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Portfolio submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

The Negotiation of Boundaries: Creating Connection and Separateness

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September 2024

Own Work Declaration

I, Sofia Likhacheva, confirm that the work presented in this portfolio is my own. Any information derived from other sources has been appropriately cited.

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I. Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking the participants without whom the research would not be possible. I hope that I have done justice to your stories and that this research will increase the awareness of consensual non-monogamy and help to promote the inclusion and diversity in some way.

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Most importantly I would like to thank my family and friends who supported and encouraged me throughout my training and believed in me even when I did not believe in myself.

II. Declaration of Power

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III. Preface to the Portfolio

The Negotiation of Boundaries: Creating Connection and Separateness

The years of doctorate training, filled with academic and clinical experiences, have been novel, exciting and challenging for me in terms of maintaining life/work balance, navigating my innate assumptions and expectations about the psychology field, and containing the experiences of my clients. These years empowered me to strive for continuous professional and personal development. Over the course of writing this portfolio, I remained sensitive to the recurring parallels between my own journey and that of my clients and research participants. Despite the variances in our experiences and their intensity, similar to my clients and research participants, I, too, have been on a transformative journey, developing a new professional identity, gathering insights about my own potential and my limitations.

This portfolio encapsulates my self-discovery and personal growth over the course of three years by describing my professional development. Self-discovery, transformed boundaries and empowerment are dominant themes in this portfolio. According to Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), "empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours to social policy and social change" (p.380). Continuous reflexive practice, personal therapy, clinical and research supervision were crucial in deepening my understanding of my clients' and participants' journeys of self-discovery and in enhancing my own self-discovery and empowerment.

Reflexive practice, rooted in social constructivism, has played an important role in the way I approached the research. As noted by Willig (2019), "in the same way that researchers need to develop reflexive awareness of their assumptions about what there is to know (ontology) and how they can come to know about it (epistemology), therapists need to be

aware of their fundamental assumptions about human beings and the world they live in (ontology) as well as their beliefs about how best to develop an understanding of their clients and the meaning(s) of their experiences (epistemology)" (p.186). Throughout my research, I adopted a social constructionist approach which views realities and experiences as subjectively constructed. The subjective nature of experiences in open relationships sparked my curiosity about the various dynamics of such relationships. Concurrently, I was challenged by this worldview in terms of letting go of my long-held assumptions about what satisfying relationships might look like, and trying to view relational dynamics from the lens of my clients. The reflexive practice offered a framework for understanding and engaging with my assumptions and biases about open relationships, which was important as I sought to understand how people in open relationships construct meaning and relate to challenges in their experiences. I was empowered through reflective practice, research supervision process, and personal therapy to differentiate my biases and, therefore, bring the experiences and narratives of my participants to the forefront of my research (Binder et al., 2012).

In the therapeutic setting, adopting a reflexive approach and using clinical supervision helped me to assist my client (presented in the case study) in reframing their narrative, reclaiming their strengths and addressing power imbalances within the therapeutic relationship.

When I reflect on my journey, I recognise that working with individuals in open relationships has immensely impacted my understanding of myself and my professional identity as I engage with themes such as boundary-pushing and deviating from norms. My work has reinforced my belief in the resilience of individuals amidst societal judgements and the capacity for self-discovery and growth, at times found in unexpected places. The idea that various positive and equally challenging experiences have a potential to encourage

individuals to heal, understand themselves better and grow, truly resonates with me, as personal growth is a central tenet in the field of counselling psychology.

As I move forward on my path of professional development, I am equipped with a stronger sense of self and clearer professional identity as a trainee counselling psychologist who is culturally competent. The self-discovery and empowerment I have gained through my research and clinical work will continue to inform my practice and contribute to my ongoing development as a counselling psychologist.

This portfolio comprises three parts: Section A: Doctoral Thesis, Section B: Process Report and Section C: Publishable Paper. I intend to demonstrate the ongoing theme of 'empowerment through self-discovery and boundaries transformation' and show how it weaves through and links these pieces of work.

Section A: Doctoral Thesis

This doctoral research explores relational satisfaction in open relationships from the perspective of individuals in such consensual non-monogamous arrangements, utilising reflexive thematic analysis. I wanted to explore the benefits and challenges that open relationships pose for relationship satisfaction, focusing on both relational and sexual satisfaction. The lived experiences of my participants were at the forefront of my research design from the outset, which entailed adopting a constructivist approach that would prioritise their viewpoints and experiences. At the same time, as a trainee counselling psychologist, I was inclined to reflect on my responsibility to remain unbiased while concurrently recognising the limitations of my impartiality. As noted by Dixon and Chiang (2019), "By being aware of one's role, the researcher can address implications and be mindful about how they influence the research process. More so, building on the understanding that analysis of participants' accounts

is not enough to provide accurate results, as researchers, we need to analyse our own lived realities and determine how they might or might not influence the research outcome" (p.20).

It was imperative for me, therefore, when conducting my research, to continuously reflect on how my own experiences and insights could have impinged on the study. Ultimately, during the literature review and conceptualisations of my research ideas, I experienced evolving perspectives about non-monogamous relationships. In my clinical practice I had interactions with individuals in such arrangements and the insights that I garnered from them ultimately shaped my perceptions and expectations. For example, I found many of the reasons for entering open relationships to be trendy or cliché following such interactions. Recognising how my subjective experiences may have impinged upon the research process, I was prompted to adopt a reflexive approach supported by my uptake of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to navigate my biases. Addressing these possible sources of bias ensured that the research process was a journey of self-awareness where I confronted my theoretical and personal assumptions and how they might have affected the research process. By taking up this reflective approach, I aim to honour the diverse experiences of my participants while concurrently fostering a more nuanced understanding of relational satisfaction in open relationships. Embarking on an ongoing process of self-awareness and introspection was salient for ensuring that my research was rigorous and respectful of the lived experiences of my participants. The research supervision helped me immensely in this process by encouraging a reflective practice and by providing a space and time for stimulating discussions and constructive feedback on my work.

Section B: Combined Case Study and Process Report

According to Lum (2002), “the development of the self of the therapist is a significant aspect of becoming an effective therapist” (p.181). This resonated significantly within my process

report. The therapeutic process, informed by psychodynamic theory, was a journey via which I supported not only my client's exploration of his inner world but also my own self-discovery as a therapist.

Navigating my client's intense feelings of fear and shame and confronting their perceptions of powerlessness necessitated that I reflect deeply on my own responses. My personal therapy, clinical supervision and reflexive practice were crucial for balancing the client's needs with the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. By analysing the experiences of transference and countertransference, I was able to gain a better understanding of my client's key relationships and also to unpack and address my own responses to the client's material, including my own insecurities and biases. For example, upon reflection, I recognised that my interventions were partly prompted by countertransference - the desire to prove that I could help my client, and partly by my own insecurities and an urge to be an efficient therapist. My self-awareness empowered me to navigate the complexities concomitant with the therapeutic relationship with enhanced clarity and effectiveness, supporting me to adapt and grow as a therapist. Ultimately, as noted by Rizq and Target (2008), "whilst aligning itself with a 'scientist-practitioner' paradigm, which emphasises the importance of an empirical basis for theory and practice, [counselling psychology] also places a high value on the use of the self, and on understanding the interplay of subjective and intersubjective factors within the therapeutic relationship" (p.131).

Section C: Publishable Paper

This paper was produced from the empirical research that I had collected for my thesis. I developed the paper via multiple drafts and engaged extensively with the data using reflexive thematic analysis. The paper, "Pushing against Norms: Boundary-Making in Open Relationships", explored the notion of open relationships as a form of boundary-pushing that

challenges prevailing norms about sexuality and relationships. The article unpacked how these relationships redefine traditional models of romantic commitment within a broader discussion about the nature of commitment and sexual freedom. It focused on the various ways in which individuals in open relationships navigate boundary-pushing dynamics through strategies such as open communication and clear rules to address challenges like jealousy and emotional security. The empirical evidence revealed that entering an open relationship typically commenced with a period of scepticism and adjustment, within which participants grappled with the discomfort associated with deviating from conventional practices and norms. The boundary-pushing character of open relationships nevertheless empowered some participants to reflect on what commitment truly means and question traditional values pertaining to exclusivity while exploring new forms of connections. The article was written for the *Sexualities* journal due to its focus on shifting human sexualities which aligned with its theme, as well as its emphasis on empirically derived material.

Counselling Psychology

Counselling psychology offers valuable insights pertaining to the study of relational satisfaction in open relationships "at its core, counselling psychology privileges respect for the personal, subjective experience of the client over and above notions of diagnosis, assessment and treatment, as well as the pursuit of innovative, phenomenological methods for understanding human experience." (Bury & Strauss, 2006, p. 113). In contrast to medical approaches that prioritise diagnosis and treatment, counselling psychology offers phenomenological methods utilised in exploring human experiences and relationships. Throughout my engagement with research participants, I have come to recognise the importance and relevance of counselling psychology's phenomenological approach in conceptualising relational dynamics in the context of open relationships. This approach supports a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of open relationships via the subjective

experiences of individuals, challenging the positivist approach that I had prioritised in my research. Amidst the dominance of clinical perspectives, counselling psychology and the phenomenological methods that it supports can enrich current insight into relational satisfaction in open relationships and how they are navigated by individuals who enter such consensual non-monogamous arrangements.

Concluding Comments

In summary, my portfolio illustrates the possibility of empowerment through self-discovery and boundaries transformation. My personal and clinical experiences have highlighted that counselling psychologists, via their open-mindedness and commitment to exploring a myriad of approaches and perspectives, can assist individuals, couples and families with that process. Ultimately, the essence of counselling psychology is rooted in navigating and integrating various worldviews and models (Frankland & Walsh, 2005). This capacity for integration was an important element in shaping my portfolio. Via my work, I have garnered a deep appreciation of the extensive impact that both I, as a trainee counselling psychologist, and the field, holistically, can have in supporting individuals in open relationships and any individuals who might not fit in the societal norms, and who are on the journey of self-discovery. I hope that my research and clinical work contribute to the promotion of diversity and inclusion. Further, the insights I have garnered from my research have played a salient role in my personal journey of raising self-awareness and understanding my feelings and beliefs.

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Section A: Doctoral Research Paper

Relational and Sexual Satisfaction in Consensual Open Relationships

1. Abstract

Consensual non-monogamous relationships become more common as an increasing number of individuals engage in various forms of non-monogamy. The desire for both stability of a romantic relationship and novelty of various sexual encounters make some individuals opt for consensual open relationships. It is important for counselling psychologists to have a nuanced understanding of non-traditional forms of relationships, including open relationships, in order to support clients and promote diversity and inclusion. Consensual open relationships remain under-researched. The aim of this research was to gain insight into the lived experiences of individuals engaged in consensual open relationships and to understand the benefits and the challenges that influence their relational and sexual satisfaction. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews from 12 participants (aged 29-56yrs) currently in consensual open relationships for at least one year or those who were in such a relationship for at least one year in the past five years. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Two master themes were generated: Autonomy and Self-Discovery; Redefining Various Aspects of the Relationship. Master themes comprised of five sub-themes: An Opportunity for Healing; Improved Self-awareness and Self-esteem; New Perceptions of Jealousy; Pushing and Redefining Boundaries; and Developing New Ways of Communicating. Individuals in consensual open relationships experience various benefits and face multiple challenges linked to their relationship form. To effectively work within this field, counselling psychologists need to have a nuanced understanding of various forms of non-monogamy.

Keywords: consensual non-monogamy, consensual open relationships, satisfaction in open relationships, reflexive thematic analysis.

2. Chapter One: Review of Literature

2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore relational and sexual satisfaction in consensual open relationships. It seeks to understand what conditions within open relationships impact the level of satisfaction experienced by the individuals involved. This inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do individuals in open relationships experience relationship satisfaction?
2. What is their experience of the potential benefits and challenges with regard to sexual and relational satisfaction?

With these questions I acknowledge the nuanced realities of open relationships and seek to unpack the dual components of relationship satisfaction: relational and sexual satisfaction. The literature on relational satisfaction across various forms of consensual non-monogamy (polyamory, swinging and open relationships) reveals divergent views and highlights significant gaps, particularly in the area of consensual open relationships. While polyamorous and swinging relationships have been extensively studied (Baer, 2022; Cohen, 2016; Conley & Piemonte, 2021; Flicker et al., 2021; Matsick et al., 2014; Moors et al., 2021), open relationships remain under-researched.

This study aims to address this gap by focusing on relational and sexual satisfaction within consensual open relationships. Understanding open relationships is critical due to their unique dynamics and challenges, distinct from those of polyamory and swinging. These dynamics include how individuals navigate boundaries, manage jealousy, and maintain trust and intimacy (Taormino, 2008). Additionally, open relationships often face societal stigma, impacting relational dynamics and satisfaction (Valadez et al., 2020; Moors et al., 2013).

Investigating these factors can provide insights into the influence of external pressures and internal relationship management.

This research is also important for exploring sexual variety and its role in relationship satisfaction, psychological and emotional well-being, and informing relationship counselling and therapy. Understanding the dynamics of consensual open relationships can help counselling psychologists to challenge and reframe conventional mono-normative biases, thereby supporting a more diverse range of relationship structures with empathy and competence.

In the ensuing sections, I will offer a definitional overview of key concepts after which the search strategy will be delineated. Following the presentation of the literature findings, the emergent gaps will be identified, paving the way for a discussion about the implications of the present study for research and practice.

2.2. Defining Relational and Sexual Satisfaction

Relational satisfaction is conceptualised by psychologist Rusbult (1983) as the internal assessment made by individuals concerning the positive qualities of their partner, as well as the overall fulfilment and attractiveness of their relationship. Similarly, Bradbury and Karney (2010) posit that relational satisfaction constitutes the overall happiness and fulfilment that individuals feel in their relationship, encompassing emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical well-being. The concept of relational satisfaction is a broad one that pertains to factors such as emotional bonding, support, conflict resolution, trust, respect, effective communication and shared values. Relational satisfaction is often derived from the stability, trust, and intimacy experienced within a relationship, while on the contrary, sexual satisfaction frequently hinges on novelty and excitement, which may or may not be present in

monogamous contexts (Witherspoon, 2018; Velikonja, 2021; Conley et al., 2018; Perel, 2017).

Sexual satisfaction, on the other hand, refers to an individual's internal evaluation of their sexual relationships and ensuing experiences within these relationships (Conley et al., 2018). This includes sexual compatibility, how frequently one engages in sexual activities, and the ability to satisfy each other's sexual needs and wants (Pascoal et al., 2014). Primary facets associated with sexual satisfaction entail the physical pleasure associated with sex, the emotional pleasure derived during sex, mutual fulfilment about sex, variety and novelty in sexual activities, and communication about sexual wishes and boundaries (Pascoal et al., 2014). Physical and sexual aspects are concerned with how well partners can connect sexually, be sexually attracted to each other, and satisfy each other's sexual desires (Pascoal et al., 2014). Having a high degree of sexual satisfaction could enhance feelings of intimacy and closeness and also boost relational satisfaction, while low sexual satisfaction may be reflected in frustration, a possible reduction in intimacy, and potential conflict (Velikonja, 2021).

Although relational and sexual satisfaction are distinct concepts, they are inextricably linked. Studies indicate that a good, healthy sex life can increase relational satisfaction and foster a good relational base that can in turn enhance the experience of sex (Byer, 2005; Costa & Brody, 2012; Fallis et al., 2016).

2.3. Defining Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships

Consensual non-monogamous relationships are defined as interpersonal unions whereby participants mutually consent to engage in sexual and/or romantic activities with individuals beyond their primary partner (Mogilski et al., 2019). The motivation for individuals to enter into these arrangements typically stems from an anticipation of enhanced

relational and sexual satisfaction derived from multiple partners, as evidenced by recent empirical studies (Wood et al., 2021; Flicker et al., 2021). The primary forms of consensual non-monogamy include open relationships, where sexual but not emotional connections with others are permitted (Conley & Piemonte, 2021), polyamorous relationships that embrace both sexual and romantic bonds outside the primary relationship (Miccoli, 2021), and swinging, which involves individuals in a couple engaging together in sexual activities with other individuals or couples (Vaillancourt & Few-Demo, 2014).

2.4. Background

2.4.1. The Benefits and Challenges of Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships Reflected in the Existing Literature

Research has shown that the desire for stability and the pursuit of novelty often conflict, presenting a challenging paradox for long-term monogamous relationships (Lehmiller, 2020). This contradiction can lead individuals to seek sexual relationships outside their primary partnership, as they attempt to fulfil these opposing needs. Indeed, studies indicate that different relationship structures might offer varying degrees of these satisfactions, potentially leading some individuals to seek fulfilment outside of their primary relationships (Lehmiller, 2020). Some scholars suggest that consensual non-monogamous relationships are more satisfying than conventional monogamous relationships, mainly due to the fact that they often offer better sexual variety, increased personal freedom, and enhanced trust between partners (Killeen, 2022).

The notion that individuals in consensual non-monogamous arrangements might experience higher levels of satisfaction in their relationships compared to those in monogamous partnerships is premised on several potential benefits that non-monogamous relationships can offer. There is evidence that consensual non-monogamous relationships

may allow the fulfilment of diverse emotional, sexual, and psychological needs (Wood et al., 2021). Since different partners can provide varied forms of emotional support, intellectual engagement, and sexual fulfilment, this diversity might lead to a higher overall sense of satisfaction. There is also the argument that these relationships can help individuals explore different facets of their identities and desires without the confines of traditional relationship expectations (Wood et al., 2018). This greater personal freedom can enhance individual and collective contentment within relationships. Moreover, consensual non-monogamy often demands a higher degree of honesty and transparency. The skills developed to manage these relationships can deepen trust and reduce misunderstandings, thereby enhancing the quality of the relationship (Mogilski et al., 2021).

Additionally, Brooks et al. (2022) find that engaging with multiple partners can invigorate one's relational dynamics, reducing monotony and adding excitement to personal interactions. This ongoing renewal of excitement can substantially boost relational satisfaction. The authors further highlight how consensual non-monogamous relationships provide a pragmatic solution to the issue of mismatched desires within a relationship, such as differing sexual needs or libidos. By allowing relationships with more compatible partners, individuals can achieve a more satisfying sexual and emotional life without overburdening any single relationship (Brooks et al., 2022).

Overall, however, the evidence is mixed concerning whether individuals in consensual non-monogamous relationships experience greater relational satisfaction compared to their monogamous peers. Moors et al. (2021), for example, utilise the concept of minority stress to highlight a potential factor that could lower satisfaction in those engaged in non-monogamous relationships. Due to society's strong preference for monogamy – a phenomenon known as mono-normativity – individuals who practice non-monogamy often

face significant social criticism and disapproval. Thus, it is important to further explore the dynamics of relational satisfaction in consensual non-monogamy, particularly in light of the increasing practice of these relationships (Bruce, 2022; Rubel & Bogaert, 2017). Despite their growing prevalence, these relationship forms often conflict with the traditional societal endorsement of monogamy, raising significant questions about their impact on individual and societal well-being (Conley et al., 2012). This discourse extends into the realm of counselling psychology, where it is important to understand the dynamics of consensual non-monogamous relationships to effectively support clients who engage in them (Berry & Barker, 2014).

2.4.2. Therapy Offer for Non-Monogamous Couples and Individuals

Traditional counselling roles have often focused on monogamous relationships and finding solutions within this context. However, as relationship paradigms evolve, so too must the strategies employed by counselling psychologists (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021; Chatara-Middleton, 2012; Orion, 2018; Finn, 2014; Schechinger et al., 2018). Girard and Browniee (2015) highlight a significant gap in the counselling psychology profession in understanding the dynamics of non-monogamous couples, whereby there is a shortage of professionals adept at addressing the specific needs of such relationships.

Berry and Barker (2014) propose a psychotherapeutic approach based on the work of Peggy Kleinplatz and Irvin Yalom, known as "existential sex therapy," to better understand the unique challenges faced by non-monogamous couples. This approach incorporates core therapy principles such as bracketing and horizontalising, which are techniques designed to help clients explore the concept of freedom within their relationships. Bracketing refers to a process whereby a therapist reduces or puts aside their underlying beliefs, biases, assumptions, and personal experiences with the aim of enhancing empathy and thus their

understanding of clients' perspectives (Berry & Barker, 2014). In sex therapy, bracketing foments a safe and non-judgmental space where clients can feel comfortable to share intimate and vulnerable aspects of their lives.

With regard to horizontalising, the therapist does not take up the role of the expert, thus encouraging a more inclusive and client-centred environment (Berry & Barker, 2014). Such methods are designed to enhance the ability of individuals to define and achieve relationship satisfaction on their own terms, acknowledging the diverse ways in which satisfaction can manifest in non-monogamous relationships. This and other therapeutic approaches necessitate a comprehensive understanding of the nuances of consensual non-monogamous relationships and how counselling psychology can be adapted to meet the therapeutic needs of the individuals and couples choosing these relationship forms (Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Berry & Barker, 2014).

A more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the various forms of consensual non-monogamous relationships may help to enhance therapeutic approaches offered to non-monogamous couples and individuals. The participation of individuals in open relationships in the present study may help to challenge stigmas and assumptions about these relationships, adding to the existing literature the insights about the benefits and challenges of consensual open relationships, which is important for clients who otherwise might feel marginalised or misunderstood while seeking therapeutic support.

In the remainder of this chapter I will provide a rationale for the current study by offering a critical review of the literature and highlighting the existing gaps via a systematic search of key databases. In the following section, the literature search process is delineated in detail.

2.5. Literature Search

I performed a literature search on four academic databases that contain peer-reviewed articles in the fields of psychology and counselling. These were PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, PsycTHERAPY, and Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection. Google Scholar was utilised to access grey literature, which was important to include to overcome publication bias (Paez, 2017).

I entered specific keywords to retrieve relevant search results. These were: “consensual non-monogamous relationships,” “open relationships,” “polyamorous relationships,” “swinging,” “non-traditional relationships,” “relationship satisfaction,” “sexual satisfaction,” "benefits of open relationships," "challenges of open relationships," "non-monogamous relationship dynamics” and "polyamory." These keywords were strategically combined using Boolean operators and search modifiers such as "AND," "OR," and "NOT" to refine the search process. For instance, search strings were structured as follows: ("Open Relationships" OR "Consensual Non-monogamy") AND ("Relational Satisfaction" OR "Emotional Satisfaction"). Another example of the search string employed was: ("Open Relationships" AND "Challenges") AND ("Sexual Satisfaction" OR "Relationship Quality"). Utilising a combination of these keywords helped ensure a comprehensive exploration of the literature, encompassing both the relational and sexual dimensions of satisfaction within open relationships. This approach enabled a detailed understanding of the various facets of open relationships and their impact on those involved.

To ensure the present-time relevance of findings, only articles published in the last 10 years were considered for inclusion. In the past decade, there has been a notable shift in cultural attitudes toward consensual non-monogamous relationships whereby they have become increasingly liberalised (Sheff & Tessene, 2015). Consensual non-monogamous

relationships have thus been more openly discussed in the literature, partly influenced by growing visibility in society and the media, and partly by more liberal attitudes of the Western societies towards various forms of sexuality, gender identity and relational variety. With the diverse relationship structures becoming normalised and social movements which advocate for sexual and relational freedoms gaining traction, the tenor of the literature has captured evolving perspectives. These perspectives are not necessarily captured in the older literature some of which were rooted in pathologising views of non-monogamy or binary understandings of relationship norms which often portrayed non-monogamous relationships as deviant and unstable (Klesse, 2005, 2006). These studies were reflective of societal attitudes which framed and stigmatised such relationships as immoral (Moors et al., 2013, 2015; Barker & Langdridge, 2010). Non-monogamy received considerable attention in the literature during the mid-1970s, coinciding with social upheavals such as women's liberation, the sexual revolution and rising divorce rates which inspired the "intense re-examination of interpersonal relationships, marriage, and family life," shaping interest in "alternative lifestyles" (Rubin, 2001, p.711). Following this initial interest, non-monogamous relationships remained "on the periphery of study and tolerance because they [threatened] the cultural image of what marriage is supposed to be" (Rubin, 2001, p.724). Against this backdrop, various scholars critically engaged with the morality of non-monogamy (see for example Rudy, 1999; Klesse, 2005, 2006; Willey, 2006).

Historically, western models of romantic love have been rooted in the assumption that emotional and sexual monogamy are inseparable and mutually reinforcing (Bergstrand & Williams, 2000). Emens (2004) has highlighted "monogamy's mandate" pointing to the normalisation of marriage rooted in idealised Western romantic traditions and laws that function as a "coercive enforcement of monogamy" while criminalising relational models that do not fit within this framework (p.7). Monogamous relationships have often been framed as

a counter to the fear, uncertainty, and perceived dysfunction historically associated with non-monogamy (see for example, Bell & Weinberg, 1978; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). Although this view has evolved, sociological research still reflects the persistence of these assumptions with some studies framing emotional monogamy (for example via deep emotional connection or exclusivity) as a stabilising practice that is salient for the success of non-monogamous relationships (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001; Mogilski et al., 2023). Studies have increasingly focused on the prevalence of mono normativity as an ideology, which has led monogamy to be valorised as morally superior (Barker & Langridge, 2010)

Contemporary understandings of relationship diversity challenge such frameworks, as societal discourses around monogamy, sexuality, and relationships have shifted significantly. In the past decade, there has been greater acceptance of non-monogamous configurations, including polyamory, open relationships, and other consensual non-monogamous relationship structures, reflected in both popular media and academic work that focuses on relationships beyond monogamy. The newer literature—both theoretical and empirical—more accurately reflects the evolving social context, capturing how individuals within consensual non-monogamous relationships negotiate, construct, and redefine intimacy, commitment, and emotional bonds in ways that differ from previous generations' experiences. This body of research also integrates more nuanced perspectives, such as the impact of cultural shifts toward individualism, the influence of digital platforms, and the increasing emphasis on consent and communication within non-monogamous relationships (see for example, Sheff & Tessene, 2015). Therefore, a more contemporary body of work provides a better foundation for understanding the lived experiences and social dynamics of individuals in consensual open relationships in the current societal context.

Peer-reviewed empirical studies, including both qualitative and quantitative research, meta-analytic, or literature review studies were included. Further, only studies published in English were considered for inclusion to ensure that the research was understandable and accessible to me. I considered studies that specifically examined relational and sexual satisfaction in the context of open relationships, consensual non-monogamy, polyamory, and swinging for inclusion as well as studies involving adult participants (aged 18 and above) who were actively engaged in or had previous experience of open relationships. I did not place any geographic restrictions on eligible studies to capture a broad spectrum of cultural contexts and insights. Further, I did not consider opinion pieces, editorials, reviews, conference abstracts, or book chapters for this research as these may not provide empirical data necessary for rigorous analysis. The exclusion criteria additionally encompassed studies that do not directly address relational or sexual satisfaction within the framework of consensual non-monogamous relationships and studies focusing on minors or individuals under the age of 18.

Following the search process, I identified 18 recent studies that were deemed relevant for clarifying the current understanding of relationship satisfaction in consensual non-monogamy. The results of these studies are presented and evaluated in the following section.

2.6. Review of Consensual Non-Monogamy Literature

2.6.1. Consensual Non-monogamy and Relationship Satisfaction

Multiple studies examined relationship satisfaction in the context of consensual non-monogamous relationships, although the literature was skewed towards discussions about swinging relationships. Comparatively, studies pertaining to open and polyamorous relationships were limited. A notable exception was the research of Flicker et al. (2021), which examined how different polyamorous relationship structures shaped relationship

satisfaction. The authors compared hierarchical structure, whereby one partner is prioritised over others, and non-hierarchical, whereby all partners are considered equal. The scholars found that individuals in hierarchical relationships report lower satisfaction. While primary partners in hierarchical relationships did not differ significantly from partners in non-hierarchical relationships, secondary and tertiary partners in hierarchical arrangements demonstrated notably lower levels of satisfaction in the study. Flicker et al. (2021) posit that these differences might lessen over time and emphasise the need for further research to understand if these disparities align with the goals of individuals in hierarchical relationships. Overall, non-hierarchical relationships seem to foster greater satisfaction among partners.

Mitchell et al. (2014) also conducted a study involving 1,093 polyamorous individuals who completed online measures of relationship satisfaction. The overarching aim of the study was to assess the linkages between fulfilment of needs with two partners, relationship satisfaction and commitment with each partner. The authors examined three main patterns of association: the additive model (whereby need fulfilment with one partner might positively predict satisfaction and commitment), the contrast model (whereby need fulfilment with one partner might negatively predict satisfaction and commitment with another partner) and the compensation model (whereby need fulfilment with one partner might offset the negative effects of low need fulfilment with another). Across all models, having needs met by only one partner was minimally linked with relationship satisfaction. The study showed that relational satisfaction is linked to the needs of an individual being met and not to the number of partners who satisfy those needs. The scholars concluded that “polyamory may be a viable and fulfilling alternative way of conducting intimate relationships” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 329).

While there is a lack of research on open and polyamorous relationships, multiple studies in the literature explored the lived experiences of individuals engaged in swinging

relationships, highlighting how the freedom to engage in diverse sexual experiences contributes to higher levels of relationship satisfaction, deeper connections, and increased trust between partners, while transparency is preserved, as individuals in a couple engage in sexual activities together. The theme of sexual variety and exploration as a contributor to higher relationship satisfaction was explored in multiple studies including those conducted by Riley (2018), Kimberly and Hans (2017), and Conley et al. (2018).

Riley (2018) explored the lived experiences of 33 individuals engaged in swinging relationships. The participants reported being satisfied in their relationships because of sexual variety and increased excitement and enjoyment. The study showed that, in contrast to monogamy, swinging prevents partners from becoming bored in a relationship. By welcoming a variety of sexual experiences, partners can explore their sexuality freely and, more importantly, assist each other in this process. This ensures that they feel involved in each other's sexual journeys. The participants also mentioned the high level of self-exploration and an opportunity to learn more about their partners while exploring their sexualities and sexual desires with each other and other people. The participants highlighted that while benefiting from freedom, they felt safe and secure, as their partners were involved in their sexual activities. Due to the transparency of all the engagements, the partners trusted that they would not be betrayed, they could relax and forge deeper bonds, ultimately fostering a stronger connection between them. Finally, participants noted that swinging relationships opened them up to the social world and other people, thus increasing the range of activities they could do with their partners, reducing the chances of boredom, thus contributing to an overall increased level of relationship satisfaction (Riley, 2018).

Similarly, Kimberly and Hans (2017) conducted a study with 16 couples who had been practising a swinging lifestyle from 1 to 35 years. These couples reported that swinging

relationships helped them increase their exposure to sexual practices not experienced previously with their partner, such as bondage-discipline/sadism-masochism (BDSM), same-sex, and interracial sex. They perceived the sexual variety brought on by the swinging lifestyle as crucial for relationship satisfaction, primarily because swinging allowed a fuller meeting of one's sexual desires. The study also showed that it is likely that the clear boundaries set within swinging relationships contribute to higher relationship satisfaction in swinging couples. Additionally, participants thought their lifestyle fostered long-term friendships with other couples, which increased the satisfaction in their own relationships. The participants shared that an active social life and communication with like-minded individuals enhanced the couple's overall quality of life. The swinging lifestyle also aided the couples' engagement in shared activities, such as travelling together, camping, and cruising, which proved central to improving their relationship. Finally, participants noted that the swinging lifestyle involves enhanced trust and open communication, both of which translate to greater relationship satisfaction. Kimberly and Hans (2017) emphasise that trust is fundamental to the success of swinging relationships. By establishing trust in each other and establishing boundaries, partners in swinging relationships can withstand the jealousy and other negative emotions that might arise if they see their partner engaging in sexual activity with another person.

This idea is further supported by Conley et al. (2018), who noted that swingers reported higher sexual satisfaction than monogamists due to the clearer boundaries negotiated within their relationships. Additionally, transparency of swinging interactions and the presence of partners in each other's experiences was reported to be an important factor contributing to the participants'' satisfaction. Conley et al. (2018) and Conley and Piemonte (2021) found that swingers, compared to those in open relationships, reported higher levels of

satisfaction, passionate love, and trust due to transparency in their sexual interactions and mutual engagement in exciting activities.

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that swinging relationships can enhance relationship satisfaction through increased freedom, sexual variety and active social engagement while fostering deeper connections and preserving the transparency of the sexual encounters through the involvement of both partners.

2.6.2. Polyamory and its Influence on Personal Growth and Self-Development

Some studies investigated how engaging in polyamory promotes self-development and personal growth by encouraging self-exploration, understanding of personal limitations, and continuous reflection on an individual's feelings and desires.

Sanchez (2019) investigated the unique experiences of four individuals who were in polyamorous relationships for at least six months. All participants reported being satisfied with their relationships. Comparing their current relationship to past monogamous relationships, they concluded that polyamorous engagements helped them overcome jealousy through a continuous reflection on their feelings which led to understanding themselves and their limitations better. Additionally, the need to discuss their feelings and their limitations with the partners improved their self-reflection capacities, and consequently, their confidence and tolerance, which proved essential for remaining happy in a primary relationship. Participants believed that jealousy could impede the functioning of monogamous relationships, which is supported by other research (Himawan, 2017). The four participants in the Sanchez (2019) study also argued that self-reflection and introspection prompted by their relationship styles helped them avoid jealous feelings. Polyamorists in this study further articulated that having partners outside the relationship helped them meet their needs better since different partners had different bonding styles. Since their needs were met, they were

less likely to snap at and fight with their primary partner, which increased their relationship satisfaction. The results of the Sanchez (2019) study suggest that polyamorous relationships can offer different opportunities for personal growth, and meeting the needs of the individuals in the relationship.

Complementary findings were established by Meyer-Goodwin (2021) who explored the lived experiences of polyamory in a study of 15 individuals, comparing their current polyamorous relationships with past monogamous ones. Participants described monogamy as confining, limiting their ability to deeply explore love due to the restriction of having one partner. In contrast, polyamory was perceived as more fulfilling, promoting personal growth through the connections formed with multiple partners. According to the participants, engaging in romantic relationships with multiple partners provided an opportunity to discover various parts of self, as different personalities provoked different emotional and physical responses in them. This multiplicity of connections facilitated learning, increased support, and contributed to greater self-actualisation (Meyer-Goodwin, 2021). Richter and Finn (2021) further support this idea and suggest that engaging with various relationship types allows individuals to explore different aspects of themselves, enhancing self-esteem and self-knowledge. This increased self-awareness can lead to higher relationship satisfaction, characterised by fewer disagreements, greater empathy, and reduced stress within relationships.

Balzarini et al. (2019) suggest that polyamorous relationships promote personal growth through connections with multiple partners, fostering a broader experience of love. Through interactions with multiple partners, individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences, which encourage them to reflect on their own behaviours, desires, and boundaries. This continuous reflection helps an individual to learn about the various aspects

of herself which can lead to personal development. The increased self-awareness gained from engaging in diverse relationships then contributes to higher relationship satisfaction. When individuals understand themselves better, they are more likely to communicate effectively, set realistic expectations, and navigate relational challenges.

In conclusion, studies reveal that polyamorous relationships can enhance personal growth through increased self-awareness and self-reflection, contributing to higher overall relationship satisfaction. This aligns with the reported increase in the population being open to polyamorous relationships in the United Kingdom from 2 to 10% between 2019 and 2024 (UK Government, 2024).

2.6.3. Comparative Studies on Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction in Monogamous and Various Forms of Non-Monogamous Relationships

A number of studies compared relationship satisfaction between monogamous and non-monogamous couples, exploring how different relationship structures impact overall relational fulfilment and identifying various influencing factors.

Rubel and Bogaert (2017), using a literature review methodology, synthesised the results of quantitative studies that investigated relationship satisfaction in consensual non-monogamy versus monogamy, exploring the impact of consensual non-monogamy on psychological well-being and the correlates of relationship quality. The review included eight studies, which established similar findings. Six of the included studies showed that couples in non-monogamous relationships reported similar relationship satisfaction as those committed to one partner. One study found higher relationship satisfaction in non-monogamous, and one in monogamous couples, suggesting that relationship satisfaction is a highly personal and difficult-to-understand concept because what produces relationship satisfaction is different for different individuals.

Based on these results, Rubel and Bogaert (2017) concluded that consensual non-monogamy produces no more or less satisfaction than monogamy. The results of the reviewed studies, however, are not easily generalisable since they had small samples. Insufficiently large sample sizes reduce generalisability and diminish the ability to confirm effects that exist in the broader population (Lakens, 2022). The results are indicative, however, of a similar scope of relationship satisfaction in non-monogamous couples as in monogamous couples: relationship satisfaction, therefore, might not be dependent on the type of relationship.

Killeen (2020) also synthesised findings from various studies to explore relational satisfaction within the framework of consensual non-monogamy. By examining existing literature that spanned demographic and social factors, Killeen (2020) evaluated the levels of satisfaction reported by individuals in non-monogamous versus monogamous relationships. The paper is not focused on primary data collection but rather on an analytical review of past research, which includes both qualitative and quantitative studies from international sources. The findings presented in the paper suggest a complex picture. Some individuals in consensually non-monogamous relationships reported higher levels of satisfaction, which could be attributed to the freedom and personal fulfilment that these relationships might offer. However, Killeen (2020) is careful to note that this increased satisfaction does not universally apply to all individuals accustomed to monogamous settings. The author emphasises that relationship satisfaction is influenced by various factors, notably by the match between one's preferred and actual relationship configurations.

One of the significant limitations highlighted in Killeen's (2020) review is that it does not distinguish between non-monogamous relationship types, which can muddy comparisons and conclusions. Furthermore, the reported demographic differences, such as higher

education levels and income among those practising non-monogamy, may skew the perceived benefits of non-monogamous arrangements. Individuals with higher income and education levels may have more social support, resources and access to information which can engender a more successful non-monogamous relationship. Consequently, such individuals may overstate the benefits of non-monogamy and thus skew the perceived benefits of this arrangement. These factors necessitate cautious interpretation of the data, as they might confound the true effects of relationship structure on satisfaction. Killeen's (2020) paper implies that while consensual non-monogamy can offer heightened relationship satisfaction for some, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The satisfaction derived from any relationship model, whether monogamous or non-monogamous, largely depends on personal preferences, societal influences, and the congruence between desired and actual relationship practices. The review also points to the need for further research to disentangle the intricate variables that influence satisfaction in non-monogamous relationships, suggesting that a more nuanced understanding could inform better support systems for individuals navigating these relationship dynamics. In summary, Killeen's paper provides a valuable contribution to the discourse on relationship satisfaction within non-monogamous settings, highlighting both the potential benefits and the complexities that need further exploration to fully understand how these relationships impact individual well-being and happiness.

Brooks et al. (2021), in a study with a large sample of 555 non-monogamous participants, found that consensual non-monogamists reported significantly more relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, passion, and love than monogamists. Similar results were shown by Cox et al. (2021), who explored differences in perceived relationship satisfaction in a quantitative study involving 4,062 respondents. Following Z-tests comparing differences between consensual non-monogamous relationships and the General Social Surveys sample, the findings revealed that individuals in consensual non-monogamous relationships reported

higher levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to those in monogamous relationships. However, further analysis showed that this trend did not hold for non-monogamous married couples, who did not report higher satisfaction than their monogamous counterparts. This discrepancy could suggest that the inherent satisfaction derived from marriage in monogamous relationships might offset the potential benefits of non-monogamy. Collectively, these findings suggest that while consensual non-monogamists may experience greater romantic and sexual benefits in some instances, these benefits are not universally consistent, reflecting the subjective nature of relationship satisfaction across different relationship types.

Conley et al. (2018) found that significant differences in sexual satisfaction between monogamous and non-monogamous couples diminished after considering the type of consensual non-monogamy that respondents were practising. Only swingers, and not individuals in open and polyamorous relationships, reported a more fulfilling sexual life than monogamists. Conley et al. (2018) suggest that this is due to the excitement gained from swinging relationships and the fact that one's main partner remains involved in various sexual activities, fostering both variety and the couple's bond. Additionally, it is clear in this type of relationship what the rules are and how to remain within the boundaries of the rules dictating participation. By allowing themselves to explore their sexuality in a swinging relationship, with no fear of being blamed or shamed (because the rules of play are established prior to the play being engaged in) and while transparency is preserved, swingers can achieve a more fulfilling sexual life (Conley et al., 2018). The contrasting outcomes of the Brooks et al. (2021) and Conley et al. (2018) studies highlight a recurring theme: relationship satisfaction is influenced by variables beyond the nature of the relationship itself.

Conley and Piemonte (2021), in a sample of 1,681 people, found that swingers and individuals in polyamorous relationships reported more relationship satisfaction, passionate love, and trust than those in open relationships. Participants who were in open relationships were reported to be the least well-adjusted and the least happy. When combined, the studies by Conley et al. (2018) and Conley and Piemonte (2021) suggest that people in open relationships fare much worse than polyamorists and swingers. Whilst it can be hypothesised as to why this might be, it is clear that these findings represent a gap in the research, whereby there is a lack of understanding concerning why swingers report more relationship satisfaction compared to individuals in consensual open relationships.

A study by Levine et al. (2018) utilised data from the 2012 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behaviour (NSSHB), a cross-sectional survey of adult women and men in the United States. The authors employed multinomial logistic regression to analyse relationship structures, alongside linear and logistic regression to investigate associations with HIV/STI testing, condom use, and relationship satisfaction. The survey included 2,270 participants in various forms of romantic relationships, selected through a national probability sample using a methodology that provided demographic representativeness. The authors found that individuals in open relationships reported lower relationship satisfaction compared to those in monogamous relationships. Further, participants in non-consensual non-monogamous relationships also reported lower satisfaction than those in monogamous relationships. The study was however concomitant with some limitations, including the use of self-reported data, which may be subject to biases including memory errors or the desire to present oneself in a favourable light. Further, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to establish causality between relationship structure and satisfaction. Additionally, the categorisation of relationship types might not fully capture the complexity and fluidity of actual relationship practices, potentially oversimplifying diverse personal and social

dynamics. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that while consensual open and non-consensual non-monogamous relationships may offer some benefits such as increased sexual freedom and diversity, they may also come with challenges related to lower relationship satisfaction. This could be influenced by factors such as the lack of societal support for these relationship types or the internal dynamics within such relationships. Future qualitative research is needed to explore these dynamics more deeply, particularly to understand the nuances behind the reported lower satisfaction and to investigate whether these findings persist across different demographic groups and over time.

Balzarini et al. (2019) examined how relationship satisfaction varied within and across different relationship configurations. The researchers used a comprehensive approach involving online surveys to gather data from individuals involved in polyamorous and monogamous relationships. Participants were recruited through various online platforms to fill out detailed questionnaires designed to measure various aspects of relationship quality, including satisfaction, commitment, sexual frequency, acceptance, and secrecy. The authors leveraged the Investment Model Scale which assesses satisfaction and commitment levels in romantic relationships and integrated additional measures tailored to understand the unique dynamics in polyamorous configurations.

The sample consisted of 4888 participants who self-identified as either polyamorous or monogamous. Polyamorous participants were further categorised based on their relationship structures, such as primary-secondary, co-primary, or non-primary configurations. In polyamory, primary-secondary configurations entail a central primary relationship that is prioritised, with additional secondary relationships that are comparatively less prioritised (Balzarini et al., 2019). Co-primary configurations, on the other hand, comprise multiple relationships, all of which are conceptualised as equally important

(Balzarini et al., 2019). In the non-primary configuration, no hierarchical distinctions are delineated among relationships (Balzarini et al., 2019). All relationships are conceptualised as distinct. This diversity allowed the researchers to explore relationship dynamics across a spectrum of non-monogamous arrangements. The study revealed that polyamorous relationships, specifically those categorised as non-hierarchical (co-primary and non-primary), often exhibit relationship satisfaction levels that closely mirror those found in monogamous relationships. However, traditional hierarchical polyamorous relationships (primary-secondary) showed varied satisfaction levels where primary partners typically reported higher satisfaction and commitment compared to secondary partners. This highlights how the allocation of emotional and practical resources within relationships can impact perceived relationship quality (Balzarini et al., 2019).

One significant limitation of the research is its reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. Additionally, the sample, being self-selected and recruited online, may not adequately represent the general population, particularly in terms of demographic diversity. The cross-sectional design of the study also limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between relationship structure and satisfaction. Nevertheless, this study illuminates the complex nature of relationship satisfaction within various romantic configurations. It challenges the conventional view that monogamous relationships inherently provide higher relationship quality, showing that polyamorous relationships can offer similar levels of satisfaction, depending on their structure. The findings suggest that the principles of fairness, shared commitment, and clear communication are crucial in enhancing relationship satisfaction across all forms of relationships.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the abovementioned studies exhibit common methodological flaws inherent to quantitative research, which could have influenced the results. For example, all empirical studies discussed allowed consensual non-monogamists to self-select for participation, which introduces potential bias. According to Sutton & Edlund (2019), self-selected participants may differ from those who choose not to participate; they might be more content with their relationships, thus more likely to participate and report higher satisfaction. This self-selection could artificially inflate the perceived benefits of consensual non-monogamy. While self-selection is also a characteristic of qualitative research, this form of research does not prioritise generalisation, rendering it less problematic than in the quantitative approach where generalisation is a primary concern and goal. Furthermore, these studies primarily relied on self-report measures to collect data, which are not the most reliable tools for assessing relationship satisfaction. Self-reporting can lead participants to convey their beliefs rather than their actual experiences and to portray themselves and their relationships in a more favourable light to boost their social identity (Brenner & DeLamater, 2016). This suggests that an interpretive lens is imperative in future studies. Given these limitations, it remains uncertain whether couples in consensual non-monogamous relationships experience more or less relational and sexual satisfaction than their monogamous counterparts. This uncertainty highlights a gap in research, emphasising the need to explore the factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction across different types of relationships.

2.6.4. The Role of Personality Traits and Relationship Dynamics in Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships

In some studies, authors analyse the personality traits of individuals and various aspects of relationship dynamics in monogamous and consensually non-monogamous

relationships, examining how those factors may impact overall relational fulfilment. Lecuona et al. (2021) explored various psychological traits of individuals in monogamous and consensually non-monogamous relationships and their sexual satisfaction. The study employed a cross-sectional correlational design, analysing data collected through online surveys. Participants were categorised into monogamous, cheating monogamous, and various forms of consensual non-monogamous relationships, including "don't ask don't tell," swingers, open relationships, polygamy, and different forms of polyamory. The survey included scales to measure personality traits, sexual satisfaction, dominance, and jealousy. The Short Form of the Big Five Inventory-2 (a measure of the Big Five personality domains: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Negative Emotionality, and Open-Mindedness (Soto & John, 2017)) and the Dark Factor of Personality test (a measure of socially disapproved traits such as egoism, sadism, spitefulness and others (Moshagen et al., 2018)) were utilised. These instruments were distributed among online communities and social networks to gather a diverse sample.

The study involved 372 participants from Spain, focusing on those from Madrid and Catalonia. The participants were categorised based on their relationship styles, with a near-even split between those in monogamous relationships (42.5%), including participants who identified as cheating in monogamous relationships (4.8%), and non-monogamous relationships (57.5%). The researchers found no significant differences in sexual satisfaction between monogamous and consensual non-monogamous participants, suggesting that relationship style may not impact overall relationship fulfilment. Consensual non-monogamous relationship practitioners showed higher openness and lower conscientiousness compared to their monogamous counterparts, although these differences were small. The study recorded similar scores in the Big Five personality traits for consensually non-monogamous and monogamous individuals. Further, consensually non-monogamous

individuals were not prone to higher or lower Dark Personality Traits than monogamous individuals.

The findings challenge the notion that consensual non-monogamous relationships are less satisfying than monogamous ones, showing that sexual satisfaction levels are comparable across different relationship styles. This suggests that the relationship structure alone is not a determinant of relationship satisfaction, and factors such as personality traits and individual experiences may play a role. Importantly, however, the study was concomitant with some limitations. The sample may not fully represent the general population, as it is limited to Spanish individuals from specific regions and therefore may represent particular cultural and regional trends. Further, participants were recruited primarily through online platforms which may exclude certain populations. The design also does not allow for causation to be inferred, only associations. Finally, the reliance on self-reporting can introduce bias, as participants may not always provide accurate responses due to social desirability or personal bias.

Muise et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between sexual need fulfilment and relationship satisfaction across multiple partners in consensually non-monogamous relationships. The researchers conducted two studies involving consensual non-monogamous participants. The methodology integrated comprehensive surveys designed to measure sexual need fulfilment, perceived partner motivation to meet sexual needs (termed sexual communal motivation), and relationship satisfaction. The researchers employed quantitative analyses, including multilevel modelling, to explore the associations across primary and secondary relationships. Across both studies, the participants included individuals from consensual non-monogamous relationships, totalling 1,054 participants in Study 1 and additional participants in Study 2 recruited via online forums and Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The sample was

diverse, covering various forms of non-monogamy such as polyamory, open relationships, and swinging.

Participants who experienced higher sexual need fulfilment in one relationship tended to report greater satisfaction not only in that relationship but also in another concurrent relationship. Notably, in some cases, higher sexual need fulfilment with a primary partner was associated with higher satisfaction with a secondary partner, suggesting a spillover effect. However, this was not universally found across all participant groups and relationship types. Some gender-specific effects were observed, where male participants reported increased satisfaction in their primary relationship when their sexual needs were met by their secondary partners, a pattern that did not hold for female participants. This research contributes to understanding how satisfaction in consensual non-monogamous relationships can be influenced by the fulfilment of sexual needs across multiple partners.

The findings suggest that consensual non-monogamous arrangements might offer a unique framework where the satisfaction of needs in one relationship could positively impact the dynamics and satisfaction in another, highlighting the complex interdependencies in these relationships. As with most studies based on self-reported data, however, the findings might be influenced by participants' perceptions or willingness to report accurately on sensitive issues. Further, the study's design does not allow for causal inferences, only associations. Finally, the specific recruitment methods and the focus on a population engaged in consensual non-monogamous relationships might limit the applicability of the findings to the general population or those in monogamous relationships.

Rubel and Bogaert (2017) also discussed the role of individualism in consensual non-monogamy dynamics and in fostering relationship satisfaction. According to the authors, the changing nature of relationships, due to a societal shift to hyper-individualism, means that

individuals who are not happy in relationships are less likely to remain in the relationship because a bad relationship only detracts from their own happiness and well-being. According to Rubel and Bogaert (2017), individuals will only be satisfied and happy if they seek out the type of relationship they want to have and then have the courage to enter into this relationship and take the relationship in the direction that both partners wish to see. Following this argument, partners committed to consensual non-monogamy may experience relationship satisfaction as they actively choose their type of relationship and thoroughly negotiate what is expected from both partners during the relationship.

In conclusion, these studies highlight that relationship satisfaction in consensual non-monogamous relationships is influenced by various personality traits and relationship dynamics, suggesting that factors beyond relationship structure significantly contribute to relational fulfilment.

2.6.5. Compersion and its Role in Relationship Satisfaction

In a 2020 mixed-methods study, Flicker et al. explored the concept of compersion in consensually non-monogamous relationships, examining how positive emotions experienced when one's partner is romantically or sexually involved with another person can influence overall relationship satisfaction. Compersion, often described in polyamorous communities, is the positive emotion an individual experiences when their partner is involved romantically or sexually, and experiences fulfilment and pleasure, with another person. Despite its relevance to consensual non-monogamous relationships, the empirical study of compersion has been limited due to the absence of a standardised measurement tool. To address this gap, the researchers developed a robust quantitative scale, the Classifying Our Metamour/Partner Emotional Response Scale (COMPERSe), through a multi-stage process.

Initially, researchers conducted a thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from 44 participants who were actively engaged in consensual non-monogamous relationships. These participants were recruited from an online community dedicated to polyamory discussions and were selected based on their experience of compersion within the last year. The qualitative phase involved open-ended questions aimed at eliciting detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and emotional responses related to compersion. The insights garnered from these responses informed the initial item generation for the COMPERSe scale. Subsequently, the researchers refined these items through feedback from both academic peers and members of the consensual non-monogamous community, ensuring that the scale accurately reflected the lived experiences of those practising non-monogamy.

The quantitative phase included both exploratory (n = 310) and confirmatory factor analyses (n = 320) to validate the scale's structure and assess its psychometric properties. These analyses led to the identification of three distinct factors of compersion: Happiness about Partner/Metamour Relationship, Excitement for New Connections, and Sexual Arousal, each demonstrating excellent internal consistency and robust validity. The development of the COMPERSe scale revealed that compersion encompasses a range of positive emotions, including joy, contentment, and excitement, which vary in intensity and context depending on the nature of the participant's relationship with their partner and metamour (a partner's other partner). The study highlighted that compersion could significantly influence relationship satisfaction by fostering positive emotional responses to a partner’s additional romantic or sexual engagements. The study's limitations include potential biases in participant selection, as individuals might have chosen relationships in which they experienced the highest levels of compersion. Additionally, the scales used for validating the new measure were originally designed for monogamous populations and might not fully capture the nuances of consensual non-monogamous relationships. This research underscores the importance of understanding

and measuring compersion within consensual non-monogamous relationships as a means to enhance relational dynamics and satisfaction. It is suggested that by integrating the understanding of the concept of compersion into relationship counselling and therapy, professionals can better support consensual non-monogamous individuals and couples in managing jealousy and enhancing the overall quality of their relationships.

2.6.6. Societal and Cultural Factors

Some studies examine how societal stigma and cultural expectations impact relationship satisfaction in consensually non-monogamous relationships, highlighting the role of external pressures in shaping relational outcomes. Levine et al. (2018) and Cox et al. (2021) discussed the influence of societal support on relationship satisfaction. They found that consensual open and non-consensual non-monogamous relationships often reported lower satisfaction, possibly due to societal pressure. Both groups of authors illustrate the significant impact of societal stigma on relationship dynamics and satisfaction. The lack of societal acceptance can lead to external stressors and internalised feelings of inadequacy or shame, which negatively impact relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, effective communication, trust, and the management of jealousy are highlighted as crucial internal dynamics that can mitigate the negative effects of societal stigma. For instance, Cox et al. (2021) found that non-monogamous married couples who might lack societal support did not report higher satisfaction, indicating that internal relationship challenges are compounded by external societal pressures. The findings from Cox et al. (2021) that non-monogamous married couples do not report higher satisfaction compared to their monogamous counterparts suggest that the institutional context of marriage, with its associated societal expectations and pressures, might influence the dynamics and satisfaction in consensual non-monogamous relationships.

2.7. Limitations of the Literature

This literature review sheds light on how consensual non-monogamy may lead to increased relationship satisfaction. However, the studies reviewed present several limitations. Notably, participants were predominantly recruited from polyamorous or swinging clubs and communities, potentially biasing results towards highlighting the benefits of these lifestyles while downplaying their challenges. Many individuals practising consensual non-monogamy, who prefer privacy and steer clear of such clubs, were not represented. This selection bias limits the generalisability of the findings, making them specific to a particular subset of the non-monogamous population.

Moreover, the existing qualitative research has largely overlooked the experiences of individuals in consensual open relationships. This represents a significant gap in the literature, especially considering the distinct internal dynamics and levels of trust involved in open versus swinging and polyamorous relationships, which can offer nuanced insights into how consensual non-monogamous relationships are navigated and sustained. Open relationships have a distinct nature whereby partners maintain primary relationships concurrently with often casual connections. Thus, they are concomitant with different patterns of boundary setting and emotional engagement, when compared to polyamory and its hierarchal nature, or swinging, which is often associated with more structured dynamics. Focusing on open arrangements can offer nuanced insights into pertinent issues such as the management of jealousy and attachment, conflict resolution and communication strategies. Exploring these issues could elucidate the various ways in which individuals manage their needs and expectations in such relationships, thereby offering a more holistic and inclusive understanding of consensual non-monogamous relationships.

Another critical oversight is the failure to account for the ethical, cultural, and religious backgrounds of participants. This omission restricts the applicability of the results, potentially confining them to counselling psychology clients of specific racial or ethnic groups. The methodologies employed also lacked diversity, further narrowing the scope of the findings.

Furthermore, the majority of the research has been conducted in the United States and Canada. Counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom, where cultural and societal norms may vary, could benefit from research that reflects the local context to better understand attitudes towards monogamous and non-monogamous relationships. This underscores another gap in the literature that needs addressing.

2.8. Summary

The studies identified in this literature review present divergent views on the linkages between relationship type and relationship satisfaction. The exploration of the literature highlights that consensual open relationships are comparatively under-researched in contrast to polyamorous and swinging relationships, which have been more extensively examined. Consequently, this study aims to address this gap by focusing on relational and sexual satisfaction within consensual open relationships. By doing so, it seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics, challenges, and benefits associated with open relationships, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of relationship satisfaction across different forms of consensual non-monogamy. In the subsequent chapter I will present the methodological framework employed in this study.

3. Chapter Two: Methodological Overview

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the methodological framework employed in this study. It begins with an articulation of the research design which includes a focus on the research aims and objectives, followed by a description of the theoretical, ontological, and epistemological frameworks that underpin the research. It then delineates the procedure of this study, outlining the recruitment methods, the data collection and data analysis process, and the strategies implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings. Ethical considerations are paramount in any research involving human participants. This chapter will also outline the ethical approval process, participant consent procedures, and how participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.

3.2. Research Design

This study is predicated on the ontological stance of critical realism, proponents of which posit that while events and experiences have an objective reality, individual interpretations of these events vary based on unique perspectives. The epistemological perspective adopted for this study is constructivism; constructivists posit that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the world and shaped by societal, cultural, and environmental influences. The ontological and epistemological positions are further explained in section 2.2.2. Given these philosophical foundations, a qualitative methodology was chosen for this study, specifically reflexive thematic analysis, to explore the subjective experiences of individuals in open relationships and their perceptions of relational and sexual satisfaction. In the ensuing sections, the research design is discussed in further detail.

3.2.1. Research Question and Aims

This study was designed to explore the benefits and challenges that open relationships may pose for relationship satisfaction, including both relational and sexual satisfaction. As elucidated in the previous chapter, relational satisfaction refers to the degree of intimacy, love and understanding that individuals have for one another as well as their ability to meet the emotional needs and expectations of one another (Reis et al., 2017). Additionally, sexual satisfaction pertains to the perceived quality of the sexual experience (e.g., pleasure, arousal, orgasm) and positive sexual interactions with a partner (e.g., mutuality, creativity, acting out desires, and frequency of sexual interactions; Pascoal et al., 2013). With the above definitions of key terms in mind, I sought to address the following research questions:

How do individuals in open relationships experience relationship satisfaction?

What is their experience of the potential benefits and challenges with regard to sexual and relational satisfaction?

In order to address the above questions, a qualitative methodology was adopted for this study, to explore the subjective experiences of individuals who are in or have recently been in consensual open relationships. I also sought to explore the potential benefits and challenges that this type of relationship poses to relational satisfaction and evaluate aspects of both sexual and relational satisfaction in open relationships. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews (Appendix 7.6.) and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the data analysis subsection of this chapter, I will describe these in more detail. The aim of this study is to stimulate discussions about relationship diversity and to inform therapeutic practices for individuals in non-traditional relationship arrangements.

3.2.2. Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

An ontological stance of critical realism was adopted for this study. Critical realists posit that while events and experiences possess an objective reality, individual interpretations of these events vary widely, shaped by each person's unique perspectives and beliefs (Bhaskar, 1978). According to Forsberg (1992), each interpretation, while valid, is neither wholly true nor false. This viewpoint underscores the assumption that reality is multifaceted and subjective. The aim of the present study is to explore how participants understand and articulate their experiences within open relationships, focusing on their perceptions of both the challenges and benefits. Thus, this requires a reflexive and interpretative framework. Through the theoretical lens of critical realism, the researcher's role is seen as one that is not merely to document information but to interpret the realities presented by the participants, aiming to uncover underlying structures that influence these realities (Willig, 2013). During the review of existing literature, it became evident that while relational satisfaction in consensual open relationships is a tangible phenomenon (in that people engage in relationships outside of their primary relationship), it is experienced differently by each individual, highlighting the subjective nature of what might constitute "relational satisfaction."

From an epistemological perspective, this research is informed by constructivism, proponents of which argue that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the world, rather than discovered in a predetermined, objective form (Turnbull, 2002; Ponterotto, 2005). In this approach, scholars acknowledge that knowledge is not singular but plural, shaped by intersubjective engagement, and coloured by societal, cultural, and environmental influences. Critical realism combined with constructivism enables a nuanced exploration of how participants in open relationships construct their realities and understandings of these

relationships. This includes examining their personal experiences and the impact their perceivable environment (to the extent that it may be witnessed by the researcher) may have on their perceptions of relational and sexual satisfaction.

These philosophical foundations support a thorough investigation into the experiences of individuals in open relationships, emphasising the complex interplay between objective realities and subjective interpretations, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study.

3.2.3. Methodological Considerations

Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies are fundamental to collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, but they differ significantly in their focus and application. Quantitative research is primarily concerned with quantifying data and uncovering patterns in causal and correlational relationships among variables, making it suitable for hypothesis testing (Ponterotto, 2005). In contrast, qualitative research is aimed at understanding and interpreting the deeper meanings within data, focusing on the complexities of human experiences as described in participants' own words (Smith et al., 1995). Qualitative research extends beyond merely cataloguing participants' responses. It seeks to uncover the underlying reasons and motivations behind their thoughts and behaviours, exploring not just what participants believe but why they hold these beliefs (Alase, 2017).

The current study specifically aims to delve into the subjective experiences of individuals in open relationships, exploring their perceptions of relational and sexual satisfaction, and the benefits and challenges they encounter. Given the study's epistemological and ontological position, as well as its focus on personal viewpoints and the intricacies of individual experiences, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. This approach is particularly advantageous for studies involving personal and emotional

topics, such as relationship dynamics, where the depth of inquiry can reveal nuanced insights into feelings, motivations, and interpersonal interactions. This method will thus enable a detailed and comprehensive examination of participants' subjective experiences, aligning with the research objectives (Sutton & Austin, 2015). By fostering an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding open relationships, a topic that is underexplored in the existing literature, this method assists in addressing the literature gap, particularly concerning the complexities of relational and sexual satisfaction.

Moreover, qualitative methods are advantageous for this research as they offer the flexibility to delve into participants' unique experiences while concurrently fostering trust and rapport. Trust and rapport are salient for discussing sensitive and personal topics such as those explored in the present study. This method facilitates open dialogue and encourages participants to be non-elusive and more willing to share their perspectives and insights regarding their open relationships, yielding richer, more detailed data (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). Thus, the selection of a qualitative methodology for this study is justified by the need to gain a profound understanding of the unique and complex experiences of individuals in consensual open relationships, making it possible to capture a wide spectrum of the benefits and challenges they experience.

3.3. Method of Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis, chosen for this study, evolved from the Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Prior to explaining the reasons why Reflexive Thematic Analysis was a suitable method for this research it is important to explain the main differences between Thematic Analysis and Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis and Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), share foundational principles, however, their theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches, and focus

differ significantly. Thematic Analysis as initially developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a flexible and widely used method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes that emerge within a qualitative data set. It provides a structured process via which researchers can extract meaningful patterns across a dataset, with an emphasis on organising and describing the data set in a nuanced and comprehensive way. This process entails familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic Analysis is often conceptualised as a more "traditional" approach, where the researcher aims to minimise their own influence on the analysis and seek to remain somewhat detached from the data, with an emphasis on "what" is present in the data, as opposed to "how" the data is being interpreted. Reflexive Thematic Analysis differs in its emphasis on the active role of the researcher in shaping the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the researcher is not seen as a neutral or detached observer, but rather as an integral part of the analytic process. Reflexivity is central to Reflexive Thematic Analysis as it encourages researchers to critically engage with their own positionality, assumptions, and the power dynamics inherent in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method acknowledges that themes are not discovered but are co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and the data. The key difference between Thematic Analysis and Reflexive Thematic Analysis is thus rooted in the role of the researcher in the analysis process. While both approaches focus on identifying themes within data, Thematic Analysis traditionally seeks to minimise researcher subjectivity by assuming that themes exist independent of the researcher's interpretations, with an emphasis on an objective and systematic process. In contrast, Reflexive Thematic Analysis explicitly foregrounds the researcher's reflexive engagement with the data, acknowledging the interpretive nature of the analysis. Reflexive Thematic Analysis does not attempt to distance

the researcher from the process but instead invites the researcher to be aware of and engage with how their positionality, assumptions, and experiences shape the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Reflexive thematic analysis was selected for this study for several reasons, each aligning closely with the goals of the study and the nature of the research topic. Firstly, this method of analysis, as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2021), allows researchers to access and interpret the nuanced perspectives and experiences of participants, providing a comprehensive understanding of their internal worlds and lived realities. This is achieved through the identification of patterns in the data, themes development and analysis of recurring themes, which are carefully woven from the narratives provided by the participants themselves. Secondly, according to Silverman (2020), reflexive thematic analysis is particularly suitable when pioneering new topics of investigation, as it does not require a predefined theory or hypothesis. This flexibility makes it ideal for exploring under-researched areas, allowing findings to be gleaned organically from the data. Thirdly, as Braun and Clarke (2014) suggest, thematic analysis is well-suited to applied research projects that aim to integrate empirical findings with practical, real-world applications. The aim of this study is to inform therapeutic practices in counselling psychology focused on non-traditional relationships, making reflexive thematic analysis a fitting choice due to its potential to directly influence practice and policy. The insights generated through reflexive thematic analysis can lay a foundational understanding of a topic, which can subsequently be explored or tested through quantitative methods (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This is particularly valuable in a field like open relationship dynamics, where empirical data can further inform and refine the qualitative findings, potentially leading to more generalised conclusions.

3.4. Other Methods Considered

In the process of selecting an appropriate method for this study, several different methods were considered, including discourse analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). However, each was ultimately deemed less suitable for the research goals than reflexive thematic analysis, for specific reasons. Discourse analysis was initially considered due to its strength in exploring how language constructs phenomena and the social implications of these constructions. According to Willig (2003), discourse analysts research from a social constructionist perspective, emphasising how individuals use language to frame and discuss their experiences. This method is particularly potent for examining societal norms and the linguistic shaping of personal and group identities. The drawback in the context of this study is that in discourse analysis, participants are not primarily viewed as experts in their own experiences. Instead, the focus is on the linguistic devices and social contexts influencing how experiences are represented and discussed. While this could yield valuable insights into societal attitudes towards non-monogamy, it would not align closely with the objectives of the current study, which are more centred on understanding individuals' internal and subjective experiences of relational and sexual satisfaction.

IPA was also considered. It is well-regarded as it enables researchers to delve deeply into the personal lived experiences of individuals, providing rich, detailed insights into how people perceive and make sense of concrete phenomena or life situations (Smith, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This approach would align well with the study's aims to understand the nuanced personal experiences of individuals in open relationships. However, IPA was less suitable for this study due to its focus on embodied experiences and distinct experiential phenomena. IPA researchers explore the individual subjective experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to them; the aim of the present study is to explore

broader narratives surrounding relational satisfaction in open relationships. Consequently, IPA's focus on discrete phenomena could not offer the cohesive and comprehensive narratives required to address the research questions. Against this backdrop, the narrative data offered by reflexive thematic analysis was conceptualised as more appropriate as it supports the examination of how participants articulate and construct their experiences, capturing the complexity and continuity of their experiences in a way that the phenomenological lens of IPA does not. Hence, the phenomenological focus of IPA made it less suitable for answering the research questions, which require a comprehensive exploration of the social dimensions and narrative of participants' experiences.

Given the limitations of the aforementioned methods, reflexive thematic analysis was chosen. This method allows for a nuanced exploration of themes across data, while still grounding the analysis in the socio-cultural context of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis provides the flexibility to explore deep, nuanced meanings while also producing findings that are actionable and generalisable within a wider context (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These characteristics make it particularly suitable for application in counselling psychology research, where insights need to be both deeply contextual and broadly applicable to diverse client settings. This method's capacity to bridge the gap between individual experiences and broader societal contexts ensures that the findings can be effectively used to guide counselling practices, making it the optimal choice for this study. Thematic analysis might not fully support the examination of relational and sexual satisfaction in open relationships since it is concomitant with a more rigid and structured coding process which can undermine the flexibility and depth required to fully capture the nuances and societal context of participants' experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis, on the other hand, supports a more iterative and flexible approach that can support the exploration of the dynamic interplay between individual experiences and broader sociocultural influences,

thereby fostering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved.

3.5. Procedures

This section of the chapter provides a discussion of how the study was carried out including the recruitment of participants, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data collection and the data analysis processes that were adopted. In addition, issues of quality, validity and reliability of this study will be discussed together with reflections on reflexivity within this work. Finally, ethical considerations are addressed and the involvement of participants as "experts by experience" is described.

3.5.1. Data Collection and Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited via a combination of purposive, and snowball sampling (Etikan et al., 2016b). Through purposive sampling, researchers seek to match the characteristics of participants with the characteristics and objectives of the study (Etikan et al., 2016a). In this study, this consisted of creating a professional account on social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) with details of the study, following ethical clearance. This advertisement targeted individuals who engage in open relationships (Valerio et al., 2016). The recruitment leaflet can be seen in Appendix 7.2. Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 7.3.) provided further information about the study.

In addition, snowball sampling was then used to reach more participants and to achieve the target sample size. Snowball sampling is a form of chain-referral sampling whereby already recruited participants refer or nominate other potential participants, with the same characteristics, to the researcher (Dragan & Isaic-Manu, 2013). This sampling method is often used for research samples where the sample traits or characteristics are rare or hard to

come across or where participants are secretive about their identities (religious activists, cult members; Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017). This method was hence considered highly appropriate for the present study, as the topic of sexual behaviours is sensitive and non-monogamous individuals are a minority group and potentially hard to reach. A snowball sample can be linear (where one individual in a sample group nominates one other person and the cycle goes on), exponential non-discriminative (where one individual is initially recruited and the individual goes on to recruit several others and the cycle goes on), exponential discriminative (where participants refer several others and only one of them is recruited depending on whether they meet the nature of the research study; Yadav et al., 2019). For the present study, the linear method was used due to the pragmatic feasibility of this approach, and the way in which initially recruited participants were able to fulfil this aspect of sampling.

Prior to the interviews, I held individual brief phone calls with each participant separately in order to assess their eligibility and informally gauge any current level of distress. This pre-interview screening was done to exclude vulnerable participants and those experiencing high levels of distress, and therefore, protect them from adverse emotional reactions associated with taking part in this study (Draucker, 2009). The participants were then given Consent Form (Appendix 7.4.), requesting their consent for the interview participation and recording, and explaining their rights to withdraw up to one month after the interview. Participants were also asked to provide insight into their age, gender identification, sexual orientation, and the duration of their open relationship.

A semi-structured interview method was used for collecting data in this study. This method is commonly used in qualitative research (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010) and enables the aims and objectives of studies to be examined, whilst also providing opportunities for

individual participants to digress and potentially deliver interesting data that had not been anticipated by the researcher (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010). To aid with this process, an interview schedule was designed to capture the research questions (Appendix 7.6.). This was used to provide a sense of structure to all interviews, whilst also enabling and empowering participants to go off on tangents, examine some areas in greater depth, and help collaborate on the co-production of data for this work (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010). The interview schedule encapsulated specific questions that directly explored relational and sexual satisfaction.

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Using technology to conduct qualitative interviews is concomitant with both advantages and disadvantages. One of the key benefits of utilising technology concerns the flexibility and convenience that it offers, enabling participants to join a research study regardless of their location (Gray et al., 2020). Thus, utilising technology supports a geographically dispersed and diverse research sample. Videoconferencing tools such as Zoom also have a recording feature which is salient for effectively and accurately capturing data (Oliffe et al., 2021). This enables researchers to capture the body language and facial expressions of participants, adding depth to the collected data. Additionally, research participants might feel more relaxed in the familiar environment (Oliffe et al., 2021). Notable disadvantages, however, include the risk of poor internet connections which can undermine the rapport and flow of conversation between a researcher and participant (Gray et al., 2020). Such technical issues may result in data loss. Further, the virtual environment is devoid of intimacy concomitant with in-person interviews which may reduce the level of trust between the researcher and participants, a crucial factor for eliciting nuanced and detailed responses (Archibald et al., 2019). Finally, there are important privacy concerns as participants may not feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics while being recorded on a virtual platform (Oliffe et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the use

of such technology to conduct qualitative interviews has become increasingly common and is considered a highly acceptable approach for participants and researchers alike (Archibald et al., 2019). The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes for each participant. After the interview, participants were given a debrief sheet (Appendix 7.5.) containing contact details of available support services.

Participants were asked to provide basic information about themselves and the nature of their relationship at the beginning of the interview. The interview then probed further into participants' relational and sexual satisfaction, the benefits and disadvantages of the open relationship on their sexual life and their views on the differences in the satisfaction that open and monogamous relationships provide. I paid close attention to an in-depth exploration of the aspects of an open relationship that enhances participants' relational and sexual satisfaction. This consisted of using a range of probing questions such as "Can you tell me more about that?", "What does that mean to you?" and other questions, to elicit in-depth responses from participants. Participants were then encouraged to provide additional information about what they thought was important to discuss and what had not been covered in the interview. This again can be linked to the concept of co-production within the interview process (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010) and enabled the development of further breadth and depth of data collection in so doing.

To stay reflexive during this process, I completed a set of field notes within a reflexive log at the end of each interview. This enabled me to be aware of any personal responses, thoughts or feelings that came up for me and may have impacted both my experience of the interview process and the experience and presentation of the participants (Boyatzis, 1998).

Interviews were recorded using the Zoom platform recorder, with the consent of participants (Appendix 7.4.), to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the data from which the analysis would take place. Following the interview, the audio versions of the recordings were stored on the City University One Drive in an encrypted file which only I had access to. Participants were interviewed individually for this study, including the two couples who took part in the research.

3.5.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study sought to recruit participants who met a range of inclusion criteria. The participants had to be in a consensual open relationship for at least 12 months, or have an experience within the past five years of a consensual open relationship that lasted for at least 12 months. The duration of 12 months was chosen to ensure that participants included in the study had sufficient experience and depth of engagement in an open relationship which would foster rich data for analysis. Implementing a longer duration might have excluded individuals with relevant experiences, potentially undermining the diversity of perspectives. Further, the aim of this criterion was to avoid recall bias by including participants with recent experiences while concurrently allowing for a reasonable timeframe within which relationship dynamics could be captured, without relying mainly on distant memories. All participants were aged 18 years and over for the purposes of consent. The participants were unknown to me to prevent biases that may have occurred from mutual familiarity. Additionally, the participants were based in the United Kingdom so I could easily follow distress protocols and signpost them for further mental support should they have exhibited any signs of distress during the research process.

3.5.3. Ethical Considerations

The current research explores sensitive subjects such as sexual behaviour, sexual satisfaction, and participation in non-conventional relationship types (non-monogamous relationships). To address the potential discomfort these topics might cause, rigorous ethical measures were implemented to protect the participants.

A comprehensive distress protocol was established to promptly address any emotional discomfort experienced by participants during interviews. This protocol included pausing the interview if a participant displayed mild distress, such as tearfulness, and stopping the interview entirely in cases of severe emotional distress. Furthermore, all participants were provided with a debrief sheet (Appendix 7.5.) with the details of local charities, online resources, and signposting to relevant helplines. It was considered that interviewing couples together may lead to interpersonal differences or difficulties and so, in response to ethical considerations on this matter, and in order to minimise distress or psychological harm related to this work, couples in this project were interviewed as individuals (Harriss et al., 2019). In instances of significant emotional distress, I planned follow-up calls with the affected participants to ensure they had access to the necessary support services; however, it was not needed as none of the participants in the research exhibited signs of significant distress.

The study adhered to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and the Data Protection Act (UK Government, 2018). The nature and objectives of the study were transparently communicated to participants at the recruitment stage. Detailed information sheets, which outlined the aims, processes, and significance of the research, were provided (Appendix 7.3.). Consent was obtained through an electronically signed form, confirming participants' understanding and willingness to partake in the study (Appendix 7.4.).

Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw their data without justification. This was clearly communicated, ensuring participants were fully aware of their rights. Requests for data withdrawal were to be honoured within a month post-participation. To protect privacy, personal identifiers were removed from interview transcripts and participants were assigned unique codes. These codes were stored securely to facilitate any post-study communications. Data confidentiality was maintained through encryption and restricted access, ensuring that information was not disclosed to external parties. The nature of the present study and its focus on consensual non-monogamous relationships, a sensitive topic, further warrants active steps to be taken to conceal participants' identities.

In the write-up, alphabetic letters from A to L were randomly assigned to each participant to protect participants' identities (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). The participants came from various ethnicities and backgrounds, therefore, I decided against the use of pseudonyms in order to avoid attributing certain characteristics to the participants through choosing particular names. The assigned letters ensured anonymity, safeguarding participants' confidentiality and helped to avoid potential biases that might have been linked to certain pseudonyms (Saunders et al., 2015). However, I had to use pseudonyms to protect the identity of people occasionally mentioned by the participants throughout the interviews (the partners and ex-partners of the participants). I didn't use alphabetic letters for them to avoid confusion and not to interrupt the flow of the interviews.

Additionally, in the write-up I chose to use gender-neutral pronouns when talking about the participants, drawing from Moser and Devereux (2019) who argue that the use of gender-neutral pronouns can help avoid biases and assumptions linked to gender stereotypes.

Gender-neutral pronouns are also useful when referring to individuals with both fixed or fluid gender identities.

This study was evaluated and approved by the City, University of London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee, which classified it as a moderate risk study (REC reference number ETH2223-0696). Ethical approval can be seen in Appendix 7.1.

3.5.4. Participants

The above processes led to the recruitment of 12 individuals who stated that they practised consensual open relationships for over 12 months. The recruited sample consisted of four females and eight males, predominantly from White British or White European backgrounds, with ages ranging from 29 to 56 years. In terms of relationship status, 10 participants were in open relationships, of which three were married and two were engaged. The remaining two participants had experience of consensual open relationships in the past, however, were single at the time of data collection. It is of note that of the 12 recruited participants, there were two couples recruited, who took part individually in these interviews. The participants identified with various sexual orientations: heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual.

3.6. Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed word for word at the end of the interview sessions in preparation for the data analysis to be completed via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Pauses, sighs, and notable non-verbal behaviours were also documented in the transcripts to capture the full context and emotional nuances of the participants' responses. This detailed transcription approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive and accurate representation of the participants' experiences, which is crucial

for a nuanced and in-depth analysis. These verbatim transcripts, including non-verbal cues, were then stored within NVivo software files for systematic coding and analysis. A sample of an interview transcript can be seen in Appendix 7.11.

For the purposes of this study, a reflexive thematic analysis approach was adopted, enabling a focus on participant accounts, whilst interpreting their lived experiences and personal thoughts regarding open relationships. This reflexive approach was adopted due to its ability to focus on these experiences whilst also disregarding the preconceived notions that other researchers or observers may have on open relationships (Daher et al., 2017).

Reflexive thematic analysis relies on the researcher's skill to read, interpret and provide insights into data they have collected in a way that goes beyond the surface level (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It is also an approach which rests upon the researcher's ability to identify and connect data with theories and research that already exists (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, it should be noted that thematic analysis is flexible and allows for the subjective collection of data in different forms. It breaks large data down into different sets enabling easy analysis of large data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Its use in this interview-based study can therefore be seen to be an appropriate choice to address the aims identified above.

When utilising a thematic analysis approach, either an inductive, deductive, semantic or latent stance can be adopted (Clark et al., 2015; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). When implementing the analysis plan for the current study, it was therefore important to consider these approaches and to identify the way in which the collected data would be approached. The inductive approach is one where themes are generated from the data and there are no preconceived ideas about the theme generation (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Contrastingly, a deductive approach is one where the researcher already has themes that they have generated, for example, from a literature review and such themes may also provide answers to the

research questions (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Additionally, the semantic approach is concerned with collecting respondents' viewpoints without delving into the subjective meaning of the data (Smith & Smith, 2018), and the latent approach is one where the researchers seek to understand the meaning of the data by delving into it and interpreting it (Ravindran, 2019). With the above in mind, the inductive approach was chosen for the present study. This decision was made to help minimise the risk of the researcher's subjective bias influencing the research process, whilst also providing the opportunity to develop themes and insights directly from participants' accounts (Bree & Gallagher, 2016).

3.6.1. Six Stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Having collected the data and transcribed the interviews into verbatim files, the next step that was taken was the analysis of this data. Reflexive thematic analysis involves a systematic six-stage process (Terry et al., 2017). The initial stage required me to immerse myself in the raw interview data. This involved reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, and actively listening to audio recordings to become intimately familiar with the content. In line with the first step, I approached this data critically and reflexively, maintaining an open mind to prevent preconceived notions from influencing the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

During the second phase, I reviewed the data to identify relevant, striking, or particularly insightful excerpts that pertained to the research question. I then annotated these segments with brief, descriptive labels, a process known as coding. This step is crucial as it begins to organise the data into manageable parts that highlight significant features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A sample of an individual coded interview is presented in Appendix 7.12.

During the third phase, I grouped these codes into potential themes. This was achieved by clustering related codes that appeared to capture a common thread or aspect of the data. These clusters help to identify patterns that reveal deeper insights into the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The initial map of themes is presented in Appendix 7.8.

The fourth stage required a critical review of the identified themes. I evaluated whether the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. I subsequently refined the themes, which sometimes involved splitting or combining them to better capture the nuances of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The revised map of themes and subthemes can be seen in Appendix 7.9.

In the fifth phase, I further refined each theme, focusing on the essence of what each theme represented and how it related to the research question. This stage involved a detailed analysis to define and name the themes, ensuring they were clearly articulated and distinct (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The final map of themes and subthemes is presented in Appendix 7.10.

The final stage involved crafting a compelling, coherent, and reflective narrative that communicated the research findings. In the next chapter, the analysis chapter, I present the conclusions drawn from the analysis. It includes extensive verbatim quotes from participants to provide a transparent and vivid account of how themes were developed and to anchor my interpretations in the participants' experiences (Lainson et al., 2019). This allows for a transparent understanding of the thematic development process.

3.6.2. Limitations of the Method

While thematic analysis is a frequently utilised method in qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. One potential concern is that researchers'

interpretations of data can be influenced by their personal experiences, knowledge, or social status. This influence may challenge the researcher's ability to approach the data in a truly inductive manner, as noted by Sundler et al. (2019). Such biases may impact how themes are developed and interpreted, potentially leading to preconceived notions that could render the overall research output. However, in reflexive thematic analysis a researcher's unique perspective and reflexivity about what they bring to the analysis is an inherent part of the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In order to remain reflective about my influence on the analysis and to approach the data in an inductive manner, I incorporated several strategies. Firstly, my use of field notes and reflective writing, as recommended by Boyatzis (1998), was integral to the research process. These practices helped in documenting my thoughts and reflections contemporaneously with the data collection and analysis, providing a transparent audit trail of how I made interpretative decisions. Transparent reporting also played a critical role in this process. By clearly documenting and justifying the methodological choices and interpretative leaps made during the research, I aimed to uphold the integrity of the research process and enhance the credibility of its findings. This approach not only addressed the limitations of thematic analysis but also strengthened the trustworthiness and reliability of my research outcomes.

As noted in the previous subsection, I used the software package NVivo to help organise the transcripts from which this data analysis process was undertaken. The use of NVivo is widespread within the field of qualitative research (Phillips & Lu, 2018) and enables researchers to focus specifically on the processes of coding and theme development by providing organisational assistance to this process (Phillips & Lu, 2018). There are many positive aspects relating to the use of NVivo within work such as this. For example, Dollah et

al. (2017) note that the core advantages include the ease of data management processes, the comparative ease of developing and cross-referencing codes and themes, and the time and energy saved, which in turn enables more time and energy to be spent on important analytical processes. However, it is also notable that this approach can be associated with limitations as well. For example, Dollah et al. (2017) identify that this can be a system which requires considerable learning time in order to use effectively. Additionally, for those who can confidently use NVivo, Dollah et al. (2017) posit that the ease of use can lull them into a false sense of security with regard to the actual hard work and effort required for quality qualitative analysis to take place. With this in mind, whilst I used NVivo as an important tool to aid the organisation of themes, my focus was always taken back to following the steps of thematic analysis in a high-fidelity manner.

The final aspect of the analysis strategy for this study that merits consideration is the solo involvement of a single researcher in all phases, from data collection to transcription and analysis. This approach carries both strengths and limitations that are important to address. A primary advantage of single-researcher involvement, as highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2022), is the deep familiarity with the data that the researcher gains. This intimate knowledge is crucial for thematic analysis, where understanding nuances within the data is essential for developing meaningful codes and themes. In this study, the overlapping roles of the researcher in data collection, transcription, and analysis allowed for a continuous and iterative engagement with the data, potentially enriching the analysis process. The transcription phase, in particular, acted as a preliminary analysis phase, offering additional insights into the data (Boyatzis, 1998). The absence of additional research team members in this study however introduces certain limitations. The solo nature of the analysis means that the data was interpreted through the lens of a single individual, without the benefit of diverse perspectives that can add depth and rigor to the analysis.

While the single-researcher model was necessary within the context of this study, it is crucial to acknowledge these limitations. Understanding that the absence of collaborative checks might affect the objectivity and breadth of the analysis is important for interpreting the study's findings. Future research could benefit from a more collaborative approach to ensure a broader perspective and enhance the reliability of the thematic analysis. This consideration is vital for maintaining transparency and credibility in qualitative research.

3.6.3. Quality and Validity

Research quality refers to the accuracy and reliability of a study, while validity refers to the extent to which a research activity aligns with what it claims to measure (Mohajan, 2017). The aim of the present research was to minimise the biases that the researcher's subjective experiences may elicit while interpreting the data. I ensured that steps such as keeping a reflective journal were taken, where the thoughts and emotions evoked by participants' comments would be recorded as opposed to relying on preconceived notions and theory. The interview questions that were utilised were designed to adequately capture the aim and objectives of the present research and ensure the validity of the research questions (Roberts, 2020).

A first-hand account of the experiences and perceptions of the individuals in consensual open relationships might help to reduce discriminative biases towards that relationship type, promote diversity and inclusion, and ensure that the voices of this group of individuals are heard and correctly represented (Tanner et al., 2017). The direct involvement of those who practice open relationships in the research also ensured that their feelings, emotions, experiences, and opinions can be better understood and taken into consideration by counselling psychologists and other practitioners in the field (Brabban et al., 2017; McPherson et al., 2020).

In terms of participants' roles across the course of this project, opportunities to engage with them were viewed as ways to improve the rigour and robustness of this work. For example, the development of the interview schedule, which guided the protocol for the semi-structured interviews in this study, was conducted with participant-level input, with selected individuals who had personal experience with this topic providing input for question formation and regarding the appropriateness of terminology used in the interviews. Additionally, participants were also engaged during the study, such as being afforded the opportunity to look over their transcribed interviews in order to ensure that they felt that this was a fair reflection of their engagement with the study. Such steps are highly relevant when seeking to enhance both the validity and reliability of work such as this (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010).

3.7. Researcher Reflexivity

The role of a researcher is integral to the success of the research process. Researching issues related to relationships and sex is sensitive and may appear difficult to do impartially (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This research was conducted whilst I was working therapeutically with individuals (not associated with the participants in any way) in non-monogamous relationships, and I was aware of multiple stories of people being discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality, both in heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ communities. Often discrimination of relationship types and sexual behaviours is caused by the lack of knowledge and understanding of that phenomenon (Mahar et al., 2022). Therefore, it was anticipated that this research would help to increase the awareness and understanding of open relationships, as I strongly believe in the necessity of promoting inclusion and equality.

My initial interest in the research topic came from clinical work with individuals and couples in consensual non-monogamous relationships of various types. On the one hand, I

was moved by the stories of my clients, filled with pain, resilience and the battle with societal judgement and pressure. Consequently, I wanted to promote diversity and inclusion, and make my clients and other individuals who opt for non-monogamy feel better understood and better supported therapeutically. On the other hand, my interest in the topic was provoked by the curiosity regarding something totally unknown to me on a personal level. Being in long-term monogamous relationships for most part of my adult life, I am an outsider in this research. Considering my personal choice of relationship type, I inevitably held some biases. My personal ontological position aligns with Western ideologies where monogamy is seen as the normative standard for romantic relationships (MacDonald, 1995). At the beginning of the research this cultural bias may have led me to see non-monogamy as a deviation from what I considered to be a norm, therefore, I might have been prompted to look for the psychological reasons causing the deviation. As the research progressed, I was able to develop a more nuanced and flexible way of perceiving non-monogamy in general and open relationships in particular. Additionally, while conducting a literature review, I developed some opinions and expectations about non-monogamous relationships, and relational and sexual satisfaction in open relationships. It is possible that the existing literature shaped my expectations from the research. For instance, in the existing literature sexual variety and the intensity of sexual experiences appeared to be one of the main motivations to pursue non-monogamous relationships. This shaped my expectation to hear similar stories from the participants. To avoid these expectations constituting a bias in the results, I adopted a reflective and self-examining approach throughout the research process (Darawsheh, 2014).

The use of reflexive thematic analysis enabled the exploration of subjective beliefs, concepts and perceptions of the participants and the meanings they attribute to their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The nature of this analysis was interpretative. In reflexive thematic analysis, the big role of the researcher in generating, organising and

interpreting the data is recognised, and it is acknowledged that researchers can both enhance and hinder the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I understood that I had a responsibility to remain unbiased and at the same time acknowledge the limitations of my impartiality.

There are two types of reflexivity: personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity requires taking into account how my subjective experiences, personal ideology, beliefs and values might affect the research whilst epistemological reflexivity requires consideration of how my theoretical assumptions might affect the interpretation of the findings (Willig, 2013). To help this process, I kept a reflective journal, where my thoughts and emotions invoked by participants' comments during the interviews and data analysis process were noted. Additionally, I engaged in personal therapy, and any issues and worries that may be triggered by the research process were discussed in therapy. At the same time, anything related to my clinical work with individuals in non-monogamous relationships was continuously discussed in clinical supervision. I reflected on my thoughts and emotions to ensure as much as possible that my subjective beliefs and experiences did not constitute a bias in the findings, and I will incorporate my reflexivity into the write-up of this thesis (Finlay, 2003).

3.8. Summary

The aim of this study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the relational and sexual satisfaction experienced by individuals in consensual open relationships, exploring both the benefits and challenges they encounter. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected as the most suitable method to capture the nuanced lived experiences of participants and probe previously unexplored aspects of these relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Silverman, 2020). This methodology chapter has provided a detailed and critical examination of the various methodological decisions made throughout the research process. In the next chapter I will build on the methodological foundations laid here, presenting the findings that

have emerged from these methodological approaches. I hope that these results can offer insights into the experiences of those in open relationships, further enriching the discourse in this field.

4. Chapter Three: Analysis and Results

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the results of the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023) conducted on data from 12 semi-structured interviews for this study. I aim to provide insights into participants' experiences and illustrate the reflexive development of the identified themes. Following the established standards for reporting themes by Braun and Clarke (2023), I will discuss the themes that were developed and interrelated factors. These themes and subthemes are visually summarised in the thematic map presented below. The main themes are: Theme 1: Autonomy and Self-Discovery (with two subthemes: An Opportunity for Healing; Improved Self-awareness and Self-esteem) and Theme 2: Redefining Various Aspects of the Relationship (with three subthemes: New Perceptions of Jealousy; Pushing and Redefining Boundaries; and Developing New Ways of Communicating). To provide concrete examples supporting these themes, this chapter includes verbatim extracts from the interview transcripts (O'Brien et al., 2014). Given the reflexive nature of the analysis, I will also offer an overview of how each theme was developed in relation to my own positioning and responses (King, 2021).

4.2. Thematic Map

Per the thematic map below, the theme of autonomy and self-discovery is intricately linked to the theme of redefining various aspects of the relationship in open relationships. As individuals explore greater personal freedom and self-awareness, they may encounter and address new challenges related to emotional and physical boundaries. For instance, the journey toward increased autonomy can lead to a deeper understanding of personal insecurities and self-esteem, which can directly impact how jealousy and emotional connections are perceived. Open relationships may compel individuals to confront and

redefine their notions of jealousy, particularly shifting from concerns over physical encounters to those centred on emotional bonds. This shift necessitates developing new ways of communicating and negotiating boundaries to manage relationship dynamics, potentially challenging experiences and insecurities. Consequently, the exploration of autonomy and self-discovery may enhance the ability to navigate and redefine relational norms, possibly fostering personal growth and more nuanced understandings of relationship dynamics.

Figure 1

Thematic Map

4.3. Theme 1: Autonomy and Self-Discovery

Some participants conceptualised monogamy as inherently opposed to individual agency; they articulated the idea that the restrictive nature of monogamy can impede personal growth if it does not align with one's desires and needs. Participants presented a narrative that conceptualised monogamy as repressive by highlighting the limitations it imposes on personal freedom and autonomy, particularly in the realm of sexuality. Through their individual journeys, they expressed a desire for greater agency and exploration, which ultimately led to taking up an open relationship as a means of liberation from the constraints of traditional monogamous norms. They suggested that autonomy and self-discovery can be achieved through non-traditional relationship structures, where individuals are empowered to explore their identities and desires in a supportive and understanding environment.

In the excerpt below, Participant F's experience suggests a deep-seated desire for autonomy and freedom that emerged after the end of their monogamous relationship. The participant's narrative indicates a dissatisfaction with the constraints inherent in monogamy, signifying that the inability to negotiate sexual freedom played a significant role in the breakdown of their previous relationship. This dissatisfaction became a source of discontent, prompting Participant F to seek alternative relationship structures and ultimately embrace non-monogamous relationships when they met their current partner. Participant F's decision to reframe their relational paradigm highlights a deliberate effort to break free from the perceived limitations of monogamy and create a relationship that aligned more closely with their values and desires. This shift signifies a trend towards seeking autonomy and agency within intimate relationships, challenging traditional notions of monogamy and highlighting the importance of personal agency in shaping relationship dynamics:

> *I had just been in an eight-year monogamous relationship. Um, and it was, you know, a successful relationship for a long time. But when it ended, I wanted to have a lot more freedom. And part of the reason it ended was the lack of sexual freedom and just imagining what that would be like for the rest of my life having gotten into this relationship when I was 21. Um, and so my, uh, my ex and I did have discussions about opening the relationship, but he didn't think he could handle it. So we actually ended up kind of breaking up over that. So I already had this idea that I wanted to try an open relationship but I also kind of had the idea that I wanted to be single for a while. And then, um, Alex (pseudonym) and I ended up meeting only a couple of months after my ex and I split up. So, uh, we had really good chemistry and everything, but I wasn't ready to be in a committed or a monogamous relationship again. (Participant F)*

Participant F's statement about the "lack of sexual freedom" suggests a growing awareness of the limitations imposed by monogamy, particularly regarding personal and sexual autonomy. The contemplation of a lifetime confined by such constraints ignited a fundamental realisation: the need for freedom to explore and express oneself beyond the established boundaries of a conventional relationship. This realisation catalysed a pivotal decision – the end of the monogamous relationship. The discussions about opening the relationship met with the partner's resistance, underscored the incompatibility of their desires. The decisive moment, "we actually ended up kind of breaking up over that," signifies a critical juncture where Participant F chose autonomy over continuity, illustrating a commitment to personal liberation and the courage to pursue it despite potential emotional costs. In the aftermath of this breakup, Participant F envisioned a period of solitude. The

desire to be "single for a while" may reflect a conscious effort to disentangle from relational expectations and focus inward.

However, the serendipitous meeting with Alex (pseudonym) introduced a nuanced layer to this journey. Despite the immediate chemistry, Participant F's reluctance to commit to another monogamous relationship may indicate an ongoing commitment to self-exploration. The assertion, "I wasn't ready to be in a committed or a monogamous relationship again," suggests a critical awareness of the need to maintain the autonomy recently reclaimed. This cautious approach implies a protective measure to safeguard the freedom essential for their continued self-discovery, ensuring that new relational engagements did not inadvertently replicate past constraints. Through this narrative, Participant F's experience illuminates the intricate interplay between autonomy and self-discovery within the context of relational transitions. The deliberate choices to end a constraining relationship, embrace a period of solitude, and cautiously navigate new connections reflect a potential need for introspection and engagement with self-awareness and personal growth. This journey was not merely about rejecting monogamy but may rather have been about affirming an authentic exploration of self, free from the limitations previously imposed.

Participant L's account also provides insights into the interplay between individual autonomy, self-discovery, and the dynamics of long-term monogamous relationships. Their description of feeling subsumed within their previous relationship suggests a broader trend where traditional monogamy might inadvertently suppress individuality, leading to a perceived loss of personal agency. This observation raises questions about the extent to which traditional relationship structures accommodate individual growth and autonomy:

> *I guess it just means that like, you know, you're in a relationship for so long that you, you just act as one. Um, and you don't really have your sense of self or, or who you actually are. You want to do whatever, it's just kind of like, we're doing this, we're doing this, we're together. And that's great, because we're just this monogamous lump, but it's just nice to have your own solo identity. And, because I feel like, people don't really figure that, you know, we get married at, I mean, in the old days, you get married at 20 before you even figured out who you are, and then suddenly you are just part of this unit. Um, yeah, so I think, I am in my 30s and I'm still figuring out who, who I am, or what I am, or what I want to do. So it's nice to be able to, yeah, still be exploring what I like sexually, not necessarily with the same partner. Because sex with the same person for years can get the same. I mean, I'm quite lucky, I don't really feel like that. Um, and it's still really fresh and interesting, but I'm sure there'll come a point where it's kind of a bit samey. (Participant L)*

Moreover, Participant L's account suggests a potential tension between the desire for self-discovery and the expectations associated with long-term commitments, such as marriage. Their suggestion that many individuals may enter into such commitments without fully understanding themselves or their desires underscores a societal pressure to conform to traditional relationship norms, potentially at the expense of personal fulfilment and authenticity.

Participant L's contemplation on the potential for sexual stagnation within monogamous relationships sheds light on a possible concern among individuals in long-term partnerships. While Participant L expresses contentment with their current sexual

relationship, their anticipation of monotony in the future suggests a broader desire for novelty and variety that may be lacking in traditional monogamous settings. This anticipation could serve as a motivating factor for individuals to explore alternative relationship structures that may offer greater opportunities for self-exploration.

Participant L's narrative suggests a complex interplay between individual autonomy, self-discovery, and traditional relationship structures. It indicates the importance of recognising and addressing the diverse needs and desires of individuals within intimate relationships, challenging societal norms and expectations in the pursuit of personal fulfilment and authenticity. The participant's perspective offers a nuanced reflection on the dynamics of long-term relationships and the quest for individual identity within them. The notion of a relationship evolving to the point where individuals "act as one" highlights an experience where the boundaries between two people blur, potentially leading to a loss of individual identity. This loss is framed as a natural consequence of long-term monogamous relationships, where the focus shifts from personal desires to the unity of the couple. The desire for a "solo identity" within the relationship underscores the importance of maintaining a sense of self amidst the unity of a partnership. This desire for autonomy may indicate a need for personal growth and exploration, separate from the shared experiences of the relationship. The participant sees the exploration of their sexual preferences outside the relationship as a means to maintain personal interest and prevent stagnation. While acknowledging the freshness and interest in their current sexual relationship, Participant L anticipates a point where it might become repetitive. This desire for novelty and exploration reflects a broader theme of ongoing self-discovery, and the need to balance personal growth and the stability and comfort offered by long-term relationships. Overall, Participant L's narrative highlights the potential tension between unity and individuality in relationships, suggesting that maintaining a balance between the two might be crucial for their personal

fulfilment and relationship longevity. There is however an assumption inherent in what Participant L, is saying which, perhaps erroneously, suggests that for them self-exploration and development can only occur in response to novelty.

Participant C also illustrates how open relationships can promote autonomy and self-discovery by allowing individuals to openly explore and discuss their attractions and desires. Participant C suggests that a more open and honest approach to relationships can lead to greater understanding, acceptance, and fulfilment for all parties involved:

> *Um, I think what it, what it is good for and what it does remove is you have more open conversations about who you're attracted to. So rather than kind of repressing it and kind of wondering, like, you know, I've got normal friends who are too scared to even say something like that person is attractive because they think it will trigger crazy insecurities within their partner, even though, I think, they both must know that they find other people attractive. Like, you can still love someone and still find someone else attractive, I think. So, for us, I think that was a really healthy way to be able to kind of just acknowledge that this still happens. Because it kind of removes that taboo and that awkwardness, I think.(Participant C)*

The participant's remark about "normal friends" might reflect a societal reluctance to openly acknowledge attraction outside of a monogamous relationship, driven by fears of triggering insecurities in partners. It also suggests a sense of deviation from the norm or conventional standards by this participant and others who engage in non-monogamy. This contrast underscores the perceived liberation within open relationships, where partners can openly discuss attractions without fear of judgment or jealousy. It implies that the traditional

approach to relationships may stifle individual autonomy by imposing norms that discourage open dialogue about natural inclinations.

Furthermore, Participant C's assertion that one can love someone while finding others attractive indicates a nuanced understanding of human relationships. The participant's perception suggests that acknowledging attraction outside of the main relationship can enhance rather than detract from the bond between partners, promoting a more secure and confident approach to love and intimacy, thereby reducing feelings of jealousy as I will discuss in the ensuing sections of this chapter (see Theme 2).

The description of open conversations about attraction as "healthy" highlights the potential role of communication in fostering autonomy and self-discovery for participant C. By removing taboos and awkwardness around attraction, open relationships can create a space for partners to explore and express their desires freely, contributing to a more fulfilling and authentic relationship dynamic. This emphasis on open communication as a tool for self-discovery underscores the potential of open relationships in promoting individual growth.

Participant J also suggests that entering an open arrangement can produce self-awareness emanating from continuous exploration, maintaining open communication and challenging conventional norms, all of which may foster both personal and relational growth:

> *Exploration never ends and it's about bonding and closeness with yourself, both of you, and keep learning as you go on. And this is great, because, uh, you know, there's so much to learn, not just with our minds, our bodies. If you don't question the nature of your reality, how can you grow? Whether it's this, or even religion, or anything else. Because you're, we're taught to think in linear ways when we go to school. But then as you grow older, you realize that there's so much more to life and the things that you're taught,*

> *uh, can be explored. Um, and you shouldn't be punished for thinking outside the box. I mean, if you can find a partner who is willing to do the same, but still work within your boundaries, so you're able to explain to each other, um, from the beginning, what your soft limits are and what your hard limits are. And work with this. (Participant J)*

Participant J's assertion that "exploration never ends" indicates an ongoing journey of self-discovery whereby understanding oneself and one's desires is not a linear process, but an iterative one that changes over time. They appear to imply that being in an open relationship goes hand in hand with being open to new experiences which may contribute to both personal and relational growth. Further, their statement "bonding and closeness with yourself" highlights that being connected to a partner may require an individual to be in tune with their own desires, needs and boundaries. They appear to suggest that introspection and nurturing a strong relationship with oneself is crucial for this process. The learning process advocated by Participant J involves challenging conventional teachings, which they frame as crucial for personal development. In this context, their perspective on self-discovery revolves around critically examining and sometimes challenging societal frameworks that have been internalised. Their account thus illustrates how open relationships may facilitate self-discovery by offering a platform via which individuals can grow beyond the perceived limitations associated with conventional thought.

Overall, the participants' narratives articulate a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed by monogamy, highlighting its potential to impede personal growth and autonomy if it does not align with one's desires and needs. This perspective challenges the notion that monogamy is universally fulfilling, suggesting instead that it may repress individual agency in the realms of emotional constraints and sexuality. Through their

individual journeys, the participants expressed a desire for greater agency and exploration, leading them to embrace open relationships as a means of liberation from the limitations of traditional monogamous norms. The participants' narratives suggest that autonomy and self-discovery can be achieved through non-traditional relationship structures, where individuals are empowered to explore their identities and desires in a supportive and understanding environment. This perspective highlights the potential of open relationships in fostering personal growth and individual autonomy, suggesting that they may offer an opportunity for individuals to navigate their desires and identities authentically.

4.3.1. Subtheme 1: An Opportunity for Healing

Open relationships may offer a space for individuals to heal and grow. Several participants shared that they went through various difficult and at times traumatic experiences in the past: emotional and sexual abuse, controlling and restricting behaviours of ex partners, being publicly shamed for infidelity. Some participants reported that open relationships enabled them to reclaim agency over their relationships and embark on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. In the subtheme An Opportunity for Healing I refer to the reparative experience of the participants following a negative or traumatic experience in the past. In participants' cases the healing was allowed by increased freedom, sense of liberation, opportunities for self-exploration and consequently personal development and growth.

Participant L's narrative suggests that open relationships can serve as a vehicle for self-discovery and healing following negative experiences in monogamous relationships. For Participant L, being introduced to non-monogamy enabled them to re-evaluate the negative view of themselves as someone "who had an issue with cheating" and to discover that there could be a different way of loving and being loved:

> *Um, I have, I'd always had an issue with cheating in the past, uh, on ex-partners, and I kind of just thought it was a big problem with me, so I like, you know, I took a long hard look at myself and I didn't kind of get with anyone, uh, like in a long term relationship for a good like year and a half, just kind of really trying to figure out how I was going to work with my life. And then I met my partner and we were best friends for three years and it just kind of felt right for us to end up being together. Um, but I, you know, love her so much that I was like, you know, I can absolutely stay faithful to you. Um, and then just kind of years passed, and we'd heard more about sort of sex parties and the fact that, you know, couples can go to parties and they can kind of do things with other people. And then suddenly we got an invite to like quite a high-end party, a sex party from someone that she'd met through work. And I was like, well, I'm happy to go, but obviously it's up to you. And she got the invite, obviously, so she was like, yeah, why not? Let's go. We can just see what it's about. We don't have to do anything. Um, and she loved it. And I was like, this is fun. And yeah, just kind of haven't looked back since. (Participant L)*

By embracing the possibility of non-monogamous experiences, individuals like Participant L may find a new sense of liberation and fulfilment. This shift allows them to transcend the perceived limitations of traditional monogamous norms, which they found restrictive, and explore new ways of relating. The extract above also points to how the act of renegotiating relationship dynamics within an open framework can be an empowering and healing experience. It may allow individuals like Participant L to reclaim agency over their relationships after engaging in infidelity and experiencing guilt, or dissatisfaction in previous monogamous contexts.

Participant L further reflected on the meanings that are attributed to sexual encounters in monogamous and consensually non-monogamous relationships. The participant shared how being in a consensual open relationship allowed them to come to peace with a past traumatic event where they were publicly shamed for cheating on their partner:

> *Once you get rid of, like, cheating is so horrible, but it's only horrible because of the lying and the sneaking around. Like, other than that, it's just sex. When you view it that way, you can do all these amazingly intimate, fun things, but like, as long as you don't lie about it, then it doesn't really hurt anyone. It's the shame and the guilt of cheating that removes the fun, but when you agree about it, it's all different. In my previous relationship I wanted to sexually explore. And I just, was just kind of trying to sneakily do it behind my partner's back. Um, yeah. I didn't really get a kick out of it, the shame and the guilt, and the fear of getting caught. I had a really bad experience. I mean, it was all my fault, I cheated with a few different people and they all found out at the same time. Um, and that was, yeah, it was like the curtain just fell down and like, I don't know, I was quite publicly shamed about it and there was nothing that felt good about that really. So that was kind of the moment that I said I would never cheat again and I didn't. Yeh. Doing it consensually changes everything. Now the weight is lifted. (Participant L)*

Participant L explained that having various sexual encounters in a consensual way as opposed to cheating allowed them to avoid feelings of guilt and shame, while still preserving fun and the opportunity to explore. This sense of transparency, control and autonomy may be crucial in the healing process, as it enables individuals to establish boundaries and

expectations that are more conducive to their emotional well-being. The past experience of infidelity made Participant L feel exposed and vulnerable, “it was like the curtain just fell down.” On the contrary, Participant L's positive experiences in their open relationship make them feel liberated, “Now the weight is lifted” and created positive memories that could replace the negative associations of past infidelities. Furthermore, the act of exploring non-monogamous relationships seemed to serve as a form of self-discovery for Participant L. By stepping outside traditional monogamous structures, they gained valuable insights into their desires, boundaries, and priorities. This exploration appears to have led to deeper self-awareness and personal growth, allowing Participant L to understand themselves and their relational needs more clearly.

Participant A’s experience, captured in the excerpts below, also highlights a significant response to the negative experience of a monogamous relationship, leading to a rejection of traditional structures in favour of alternative arrangements that prioritise freedom and autonomy. Emerging from a decade-long, closed and judgmental relationship, the participant’s divorce served as a catalyst for seeking new experiences and perspectives. The newfound liberating experience of open relationships might have helped Participant A to heal from the past abuse. The participant described how a difficult moment of learning about their sister having cancer served as “a breaking point” that pushed them to end an abusive relationship and reflect on what they truly wanted:

> *So I was in an abusive relationship, physically and emotionally. Up to a point that I wasn't even allowed to go to have a coffee with a girlfriend. There was a lot of jealousy as well. And I kind of like just got used to that. He didn’t let me see my family because they were against him. I just got used to his behaviour, it became a norm. And then my mom called me and*

> *said, your older sister has cancer. A very aggressive form. And I didn't even talk to my sister at a time because of him. And then my sister was in a hospital about to have a surgery. And then I realised that the fear of losing her is much greater than my fear of him. And when I talked to him, I said I need to fly to Stockholm, I need to look after her. And he said it's just lymphoma, Google says it is like 70% success rate, like, why do you need to travel? And that was it for me. I just picked my passport and my belongings, and I just left. So that was a breaking point. I realised that life can stop at any moment. That I can't just go with the flow and accept things that don't belong to me. (Participant A)*

Participant A further explained how their exploration of an open relationship started, talking about an encounter at a sex club which represented a transformative moment, revealing the liberating potential of non-monogamous connections:

> *I was in relationship for 10 years. And that was a completely closed relationship. And, and not really a healthy relationship, a really judgmental relationship. And so after my divorce, I met my current husband, and we started to date, sex is amazing, everything is great. And then suddenly, we decided to travel to Berlin for a party. And we travel to Berlin. And we ended up in a club, we just like started to explore. And it was just, it has blown my mind how, how amazing it is when you engage with people and there is no jealousy, and you just understand how good it feels for you, for yourself and for your partner just to have this journey and this experience. (Participant A)*

The participant's description of their previous relationship as "completely closed" and "not really a healthy relationship, a really judgmental relationship" underscores the negative impact of their past monogamous experience on their emotional well-being and sense of self. This characterisation suggests that the closed and judgmental nature of their previous relationship may have stifled their autonomy and hindered their ability to explore their desires freely. Following their divorce, Participant A's encounter with their current husband marked a significant turning point in their journey. The participant described the beginning of this new relationship as a period of excitement and fulfilment, particularly in the realm of sexuality, "sex is amazing, everything is great." This suggests that the openness and freedom in their current relationship contrast starkly with the restrictive dynamics of their past monogamous relationship.

The decision to travel to Berlin for a party and explore non-monogamous experiences appears to represent a conscious choice to break away from traditional relationship norms and embrace a new way of relating. This was a recurring theme among other participants, who revealed conscious choice moments to visit specific places as a means of ending their previous relationships or starting new ones. The participant's description of their experience in Berlin as "mind-blowing" suggests the impact of open relationships on their sense of self and relationships. The absence of jealousy and the sense of freedom and understanding experienced in this context indicates that open relationships have provided Participant A with a space to explore their needs without fear of judgment or restriction.

Moreover, Participant A's emphasis on the journey and experience of engaging with others suggests a deeper process of self-discovery and personal growth. Through their open relationship, Participant A has been able to explore aspects of themselves and their desires that may have been suppressed or unexplored in their previous monogamous relationship,

which they described as abusive. This process of exploration and self-discovery likely became a reparative experience for Participant A and contributed to their sense of autonomy and agency in their current relationship, as they are able to feel free and define the terms of their relationship.

Participant I suggested that open relationships can concurrently present unique challenges and consequently opportunities for healing. The participant reflected on a situation where they experienced rejection and ghosting from someone they were seeing outside of their primary relationship. This experience triggered feelings of pain and rejection, despite the stability and love they felt in their primary relationship. However, these experiences of love and stability helped them to soothe the pain and look differently at the rejections:

> *You come across things that kind of trigger the same thing in you, because with John (pseudonym) I was never rejected in the relationship, it was very stable and I felt very loved, but, I mean, every once in a while you come across like a complete fuckboy or something, so there was a guy that I was seeing quite regularly, only for like a couple of months, and we would text quite a lot, and I really, really liked him. He was very charming. Every time I'd go over, we'd, like, have sex, maybe have some food and then have sex again. Uh, and then as soon as I tried to see him a little bit more, he, he kind of became very distant. And then one time we were chatting, like, on, uh, WhatsApp, and he, he asked a question. I replied. And then I never ever heard from him again. So, like, I tried to get back in touch. Nothing. I've never heard from him since. And that was, like, incredibly, um, it was very painful to just be kind of, like, ghosted and rejected in that, in that way with someone that I was seeing quite, quite regularly. Um, but also, uh, at the*

> *time that this has happened, again, with this kind of recent relationship, he had said at one point, well, I don't want to see you too much because you're married. So I don't want to build anything with you. Knowing I have John and his love changed this, uh, experience, I mean being rejected and at the same time, uh, loved and accepted eased the pain. It was, uh, making me see myself differently to how I would see myself as a single woman in a similar situation. (Participant I)*

This scenario suggests a challenge in open relationships – navigating emotional boundaries and dealing with rejection or unmet expectations from additional partners. The open relationship context seems to allow Participant I to process rejection within the safety net of their stable and loving relationship with their main partner. This duality of experiencing rejection while having a secure relationship to fall back on can facilitate emotional healing by providing a contrast between security and vulnerability. The security of the primary relationship offers a supportive environment in which individuals can process negative experiences from other connections.

Overall, the narratives examined highlight the potentially intricate relationship between individuals' past relationship experiences and their choice to pursue open relationships. They demonstrate how previous traumas, challenges, and unfulfilled desires can influence individuals' readiness to embrace non-monogamous arrangements, ultimately shaping their views on freedom, fulfilment, and intimacy within relationships. For example, individuals who have experienced restrictive or judgmental relationships in the past may be inclined to seek openness and exploration as a means of healing and growth. These narratives underscore the potential of open relationships in addressing and healing from past wounds,

offering a pathway towards personal autonomy and self-discovery through intimate connections.

4.3.2. Subtheme 2: Improved Self-Awareness and Self-Esteem

Open relationships may provide opportunities for increased self-awareness by presenting challenges that require individuals to address and manage difficult emotions such as jealousy and anxiety. Like all relationships, open relationships involve a degree of introspection, as partners navigate the complexities of multiple connections and the emotions they elicit. These dynamics are illustrated in the following excerpt from Participant I's experiences:

> *In the early days John (pseudonym) was kind of fine. He didn't have so much of a problem with it, but I think for the first couple of months he was saying that I was kind of ruining every meeting that he would have because if it went on too long, I would be really angry and he was like, yeah, I went over and we had a coffee first. And I was like, what do you mean you had a coffee first? I'm like, it's just for sex. Why are you having, like, why are you hanging out with these guys? Um, so I think, and then he felt very guilty. So we had, like, problems to begin with... He said that it's not fair because I'm not doing that with you. So I really, I had to kind of train myself quite a lot and, like, sit with a lot of discomfort… I mean, I know I have a really kind of anxious attachment style, so I know that I'm naturally kind of triggered by these things, but that they're not necessarily relevant in the here and now that kind of triggers from like much older wounds. So I think recognizing that allowed me to kind of just sit and not always kind of spread my feelings onto him or, or make John responsible for how I, I was*

> *feeling. Just kind of take ownership of, of what was going on for me and if it was uncomfortable, just try and sit with it and not, and not push it out too much. (Participant I)*

Participant I's narrative suggests a journey towards improved self-awareness and self-esteem within the context of an open relationship. Initially, there were challenges related to feelings of jealousy and guilt, which appeared to create tension and discomfort. However, through self-reflection and introspection, Participant I was able to identify their anxious attachment style as a contributing factor to these feelings. This recognition appeared to be a crucial step towards understanding the root causes of their emotions, recognising that they were often linked to past wounds rather than present circumstances. This newfound awareness seems to have empowered Participant I to take ownership of their feelings and reactions, rather than projecting them onto the partner and expecting the partner to manage those feelings.

By learning to sit with discomfort and not react impulsively, Participant I appeared to demonstrate a deepening level of self-understanding and control, which could potentially contribute to a more harmonious and fulfilling relationship dynamic. This journey highlights the possible connection between improved self-awareness, self-esteem, and autonomy, as Participant I learned to navigate their emotions and reactions with greater clarity and self-assurance.

Participant B’s narrative also suggests that open relationships might potentially enhance self-esteem through consistent flirtatious interactions which act as affirmations of sexual vitality. Engagement in behaviours that affirm attractiveness and desirability, along with the management of complex relational dynamics, could possibly foster a stronger sense of self-worth and relational competence for participants.

> *Another thing is when you are meeting people to have sex with them, there's normally quite a flirtatious, um, approach, atmosphere, dynamic. So you are constantly rediscovering those muscles, that ability to flirt, which is something that a lot of monogamous couples lose, apparently, speaking to, you know, people that have had issues. So it's like you're always, uh, yeah, you're always in a sort of flirtatious persona, even with your partner, so you never forget how to be exciting and, uh, spontaneous and, uh, yeah, just more sexualized generally, which is definitely good for relationships. (Participant B)*

In Participant B's narrative, the continual engagement in flirtatious interactions with new partners appears to play a significant role in maintaining and enhancing self-esteem. The act of flirting appears to be an exercise in self-expression and confidence building. Engaging in flirtatious behaviour with multiple partners necessitates a degree of self-assuredness and social skills, fostering a continuous reinforcement of one's attractiveness and desirability. Participant B suggests that in monogamous relationships, the opportunity for such external validation may diminish over time, potentially leading to a reduction in self-perceived attractiveness and confidence. Furthermore, the flirtatious atmosphere that Participant B described served as a constant reminder of their sexual vitality and spontaneity. By maintaining a "flirtatious persona," individuals in open relationships may engage in behaviours that seek to affirm their sexual appeal and charisma. The use of the word "persona" in Participant B's narrative suggests that this may be an "enacted" or performative behaviour. The word "persona" stands in contrast to the idea of being oneself or authentically oneself. Flirting then could be viewed as a role that is played to seek external validation of desirability or perhaps what is needed to maintain multiple connections with different partners with varying levels of intimacy.

The ability to successfully navigate and manage multiple romantic or sexual connections can contribute to a heightened sense of competence and autonomy. The dynamics of open relationships require effective communication, negotiation, and emotional intelligence. Mastery of these skills can reinforce self-efficacy and self-worth, as individuals see themselves as capable and adept in managing complex relational landscapes. Participant B's experience also suggests that the flirtatious interactions within open relationships extend to their primary partnership. This transference of flirtatious energy can revitalise the primary relationship, keeping it dynamic and engaging.

Moreover, Participant B's narrative implies that open relationships can foster an environment where sexual expression and exploration are celebrated rather than repressed. This environment can contribute to an individual's sense of self-esteem. Feeling free to express one's sexual desires and experiencing acceptance and reciprocation from multiple partners can validate and reinforce positive self-perceptions regarding one's sexual identity.

In conclusion, navigating the complexities of multiple connections may require introspection and emotional regulation. Recognising the origins of emotional responses and taking ownership of feelings could potentially lead to greater self-awareness and emotional resilience. Additionally, frequent flirtatious interactions and validation from multiple partners might play a role in boosting self-esteem, particularly in terms of sexuality and desirability.

4.3.3. Reflexivity Statement

During the course of my interviews about open relationships, I encountered moments of introspection. When engaging with participants, the rationale given for pursuing such a relationship structure at times seemed, in my view, rather clichéd. Some explanations offered were familiar, echoing common justifications that I had encountered before. For example, sexual variety and the intensity of sexual experiences, were the topics I expected to hear, and

all the participants spoke about it. This sense of déjà vu made me question whether my own supportive statements had inadvertently steered the conversation toward these conventional rationales. Although I was inclined to believe that my influence was minimal, I could not dismiss the unsettling thought that perhaps I had unwittingly guided them toward familiar arguments.

My immediate response was to reassure myself that my intentions were purely supportive and non-directive. I aimed to create a safe space where participants could explore their motivations and feelings without feeling pressured to conform to preconceived notions. However, the resemblance of their reasons to those commonly discussed in the literature on open relationships led me to scrutinise my own role more critically.

Reflecting on this experience, I realised that the familiarity of their rationale might not solely be a result of my influence but could also be indicative of broader societal narratives surrounding open relationships. It is possible that these narratives shape our understanding and discourse about such relationships, thereby making certain justifications seem more prevalent or expected. The patterns of reasoning I observed may reflect common societal themes rather than my direct impact.

Moreover, this reflection highlighted the broader challenge of navigating conversations about relationship structures. Open relationships, like any complex social arrangement, are subject to a range of interpretations and justifications. While some of the reasons given by individuals might appear clichéd or conventional, they are often grounded in personal experiences and broader cultural discourses. It is essential to approach such discussions with an awareness of these contextual factors and to recognise that familiar arguments may emerge from deeply held beliefs and societal influences.

This experience also underscored the importance of remaining open and curious in my role as a conversational partner. While it is natural to seek novel insights and diverse perspectives, it is equally important to acknowledge and respect the validity of familiar narratives. These narratives can provide valuable context and understanding, even if they seem predictable on the surface.

In conclusion, this reflective journey prompted me to consider the complex interplay between individual motivations and societal influences in discussions about open relationships. While I strive to support and facilitate meaningful dialogues, I must also remain mindful of the broader narratives that shape our understanding of such relationships. By acknowledging both the familiar and the novel, I hope to contribute to more nuanced and empathetic conversations about the diverse ways in which people navigate their relational lives.

4.4. Theme 2: Redefining Various Aspects of the Relationship

In the evolving landscape of open relationships, participants' experiences revealed a redefinition of core relationship aspects, from jealousy and boundaries to communication and intimacy. These narratives highlight how engaging in open relationships may require a shift in traditional perceptions and practices, challenging deeply ingrained societal norms and personal beliefs about fidelity, exclusivity, and emotional connection. Jealousy in open relationships may take on new dimensions, shifting from physical encounters to emotional connections. Participants noted that while physical interactions with others are typically accepted or even encouraged, emotional intimacy with someone outside the primary relationship can trigger significant feelings of jealousy. This shift underscores the potential importance of emotional bonds, which partners may wish to reserve for themselves to maintain a sense of exclusivity and security. Instances where emotional intimacy led to

jealousy highlight the complex dynamics of open relationships and the potential need for continuous dialogue about boundaries and emotional expectations.

Open relationships can amplify insecurities related to physical attractiveness and sexual performance. With the presence of multiple partners, comparisons may become more explicit and frequent, leading to heightened awareness and sensitivity about one's own desirability and performance. Partners may need to navigate their insecurities by fostering a supportive environment where feelings of jealousy can be openly discussed and addressed.

Additionally, open relationships can push the boundaries of traditional relational structures, requiring participants to rethink and redefine what constitutes a relationship. This countercultural shift involves exploring new relational dynamics and questioning societal norms regarding monogamy, marriage, and sexual exclusivity.

The complexity of open relationships may necessitate innovative and honest communication strategies that go beyond what is typically required in monogamous relationships. Participants emphasised the importance of developing new ways to articulate discomfort, jealousy, and insecurities, fostering deeper mutual understanding and conflict resolution. Effective communication also may involve the continuous reassessment of boundaries and rules, ensuring they remain relevant and supportive as partners encounter new experiences to manage the intricacies of open relationships. In the ensuing sections, these subthemes are discussed in detail with supporting excerpts from the data.

4.4.1. Subtheme 1: New Perceptions of Jealousy

Sub-Sub Theme: Jealousy Over Emotional, Rather Than Physical Connections. This subtheme underscores the potential importance of emotional intimacy beyond sexual encounters; in open relationships, where physical connections with others might be allowed

or even encouraged, it is the emotional intimacy that seems to be most cherished and protected. It is these emotional bonds that partners may wish to reserve for themselves, potentially engendering feelings of jealousy if such moments are shared with others. Some participants in the study revealed instances where emotional intimacy, rather than physical encounters, triggered feelings of jealousy within relationships:

> *[We] had a Shibari social event just recently, and I had one of the friends who came and tied me up. And then a sketch artist was drawing us and then my husband looked at how my friend hugged me from behind. And that was a beautiful moment. That's kind of like intimacy, not in a sexual way. And then at the end, he told me: "Oh, my gosh, I wished it would be me who would hug you from behind, and I felt like a little bit upset that there was no more emotional connection." We spoke about it the other day. And, and he explained he sensed a deep connection between me and that friend, at that moment. An emotional connection. Yeh. (Participant A)*

In the excerpt above, the Shibari social event seems to serve as a backdrop for a moment of emotional intimacy. The friend's hug from behind is perceived as a beautiful and intimate moment, the reaction of the participant's husband reveals the potentially complex dynamics of jealousy in open relationships. His expression of a desire to have been the one providing the hug and his subsequent feeling of being "a little bit upset" underscores the value placed on emotional exclusivity. This reaction is not rooted in the physical act itself but appears to be in the emotional significance of the gesture. It suggests that, despite the acceptance of physical interactions with others, there remains a strong desire for certain emotional experiences to be exclusive to the primary partnership.

This narrative challenges the assumption that jealousy in open relationships is primarily linked to sexual or physical encounters. Instead, it reveals that emotional intimacy can evoke similar, if not stronger, feelings of jealousy. The husband's response indicates a desire and need for emotional connection and affirmation within the primary relationship, highlighting the importance of emotional bonds in maintaining relational stability and satisfaction. Furthermore, the husband's candid expression of his feelings to Participant A appears to be crucial. It illustrates the potential role of open communication in navigating the complexities of open relationships. The husband's willingness to articulate his emotional needs and the impact of witnessing the intimate moment seems to underscore the necessity for continuous dialogue about boundaries and emotional expectations. This communication is pivotal in addressing and mitigating feelings of jealousy, ensuring that both partners feel secure and valued.

Participant A's recounting of this event also seems to point to the delicate balance required in open relationships. While physical openness is often negotiated and accepted, emotional exclusivity remains a sensitive and critical aspect. The husband's yearning to be the one sharing the intimate moment reflects a broader human desire for unique and personal emotional connections. It emphasises that emotional intimacy is not easily compartmentalised and can often transcend physical boundaries, making it a potent factor in the emotional landscape of open relationships.

Participant L's account below also sheds light on the intricacies of emotional connections and jealousy in open relationships; the participant shares the significant emotional impact that external relationships can have on the primary partner:

> *...there was a time that she was seeing someone and what seems to be more common with females is that they like to see people for longer periods of*

> *time and make more of a connection. Um, which is totally fine as long as she's happy, but like there was a time that a guy that she was meeting with ghosted her or whatever, and they'd been seeing each other for quite a while, and the way that made her feel did make me feel quite sad because I was like, this person shouldn't actually matter to you as much. Um, just seeing her be upset over someone else leaving her, and I'm like, I'm right here to look after you... So I guess it's just navigating her emotions with my emotions and then having all these external people. Um, but other than that, like, it's largely just really good fun and we have a good time. (Participant L)*

Participant L's narrative highlights the potentially complex interplay between physical and emotional intimacy in open relationships. The incident where Participant L's partner was ghosted by a long-term external partner brings this complexity to the forefront. The partner's emotional reaction to being ghosted, an experience typically associated with feelings of rejection and sadness, appears to elicit a poignant response from Participant L. The participant's jealousy upon seeing their partner upset seems to underscore the emotional interconnectedness that remains integral, even when physical relationships with others are permissible. This reaction is not rooted in jealousy over the sexual aspect of the partner's other relationship, but rather over the emotional pain it caused to the partner.

Participant L's remark that the external person "shouldn't actually matter to you as much" suggests a desire to be the primary source of happiness and fulfilment for their partner. This sentiment reveals a nuanced form of jealousy that centres on emotional rather than physical exclusivity. Despite the open nature of their relationship, there is an inherent expectation that certain emotional bonds and responses should be reserved for the primary

partner or that external partners should hold less emotional currency. The sadness and protective instinct Participant L experienced highlight a deeper longing for their partner's emotional well-being to be primarily tied to their relationship.

This scenario also emphasises the potential balance required in managing one's emotions alongside those of a partner within an open relationship framework. Participant L's navigation of their emotions, their partner's emotions, and the influence of external relationships seems to illustrate the emotional labour involved in maintaining such relational dynamics. The need to reconcile feelings of sadness and protectiveness with the understanding and acceptance of the partner's other connections speaks to the ongoing negotiation of boundaries and emotional priorities in open relationships. It seems to hint at the struggle that this may sometimes present. It is also evident in the sharp change in tone at the end of this extract from Participant L “but other than that it's largely just really good fun and we have a good time.”

In sum, jealousy over emotional connections in open relationships could indicate the significant role of emotional intimacy which seems to surpass the impact of physical encounters. These emotional bonds, cherished and protected, can trigger jealousy when shared with others, underscoring their importance within primary relationships. This dynamic emphasises the ongoing negotiation of boundaries and priorities to ensure relational stability. Effective communication about emotional needs and boundaries may be important in managing jealousy in open relationships. By openly discussing feelings and navigating the complexities of multiple connections, partners might foster a deeper understanding of their emotional needs. This approach could potentially help in mitigating jealousy but might strengthen the emotional foundation of the primary relationship.

Sub-sub theme: Jealousy caused by insecurity over others' physical attractiveness or performance. In an open relationship, where multiple sexual partners are involved, personal insecurities around sexual performance and physical appeal may become amplified because they are not just internal fears; they are contextualised by real or imagined comparisons with others. Some participants expressed concerns about their partners' reactions to others' physical attributes, indicating feelings of inadequacy or jealousy. Additionally, some participants discussed performance-related insecurities, such as difficulties with arousal or confidence, which can impact individuals' self-esteem and contribute to feelings of jealousy or insecurity within open relationships. The excerpt from Participant C below points to the complex dynamics of open relationships where partners are inevitably exposed to situations that can induce jealousy related to physical attractiveness:

> *I know I would have at times got kind of grief from her for, you know, looking at another girl a particular way. She would have still had some insecurities, but I think it's just when you have an open relationship, you just kind of amplify all of that because you're actually kind of going there. To be honest, I felt similarly myself. At times, sometimes, um, I thought of the guys, the guys she was seeing. Hm, it is unavoidable to make parallels. (Participant C)*

Participant C's reflection on insecurities within open relationships highlights the amplification of pre-existing vulnerabilities concerning attractiveness and performance. Participant C's admission of having received "grief" from their partner for looking at another woman in a particular way, as well as the participant's own tendency to compare themselves with the other people their partner was seeing, underscore the latent insecurities that many individuals harbour. These insecurities, often related to one's own attractiveness or sexual

performance, seem to become intensified in the context of an open relationship. Participant C's comparison with other people may suggest a deeper concern about their own desirability and how it measures up against others. The behaviour described by Participant C might indicate concerns or doubts about their self-worth and attractiveness. It is also possible that the sense of jealousy and the tendency to compare themselves with their partner's other sexual encounters represent a breach of boundaries or a miscommunication about the boundaries set within the relationship. The phrase "you just kind of amplify all of that" encapsulates the crux of the issue. Open relationships can magnify insecurities because they create environments where direct comparisons are more frequent and visible. Each new interaction with an external partner can be perceived as a benchmark, consciously or subconsciously, against which individuals measure their own attractiveness and sexual prowess, as well as questions the strength of their main relationship. This amplification seems to be particularly poignant in areas related to physical attractiveness and sexual performance. In a traditional monogamous relationship, sexual experiences are limited to one partner, creating a unique, shared dynamic. In open relationships, however, the introduction of multiple partners introduces a spectrum of sexual experiences and performances. This variety can lead individuals to question their own adequacy and desirability. Additionally, for Participant C, comparison with other "guys" might not be solely about their physical attraction but also about perceived implications regarding the satisfaction of their partner and worries about their own performance. The openness inherent in such relationships may demand a higher level of emotional resilience and self-assuredness. Participant C's narrative suggests that while open relationships can offer freedom and variety, they also necessitate a robust framework of emotional support and understanding.

Within the dynamic of an open relationship, it is clear that external comparisons can be a challenge and can cause discomfort and insecurities, regardless of the parameters of trust

and consent that have been established. In the excerpt below, Participant C discussed how concerns about self-comparison to others regarding attractiveness can be significant in open relationships. They explained, based on their experience and the experiences of their partner, that initiating sexual relations with individuals whom one perceives as highly attractive might trigger underlying insecurities:

> *It is hard at times. I think about myself, how I rate and how the guys she is seeing do. Yeah, I wonder sometimes. Uhm, I wonder often. Are they better than me? Do they do things differently? I think if she was honest, she struggled sometimes with that kind of aspect also, especially if she thought the girl was really hot. I wouldn't say jealousy, but kind of. Well, maybe you'd call it jealousy. Almost just like envy. I guess same for me. That's how I feel. Almost thinking, I wish I looked like that or was like that. Yeah. But not necessarily jealous in the sense that someone takes her away, and she knew I wasn't going to pursue other women, but it still made us feel slightly... insecure. Yeah. Insecure, that's right. Yeah, that's exactly it. Um, because once you kind of open those floodgates you start sleeping with people that they perceive as very, very attractive. I think it can pull out insecurities quite quickly. (Participant C)*

Participant C's reflections on the comparisons between themselves and others suggest a complex interplay between admiration, jealousy and envy, and insecurity. These feelings manifest as a comparative self-assessment that can erode self-esteem. Participant C's words exemplify a phenomenon in open relationships: the heightened sensitivity to the perceived physical attractiveness of others. When describing their feelings, Participant C initially hesitates to label them as jealousy, instead suggesting they are more akin to envy. The choice

of the word envy here seems to be directed not at the potential loss of the partner but at the perceived superiority of someone else's physical attributes. This form of envy can be particularly insidious because it is rooted in a self-perception deficit rather than a relational threat. The phrase "I wish I looked like that or was like that" encapsulates the core of these insecurities. It may reflect a deep-seated desire for the attributes that an individual feels they lack, thereby spotlighting their vulnerabilities. This reaction highlights how open relationships can amplify existing insecurities. The presence of a highly attractive third party can serve as a mirror, reflecting and magnifying one's perceived inadequacies. Even though Participant C doesn't believe someone else would take their partner away and also reassured that they have no intention of pursuing others, the mere comparison can be enough to evoke feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Participant C's narrative suggests that insecurities might rapidly emerge, and the "floodgates" are opened in an open relationship. The metaphor could imply an overwhelming influx of emotions and comparisons that partners might struggle to manage.

Participant C's account suggests the challenges of managing insecurities related to attractiveness in open relationships. The envy and self-comparison to what they perceive as highly attractive third parties might reveal how these dynamics could amplify existing insecurities. While logical reassurances might offer some comfort, the emotional responses underscore a possible need for further discussions, validation and support within the primary relationship.

Participant A also illustrated how sexual performance can be a significant source of insecurity or concern within open relationships, which in turn can lead to feelings of jealousy. There seems to be an implicit worry that if one's sexual performance is not up to certain expectations or norms, it might impact mutual satisfaction. In the context of an open

relationship, this might create anxiety about a partner seeking more sexually fulfilling experiences elsewhere. If one partner is concerned about their capability to satisfy sexually, they may feel jealousy toward partners or potential partners who they perceive as being more sexually competent or confident:

> *When we've just started to date, he couldn't erect that fast. So it may be his confidence, self-confidence. He didn't have a partner for a long time before he met me. And like, he didn't have sex for quite some time. And it took him a lot of time to build the sensitivity. And yeah. So I think [it is] the confidence. He worried about his performance and compared to others I was seeing. Getting jealous. Yes, yeah. It made it harder for me. Taking away from the pleasure. My pleasure. It really undermines the purpose of it. (Participant A)*

Participant A's account above suggests how jealousy stemming from insecurity, particularly related to sexual performance, appears to be a critical factor in the dynamics of open relationships. In this example, the issue of erectile difficulty is not merely a physical one but is deeply intertwined with psychological and emotional factors. Participant A suggested that their partner's confidence was affected and consequently caused jealousy, which tainted Participant A's enjoyment. This scenario underscores the potential impact that sexual performance can have on self-esteem and confidence and can serve as a cause of jealousy. Participant A's statement "Taking away from the pleasure. My pleasure" suggests that a jealous partner can make the experience of an open relationship less joyful. The participant's statement "It really undermines the purpose of it" indicates their expectation that an open relationship would not be filled with jealousy and, perhaps, would bring more freedom and understanding.

In the context of open relationships, where partners may have multiple sexual encounters with different people, the pressure to perform can be even more pronounced. The fear of not meeting a partner's expectations or being compared unfavourably to other sexual partners can intensify these feelings of inadequacy and increase a feeling of jealousy. Participant A's reflection that it took their partner "a lot of time to build the sensitivity" points to the gradual process of regaining sexual confidence. This rebuilding of sensitivity may be viewed as not solely about physical acclimation but also involves restoring psychological assurance and emotional comfort. In open relationships, where comparisons with other partners might be more explicit, this process may be particularly delicate. The persistent potential for comparison can either hinder the feeling of confidence or, conversely, motivate improvement in self-assurance.

Overall, this subtheme suggests that being in an open relationship prompts individuals to compare themselves with their partners' other sexual encounters. The physical and performance-related insecurities might impact individuals' self-esteem and contribute to feelings of jealousy or insecurity within open relationships, which in turn can make the relationships less enjoyable. Jealousy in such contexts may not follow a straightforward pattern but could encompass a range of emotions, from envy to insecurity, influenced by the freedom to engage with others, its effects on self-perception and self-esteem, and the social comparisons that naturally arise.

4.4.2. Subtheme 2: Pushing and Redefining Boundaries

Sub-Sub Theme: Societal, Relational and Personal Boundaries. Participants' reflections highlight the pushing of boundaries in the context of open relationships. Having spent a lifetime adhering to monogamous norms ingrained by societal expectations, participants' journeys into open relationships appear to represent a significant departure from

conventional relational structures. This shift seems to challenge personal beliefs and to cause one to confront broader societal norms regarding relationships, marriage, and sexual exclusivity, as encapsulated in Participant K's narrative:

> *Cause I've always, my whole life been monogamous and I never even looked at anyone else when I was monogamous because it's just ingrained into you that you find someone, you get married, you have children and that's that. That's just the way the society kind of has made things like. I think it's easier for guys to meet a girl and be able to have a connection with them, you know, sexually or whatever, and that'd be satisfying, whereas for me, I need to know people, I need to get to know people, I need to have some sort of connection with them so that it's going to be fun for me or even worth it. And I didn't really, hadn't really thought about the fact that I can get to know other people and that side of things. Um, so I was kind of like, oh, I don't think it's for me. And then we ended up going to a sex party, which, um, I'd never done before. I didn't really know anything about it. We were like, okay, well, let's go. And really loved it. Like, it was very different, obviously. We really enjoyed it. Um, and got, like, met some amazing people in the scene and like, in open relationships and stuff. And then we just decided to kind of try it and just dip a toe in and see how it feels. And yeah, it really worked for us. (Participant K)*

Participant K's narrative illustrates how pushing the boundaries of traditional relationship models can be inherently counter-cultural. They begin by acknowledging the deeply embedded societal script that prescribes monogamy as the standard relational model: find a partner, marry, and have children. This traditional path is presented as the default,

reflecting societal pressures and expectations that discourage alternative relationship structures. The participant's initial monogamous behaviour, characterised by not even looking at others, underscores the internalisation of these norms. The participant's exploration into open relationships began with a tentative and experimental approach, marked by an initial scepticism about whether such arrangements could align with their personal needs and desires. This uncertainty appears to reflect the tension between ingrained societal norms and the emerging curiosity about alternative relational models. The participant's statement, "I don't think it's for me," seems to highlight this initial hesitation and the difficulty of reconciling traditional monogamous values with the possibility of more fluid, open arrangements.

The transformative experience of attending a sex party seemed to serve as a pivotal moment in pushing relational boundaries. This event, which the participant had never previously considered, symbolised a bold step into a countercultural space where traditional norms are explicitly challenged. Participant K's enjoyment and positive encounters with others in the open relationship scene signified a rethinking of what relationships can entail. The sex party represents not only a physical exploration but also an ideological shift, opening the participant's mind to new relational possibilities and configurations. Meeting "amazing people in the scene" and engaging with the open relationship community further reinforced the countercultural dimension of this journey. These interactions appear to have provided a supportive network that validated and normalised the participant’s experiences, offering alternative models of relationship that contrast sharply with monogamous norms. This community became a space where the participant could explore and affirm their evolving relational identity. It seems that the individual’s perception of boundaries is linked to larger systems surrounding the individual. The definition of what is possible and what is not, what is right and what is wrong, might be linked to the context in which an individual finds

themselves. For Participant K, the new environment seemed to bring new perceptions of what relationships could be like.

The gradual transition to "dipping a toe in" and eventually finding that open relationships "really worked" illustrates the incremental nature of pushing boundaries. This careful experimentation allowed the participant to navigate their comfort levels while challenging and expanding their relational horizons. The successful integration of open relationship dynamics into their life signifies a personal and relational transformation, where traditional societal scripts were replaced with more flexible and personalised relational practices. Participant K's narrative suggests that their transition from monogamous norms to open relational practices involved a sense of caution, treading carefully in their exploration and pushing against traditional boundaries. This journey suggests the need for an ideological shift to explore alternative relationship models. It highlights how personal boundaries can change through challenging societal expectations and carefully navigating new relational dynamics.

Participant E's experiences also illustrate how pushing the boundaries of traditional relationship models by entering an open relationship can challenge conservative social norms and thereby foster some personal discomfort which is eventually overcome after making adjustments and confronting internalised values about fidelity, commitment and exclusivity:

> *Um, okay. So initially we, uh, we have, we have some very close friends, which, um, they were in the lifestyle before us, probably a good five, six years. And it took a little bit of time for, like our friendship to kind of come to a stage where we could share things like that, because you know society always judges, and even if you have close friends, even family, um, not necessarily that they want to, sometimes even subconsciously, um, they*

> *judge. Everyone has an opinion. Um, but, uh, it was throughout our friendship that a relationship developed, like, a good, chemistry and good communication, they were, in a way, they were dropping some hints about the lifestyle. So we kind of suspected what they were doing, and obviously we were intrigued and curious how it would go. How it's working and everything like that. Especially, with my background, being from a religious country, and being brought up like that, you know, something like this is not common, it's not ordinary, it's not, not even, I would say probably not even like allowed, you know. Um, so, what, what actually happened, we were invited to one of these parties over the weekend, on Saturday, uh, during the day, my friend called me and he said, um, get dressed nicely, we're gonna go out to a party, we're gonna take you to one of our parties. So we kind of knew what to expect, okay? And, um, we went out for a few drinks before, and then they took us to, uh, to this club. Uh, and we walked in, and literally we walked in, and, as they would say in England, they dropped us at the deep end. (Participant E)*

Initially, Participant E and their partner experienced some discomfort linked to social judgments and their conservative culture, indicating some of the challenges that may have been concomitant with reconciling the open relationship model with entrenched social norms. Further, their account points to how individuals in open arrangements may have to confront their internalised values of exclusivity alongside the possibilities offered by open relationships. For Participant E, being “dropped at the deep end” during their first experience in an open environment, devoid of preparation or expectations, signified the adjustment that may be required to embrace new fluid forms of connections and therefore, overcome internalised norms.

Participant G's reflections also delved into the philosophical and emotional dimensions of open relationships, suggesting a boundary-pushing culture by emphasising a shift from traditional relational norms to a broader, more inclusive perspective on human connection. In the excerpt below, the reference to feeling a sense of unity and empathy across multiple relationships suggests a move away from conventional views on exclusivity and sex towards a more open, compassionate approach to human interactions:

> *To me open relationship, um, removes the walls between people. Society builds those boundaries. Um, and when you're open to doing that with more than one person, there's a connection that you feel with more than one person. You know, there's a humanness in all of us that is the same. There's a, you know, there's a oneness, it's very kind of Sufi philosophy, um, you know, unity consciousness. There comes a point when it's just super easy to connect with anyone on all levels and it's not about sex. There's a kind of compassion and an empathy for all people. And it's much easier to go through life that way. Everything is less serious, it's more playful, more fun. I think it's a wonderful thing, you know. (Participant G)*

Participant G described a sense of connection and unity that emerged when engaging with more than one person. This experience appears to transcend the physical realm, aligning with the principles of Sufi philosophy and unity consciousness. The reference to Sufi philosophy, which emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and a sense of oneness, underscores the spiritual and philosophical shift that may accompany the move toward open relationships. This perspective highlights the dissolution of boundaries between individuals "removes the walls between people", fostering a sense of empathy and compassion that extends beyond romantic or sexual connections. The participant's narrative suggests that

open relationships can facilitate a broader, more inclusive approach to human connections. By engaging with multiple partners, individuals can cultivate a deeper understanding and appreciation of the "humanness" that connects everyone and shift the boundaries that are installed by the societal structure. This expanded relational framework allows for a more holistic view of relationships, where emotional and spiritual bonds are prioritised alongside, or even above, sexual interactions.

The notion that it becomes "super easy to connect with anyone on all levels" once the societal boundaries are lifted indicates a fundamental change in how relationships are perceived and experienced. This ease of connection mentioned by this participant seems to foster a more compassionate and empathetic approach to interactions, where the emphasis is on understanding and valuing others as whole individuals rather than through the lens of exclusivity and possession. The participant's experience also underscores the idea that open relationships can lead to a more playful and joyful approach to life. This playful attitude may reduce the pressure and create a more relaxed relational dynamic. For some participants an ability to connect deeply with multiple people without the constraints of exclusivity introduces an element of freedom and lightness. This approach aligns with the broader countercultural ethos of open relationships, which challenges traditional norms and promotes a more fluid and inclusive understanding of intimacy and connection.

Participant I’s narrative also offers a comprehensive look at the transformative and countercultural nature of open relationships, highlighting both the exhilarating and challenging aspects of this relational model. The excerpt below suggests how the initial phase of engaging in an open relationship involved a significant push of boundaries, leading to both positive transformations and accompanying trauma. While the early experiences, such as increased sexual activity and engaging in threesomes, were described as highly positive, they

also introduced new challenges and stresses related to trust and relationship dynamics that had not been encountered in their previous monogamous context. This duality suggests the potentially complex nature of boundary-pushing in open relationships, where transformative experiences are often accompanied by significant emotional adjustments:

> *In the early days, it kind of transformed it in a really positive way. Um, it kind of really, like, really had lots of positive effects. We had much more sex together once we opened up. We were also having, like, threesomes and things like that. It was really, it was really great. And also I think because opening was, was kind of, I don't know, it was almost traumatic. Even though we both wanted it, we had to really consider, like, trust and all these different things that we'd never had to consider before because we'd been monogamous. Also, also on a personal level, I felt my limits were pushed. I pushed my limits. I felt like I was entering risky territories in myself. (Participant I)*

The increase in sexual activity and experimentation with threesomes suggests that pushing the boundaries of traditional monogamous relationships can lead to a reinvigorated sexual connection. The introduction of new sexual dynamics seemed to serve as a catalyst for deeper physical and emotional intimacy, demonstrating how open relationships can enhance personal and relational satisfaction through shared adventurous experiences. However, Participant I also acknowledged the “almost traumatic” nature of this transition, despite both partners desiring it. This duality, where the relationship is simultaneously revitalised and challenged, highlights the complex emotional terrain of open relationships. The trauma described, perhaps, stems from the need to reevaluate and deeply consider foundational elements of their relationship, such as trust, boundaries, and emotional security. These are

aspects that can be more straight-forward in conventional monogamous relationships, while in open relationships the discussions around trust, boundaries and emotional security might require a higher degree of emotional labour and communication. Apart from the boundaries of the relationship being shifted, the personal boundaries also seem to be changing. Participant I shared “I pushed my limits. I felt like I was entering risky territories in myself,” suggesting that their boundaries of possible and not possible, acceptable and not acceptable, might have changed.

The necessity to consider trust in new ways reflects the inherent vulnerability in pushing relational boundaries. Trust, which is a cornerstone of any relationship, must be renegotiated and re-established within the new context of openness. This process can be both daunting and enlightening, forcing partners to confront their insecurities and develop stronger communication skills. The trauma mentioned by Participant I is indicative of the intense emotional work required to maintain a healthy open relationship, which involves continuous dialogue, reassessment of boundaries, and emotional transparency.

Moreover, the narrative underscores the countercultural elements of open relationships. By moving away from the traditional monogamous framework, Participant I and their partner are engaging in a relational practice that challenges societal norms. This shift requires a re-evaluation of deeply ingrained beliefs about fidelity, exclusivity, and relational stability. The need to "consider all these different things" that were previously unexamined suggests the transformative power of open relationships to question and redefine conventional relational structures. As partners encounter new experiences and confront personal worries and insecurities, the agreements they initially set may need to be adjusted. This adaptive process highlights the importance of flexibility and continuous negotiation, ensuring that both partners feel respected and understood.

In sum, participants' reflections reveal that open relationships can embody countercultural practices and involve pushing societal, relational and personal boundaries. Departing from the ingrained societal norms of monogamy, these journeys may represent significant shifts in personal beliefs and confront broader societal expectations about relationships, marriage, and sexual exclusivity. Engaging in open relationships can challenge the traditional script of finding one partner, marrying, and remaining exclusive, instead advocating for more fluid and personalised relational practices. Through countercultural experiences, participants found relational models that better aligned with their evolving needs and desires, potentially fostering deeper and more fulfilling connections. Concurrently, they presented challenges by way of the need to make emotional adjustments.

Sub-Sub Theme: The Need to Further Push the Boundaries. Although the nature of the consensual open relationships already allows more freedom and offers fewer restrictions than traditional monogamous relationships, the participants seemed to crave even more freedom and fewer limitations. A number of participants spoke about their desire to bend the rules, suggesting that the excitement and satisfaction might be coming not from having less restrictive, flexible boundaries, but from the act of breaking the rules and pushing the boundaries. The act of pushing the boundaries further might bring a sense of novelty and pleasurable risk-taking. Participant H talked about the satisfaction that they experienced from breaking the existing rules:

> *You know, we, we did come up with a set of rules, um, you know, about what that meant to have an open relationship. And I'm, I'm not completely convinced we've kept all of those rules. Um, so I'm not sure it's a hundred per cent honest, if you know what I mean. Um, I, you know, the risks of it are and the downsides of it are, it's quite easy to get jealous and think, oh,*

> *they're having lots of sex or they're going to meet somebody else or, you know, something like that. Um, also, it's exciting to break the rules, you know, to have something you can't, you're not supposed to, um, have. We, hm, we agreed to use condoms with our play mates, but, you know, it didn't always happen. (Participant H)*

Participant H's narrative underscores the excitement linked to the act of breaking rules, "Um, also, it's exciting to break the rules, you know, to have something you can't, you're not supposed to, um, have." This statement suggests that relational and sexual satisfaction might be associated with taking risks and accessing what is forbidden. Additionally, it shows that maintaining a certain level of excitement might require novelty. Although open relationships permit sexual encounters with various people, which assures a constant level of novelty, the rules about what is allowed and what is not might get old, making rule-breaking a way of accessing the sense of novelty again.

Similarly, Participant B explained that they tended to break the rules established in their relationship in order to get immediate gratification:

> *And I'm weak because when I'm in the moment with a girl saying that she wants to get naked, to be honest, your short-term gratification can totally overwrite any medium, long-term arrangements that you have with your partner. So, you have to be disciplined or think carefully about, you know, how realistically can I ring my partner quickly and say, I have this opportunity, as I said, so can I capitalize on it? Is that okay with you? Um, but yeah, you're right, we don't have that many boundaries. Um, one again is about using condoms. So, the assumption is that you would use condoms. Realistically, um, guys, um, would not bring up the subject of condoms if*

> *they can get away with it. Just being brutally honest. And actually, more and more girls, I think, are more confident about having unprotected sex. So they will not bother with it either. So in the mood, um, in the moment, uh, condoms are often just forgotten. (Participant B)*

The choice of words: "I'm weak," "capitalize on it," "get away with it," "not bother" and "condoms are often just forgotten" suggest a certain element of risk-taking, playing a game, where one knows they are pushing the boundaries, but still chooses to do so in order to derive a certain pleasure. It seems that Participant B might enjoy the act of breaking the rules, perhaps, more than the experience of having sex without condoms. Participant A's experience further supports these ideas:

> *And yeh, yes, we discuss, uh, we negotiate. We talk a lot and we make rules. But, you know, umm, the rules get bended. Um, when you are in that moment, you don't think, you might want something and go for it. We, for instance, said no meals with the partners, uh, no sharing meals. You know, it can be intimate sharing that moment, like eating dinner with someone. We agreed, but then, uhm, it happened. (Participant A)*

The idea of wanting something and going for it highlights that the pleasure of getting what they want is being prioritised over the arrangements and agreements made with their partner. The choice to share meals with the secondary partners might reflect Participant A's desire to develop more intimate connections with their sexual encounters, which could be an equivalent of cheating in traditional monogamous relationships. The act of consciously choosing to do what is forbidden in a relationship might indicate the search for fresh and novel impressions and experiences.

The need to further push the boundaries was somehow reflected in the narratives of all 12 participants. The experiences of the participants show that rules can be continuously bent and broken in search of excitement and satisfaction. This inclination to push the boundaries seems to be one of the challenges of open relationships. Thus, while open communication and flexible rules are important aspects of navigating the dynamics of open relationships, honest reflections on one's desires and pursuits of novelty and risk through rule-bending are crucial for maintaining relational stability.

4.4.3. Subtheme 3: Developing New Ways of Communicating

Throughout the participants' narratives, the need for new, clear and honest communication was identified as a subtheme. The challenge of articulating discomfort, jealousy, or insecurities in open relationships necessitates the development of new communication strategies that may not be as critical in monogamous contexts. This reflects an adaptive process in which partners learn to communicate more effectively about sensitive issues, leading to deeper mutual understanding and conflict resolution. Instances where partners had uncomfortable experiences highlight the importance of these new communication methods. Achieving a successful open relationship, as indicated by the narratives, requires developing nuanced communication skills. Traditional norms and scripts do not cover the complexities of open relationships, therefore, partners must create their own communication paths. This includes finding new ways to express and negotiate personal needs, boundaries, and insecurities. As Participant I reflects below, regular check-ins, debriefs after sexual encounters, and creating safe spaces for discussing jealousy and other emotions become essential parts of maintaining emotional intimacy and mutual understanding.

Participant I's reflections on communication within open relationships suggest a need for developing new ways of interacting. The complexities of open relationships might require a high level of transparency, honesty, and emotional articulation. This heightened need for communication may be particularly important in the early stages to help establish trust, set boundaries, and manage the complex emotions that arise:

> *I think it requires so much communication. Sometimes too much. And often it's the only thing that me and my partner talk about. It's like other people, our experiences, how we feel with each other. Sometimes it takes up a lot of time. But I think in the early days it's like, it's really crucial. To talk about it a lot and be really upfront and honest and kind of trust each other enough that you're not scared to, to really talk about what's going on and how you feel. And if you're jealous, I think you need to express it in a way that's kind of healthy. Um, but also like the, I think the sitting with discomfort is really, really important. Um, I think you have to learn how to contain yourself and not, and not kind of ruin it for someone else. If you've agreed to something, you've set boundaries and you've set rules. As long as the other person is kind of going by the rules, um, you can't really punish them for, for doing what, doing what you've agreed that you will do. But also, it's important that the rules or whatever get re revisited because they, they do change. I think I've learned that, well, I think I've learned that there's a lot of stuff that I haven't processed around like my attachment style and kind of like, I don't know, my own fragility, my own sense of, worth and like self-esteem and stuff and because you're confronted with it much more when you're putting yourself out there or risking having your heart broken or risking getting rejected by people that you might not even be that interested in. Um,*

> *so I think I've learned that there's a, because we've been together for so long, that there are things that I didn't have to confront for, say, 15 years that I'm now confronting as like, uh, as an adult, well, as an older adult, that I probably should have taken care of when I was much younger. (Participant I)*

As per the extract above, in open relationships, partners need to frequently discuss their interactions with others, their feelings, and their experiences. This constant dialogue can become the dominant theme of their conversations, reflecting the intense need to manage and understand the dynamics at play. The statement "I think it requires so much communication. Sometimes too much" suggests the inherent challenges of maintaining transparency and understanding when multiple partners and dynamics are involved. Open relationships may demand extensive communication to navigate the complexities of boundaries, expectations, and emotional needs. While this high level of communication may be important for managing the various relational intricacies, it may also feel overwhelming or excessive, potentially straining the partners' capacity to keep up with it. Participant I implied that the necessity of revisiting and potentially revising boundaries and rules is a key aspect of communication in open relationships. Participant I's mention of their struggle with unprocessed attachment issues and self-esteem highlights another layer of complexity. The open relationship context forces individuals to confront deep-seated emotional vulnerabilities that may have been dormant in a monogamous setting. This confrontation requires a new level of self-awareness and emotional maturity, further underscoring the need for effective communication. It seems that open relationships might require not only a more sophisticated way of communication between partners but also a constant internal dialogue of individuals with themselves.

The narrative also highlights the challenge of balancing care for others with the need for emotional independence. In open relationships, where multiple connections are involved, partners may need to find ways to maintain their emotional stability without becoming overly reliant on each new relationship. Achieving this balance might involve nuanced communication not only with the main partner but also with each person involved, allowing individuals to express care and affection while setting boundaries to safeguard their own emotional well-being. Additionally, as I discussed in Theme 1, interactions with new partners in open relationships can bring up issues related to self-worth and performance, potentially intensifying existing insecurities. Effective communication could help partners articulate these feelings, seek reassurance, and develop coping strategies. By addressing these vulnerabilities, partners may support each other in fostering confidence and resilience. Participant I's reflections underscore the importance of new and honest communication in open relationships. The need to navigate complex emotions, negotiate boundaries, and address personal insecurities may prompt partners to adopt communication methods that are adaptive, transparent, and empathetic.

Participant D's account further indicates how rules serve as a form of coping mechanism that delineates what is permissible in the open relationship and what is not. Their account below mentions various sexual practices as examples of activities that are exclusive to the primary relationship only, implying that they are conceptualised as intimate activities:

> *Um, and then, um, we started to, to put some rules because there is, uh, there are some insecurities on both sides. Um, for example, about certain sexual practice that we have together. We don't want necessarily someone else to have it. Could be anal sex, could be, uh, the practice of BDSM,*

> *certain things like this. We have to talk about it all, to agree. Not always easy, ha. (Participant D)*

Rules appear to play a role in assisting partners to safeguard their emotional well-being. Participant D's account suggests that rules may be a critical aspect of managing or navigating insecurities whereby open dialogue concerning desires and boundaries may assist both partners to feel more understood and secure amidst insecurities emanating from certain sexual practices. Participant D explained that in order to navigate those difficulties a constant dialogue and agreement are needed.

Participant K's reflections on communication within their open relationship also suggest the intensified necessity for detailed and frequent dialogue. Despite already being good at communicating, the shift to an open relationship has necessitated a significant increase in the depth and frequency of their conversations. This heightened level of communication is essential for navigating the complexities and emotional nuances that open relationships introduce:

> *Hmm, we always been good at communicating, but we have to talk way more now. Like, every time one of us goes out, we want to know, I want to know everything. Andrea (pseudonym) doesn't necessarily want to know all the sexual stuff. I like to know everything. I like all the details. Um, so talking a lot more, um... (Participant K)*

Participant K's desire to know every detail when one partner goes out, contrasted with their partner's preference to avoid explicit sexual details, suggests the need for customised communication strategies within open relationships. This discrepancy in information preferences highlights the importance of understanding and respecting each partner's boundaries and needs when it comes to sharing experiences with others. Such tailored

communication seems critical for maintaining trust and emotional security, ensuring that both partners feel comfortable and respected in their relational dynamics. The narrative reveals that open relationships demand not only more frequent conversations but also conversations that are carefully tailored to each partner's needs. The desire for detailed accounts may reflect a deeper need for reassurance and connection. By knowing all the details, Participant K may feel more involved and secure, reducing potential feelings of jealousy or exclusion. This level of openness can help mitigate insecurities by providing a comprehensive understanding of the partner's experiences and affirming that the primary relationship remains a priority.

Moreover, the necessity of increased communication reflects an adaptive process where partners learn to navigate new relational landscapes. Open relationships introduce a variety of external interactions that can impact the primary partnership. Regular and detailed communication becomes a tool for managing these interactions, allowing partners to address any arising issues promptly and effectively. This adaptive communication may help maintain relational stability and emotional equilibrium by fostering an environment of continuous feedback and mutual understanding. The increased need for communication might also imply broader implications for emotional intimacy. By engaging in more frequent and detailed conversations, partners could potentially deepen their emotional connection and gain a better understanding of each other's experiences and feelings. This ongoing dialogue may help to strengthen the relational bond, possibly providing a more solid foundation for navigating the challenges and opportunities presented in an open relationship.

The excerpt below delineates the importance of open and frequent communication in navigating the complexities of non-monogamous arrangements. This emphasis on communication underscores the proactive effort to ensure mutual understanding, trust, and

transparency between partners, which, according to Participant K, ultimately contributes to the resilience and sustainability of the relationship:

> *But since we've opened up, it's been even better, because you can bring things that you've learnt from other people that you like. Oh, I really like that, actually. We haven't tried that. Let's try it. Kind of, you can bring that in. It keeps it fresh as well. Um, Andrea (pseudonym) always says that sleeping with other people makes him love me more. And when I have sex with other people, afterwards all I wanna do is come home and tell Andrea about it and then get into bed with him. It just has made our connection stronger as well. Hmm, we have always been good at communicating, but we have to talk way more now. (Participant K)*

Participant K's desire to share experiences with their partner after being with other people demonstrates the crucial role of communication in maintaining and strengthening the relationship. This openness not only serves as a method of transparency but also as a means of re-establishing intimacy and emotional closeness. The act of coming home and sharing these experiences reaffirms their bond and ensures that both partners remain connected and involved in each other's lives, despite the involvement of others. The strengthening of their connection through open communication and shared experiences highlights the adaptive benefits of such relationships. The ability to navigate and integrate external experiences into their primary relationship without causing fragmentation or jealousy speaks to a high level of emotional intelligence and mutual understanding. This dynamic requires both partners to be deeply attuned to each other's needs and feelings, reinforcing the importance of empathy and openness. Participant K's reflections illustrate how open relationships can enhance intimacy and connection through the introduction of new experiences and heightened communication.

The ability to learn from other partners and bring those lessons into the primary relationship keeps it fresh and engaging. The deepened appreciation and love resulting from these experiences, coupled with the necessity for increased communication, highlight the potential for open relationships to strengthen the primary partnership. This narrative indicates the importance of continuous dialogue, mutual respect, and the willingness to integrate new experiences, fostering a resilient and dynamic relational framework. Concurrently, Participant K's phrasing, "but we have to talk way more," seems to hint at a potential challenge. The use of "but" suggests that the increased need for communication may be seen as a difficulty at times.

In conclusion, the necessity of developing new ways of communicating in open relationships appears to be a recurring theme in participant narratives. Partners might need to navigate and articulate complex emotions, negotiate boundaries, and address personal insecurities by creating communication strategies that are adaptive, transparent, and empathetic. The increased and modified communication may play an important role in maintaining relational stability, emotional security, and intimacy, which may, in turn, contribute to the resilience and sustainability of open relationships.

4.4.4. Reflexivity Statement

In contrast to the first theme, the linked sub-themes discussed above are less introspective and more focused on the interactions between individuals, the dynamics of their interpersonal relationships, and their decisions to engage in open relationships. Reflecting on these discussions about participants' interactions, feelings, and thoughts about others, I found myself considering my potential influence on their responses during the interviews. Given my prior experience in therapeutic work, I recognised that participants' perceptions of me might affect how they discussed their attitudes and behaviours. Throughout the interviews, I was

mindful of my responses and made an effort to avoid appearing judgmental or leading in my questions. My field notes from one interview underscored this concern and suggested that I might have influenced the participants' responses or the depth of their reflections:

Participant started talking about the emotional as opposed to the physical jealousy they felt at times; I was unsure as to how to probe this further. In my mind, I still wanted to explore if there was actually a sense of jealousy around the physical acts they were discussing, but I chose not to probe this. Why? Was this just accepting their account, or did I not want to appear conflicting their own account? How should I have broached this? Perhaps, my personal beliefs about jealousy affect my perception of what and how I asked the participant and, consequently, what the participant shared.

I also noted within the process of coding that these experiences were impacting how I approached the data. As these were elements of the interview process that I was initially very conscious about during the interviews themselves, I had my possible biases in mind even before the coding started. During the transcription of the interviews themselves, these conversations were striking to me and brought up the kind of feelings and thoughts I had about my role in this process, as noted above. Whilst transcribing can be an important first step in the qualitative analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2023) and can aid the initial development of codes and themes, this did prime me for addressing these issues and developing them into the theme. I did however make a note in my field notes/coding book to be aware of my prior anticipation of these codes.

However, it is also of note that whilst making this effort to overcome or at least be aware of any assumptions that I may have had in relation to this theme, I may have been inadvertently having an impact on their development (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This is why it

is important to ensure that reflexive reporting occurs throughout this results section and enables a higher degree of transparency to be reported (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

Additionally, throughout the analytic process, I kept wondering how my clinical experience might be affecting my interpretation of the data. I couldn't help but apply various psychological theories to the material shared by the participants, thinking about what might have been the participants' developmental history, what environmental failures they faced, how it affected their attachment styles and what defences they might have developed. In my journal, I reflected on the impact of my clinical experience on the way I approached the analysis and tried to separate my role as a researcher and my role as a trainee counselling psychologist, as much as possible.

In conclusion, the reflective process has been as transformative for me personally as it has been academically enlightening. It has reminded me that research is a deeply human endeavour, subject to cycles of personal growth and change. This recognition underscores the importance of reflexivity in research, demanding constant vigilance over how one's positionality might guide the interpretation of data and the construction of knowledge.

4.5. Summary

In this chapter I presented the research findings emanating from reflexive thematic analysis, to address the research questions "How do individuals in open relationships experience relationship satisfaction?" and "What is their experience of the potential benefits and challenges with regards to sexual and relational satisfaction?". In the next chapter, these findings are discussed comprehensively, thereby delineating specific responses to these questions.

The research findings are also discussed within the context of the secondary literature to illustrate the original contributions of this study and areas of convergence and divergence in relation to existing studies. Concurrently, this study highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the conclusions drawn so that its findings may be appropriately contextualised. The subsequent chapter further discusses the clinical and societal implications of the findings, while also identifying potential areas for future research.

5. Chapter Four: Discussion

In this chapter, I will summarise and discuss the research findings presented in the previous chapter in light of the existing literature. I will then discuss research findings and methodological considerations. The methodological considerations relate to both the strengths and limitations of the research findings, enabling them to be appropriately contextualised. I will also discuss the clinical and societal implications of the research findings, focusing on what can be deduced from counselling psychology and how relationships are understood socially, given that monogamous relationships have been long held as a standard in many societies. Following this discussion, I make recommendations for future research and subsequently conclude with a summary of the key points from the research.

5.1. Summary of Findings

Through this research, I set out to explore how individuals in open relationships experience relationship satisfaction and the potential benefits and challenges with regard to sexual and relational satisfaction. Based on the findings from the reflexive thematic analysis of participant narratives, I developed several key themes and subthemes that highlight the multifaceted nature of open relationships. These themes encompass autonomy and self-discovery, and redefining various aspects of relationships.

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss each one in the context of related literature, highlighting ways in which they support or deviate from existing work in the field.

5.1.1. Autonomy and Self-Discovery

Analysis has shown that participants experienced traditional monogamous relationships as often imposing limitations on personal freedom and growth, particularly in

the realm of sexuality. The restrictive nature of monogamy was seen as a hindrance to personal agency, leading some participants to seek alternative relationship structures. Open relationships provided the participants with a platform for them to explore their identities and desires in a supportive environment, promoting greater personal fulfilment and self-awareness. Similar findings were established by Wood et al. (2021), Heckert (2010), Lipnicka (2023) and Vilkin and Scott (2021), who identified autonomy as a motivator for non-monogamous arrangements or as an advantage listed by participants practising non-monogamous relationships. In the present study, the shift from monogamy to non-monogamous arrangements was often described as a liberating experience, allowing participants to reclaim agency over their relationships and embark on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. The perception of non-monogamous arrangements as "liberating" was similarly described by Wood et al. (2021).

In contrast to research that has unidimensionally described consensual non-monogamous relationships as unfulfilling or unstable (see, for example, Grunt-Mejer & Lys, 2022; Balzarini & Muise, 2020; Fullgrabe & Smith, 2023), the present study offers a more nuanced understanding of challenges present in such relationships. The practice of engaging with multiple partners can, in some instances, bring unresolved feelings and difficult past experiences to the forefront of the relational experience.

Engaging with multiple partners may compel individuals to confront long-standing insecurities or traumas that were previously masked by the stability of a monogamous setup. However, what transpired from participants' narratives was that the relational structure of an open relationship can also facilitate personal growth by inspiring individuals to reflect on their inner worlds, face their insecurities and be more in tune with their feelings. The imperative of negotiating and communicating about multiple relationships can engender

greater self-awareness and clarity regarding their true wants and desires. I have interpreted this process as one of self-discovery through exploration of new aspects of themselves, internal work and self-development. This process can lead to a more nuanced understanding of one's personal and relational needs. In the ensuing section, I further consider how open relationships can offer a platform to reprocess traumatic experiences.

5.1.2. An Opportunity for Healing

In some instances, open relationships offered a platform for healing from past relationship wounds. The notion that open relationships can constitute a space via which individuals can confront and heal from past relationship wounds, as well as gain deeper insights into their needs and desires, suggests a nuanced perspective on the potential benefits of such relational structures. In this study, it was found that open relationships may create an environment within which individuals are prompted to examine the unresolved issues and emotional scars stemming from previous relationships. This included examinations of what constitutes fidelity in open relationships in comparison to previous relationships, as they are characterised by having multiple partners. This finding deviates from the literature, where scholars focus on how partners in open relationships create rules pertaining to fidelity (see, for example, Dava & Mims, 2015) but do not explicitly discuss it in relation to past traumatic experiences. The present study, by adopting a qualitative approach, offers a more comprehensive account of these dynamics.

For individuals who have been restricted, controlled or even abused by their ex-partners, consensual open relationships offer a sense of agency and freedom. For individuals who have been unfaithful themselves, this study indicates that open relationships can similarly create an environment where they are prompted to address and confront their own issues surrounding fidelity and commitment. Engaging in an open relationship might lead

these individuals to reflect on their past behaviour, examining the motivations and circumstances that led to their previous acts of infidelity. These findings align with the research of Mogilski et al. (2023), who described consensual non-monogamous relationships as a “solution to sexual conflict” (p. 463).

The structure of open relationships, which involves transparent communication, flexibility of boundaries and freedom of sexual expression, may help individuals who experienced control and abuse in the past to feel accepted, respected and free to be themselves. At the same time, the freedom to engage in sexual relationships with multiple partners might require individuals to face their own history of disloyalty more directly. For someone who has been unfaithful, the experience of navigating multiple relationships simultaneously can highlight discrepancies between their past actions and their current values or expectations. This confrontation might reveal patterns or triggers that contributed to their previous infidelity, offering an opportunity for introspection and personal growth. Additionally, the process of establishing and maintaining openness within a relationship requires significant honesty and self-awareness. This study is an original contribution to the literature by showing how individuals with a history of being unfaithful may realise gaps in their own conceptualisation of commitment and fidelity, serving as a catalyst for re-assessing the behaviour and developing an alternative approach to relationships.

5.1.3. Redefining Relational Dynamics

The second major theme in this study involves redefining various aspects of the relationship, such as jealousy, boundaries, and communication. Participants' experiences highlighted a significant shift in how jealousy is perceived in open relationships. Rather than being primarily linked to sexual encounters, jealousy often arose from emotional connections with others. Emotional intimacy was highly valued and protected, and sharing these bonds

with someone outside the primary relationship could trigger feelings of jealousy, as has also been established in studies by Hamilton et al. (2024) and Andersson (2022).

In contrast to the present study, Hamilton et al. (2024) however found that jealousy was more prevalent in women as compared to men. The present study doesn't reveal any difference in perceptions of jealousy among the genders. In a study by Edlund et al. (2022), the scholars found that jealousy in consensual open relationships is not only contingent upon gender but also personality traits. This aspect was not considered in the present study; however, what did emerge was that navigating jealousy and related dynamics necessitated continuous dialogue about boundaries and emotional expectations to maintain relational stability.

In open relationships, insecurities related to physical attractiveness and sexual performance were also amplified. The presence of multiple partners heightened awareness and sensitivity to these issues, leading to increased opportunities for comparison. Participants discussed the challenges of managing these insecurities and emphasised the importance of open communication and reassurance within the relationship to mitigate feelings of inadequacy and maintain self-esteem. This finding deviates from the general tenor of the literature, whereby jealousy in consensual non-monogamous relationships has been mainly linked with emotional attachment as opposed to physical attractiveness (see, for example (Stewart et al., 2021; Valentova et al., 2020). Explicitly, this study highlights that in open relationships, partners become vulnerable to increased opportunities for comparison and scrutiny, which can highlight and exacerbate pre-existing insecurities. For instance, knowing that one's partner is interacting and potentially forming connections with others can make individuals more acutely aware of their own perceived shortcomings or anxieties about their

attractiveness and sexual performance. These heightened insecurities can become a significant source of emotional distress if not managed effectively.

To counteract the potential negative impact of these amplified insecurities, partners must engage in collaborative efforts to address and mitigate them. According to Stults (2019), this involves creating a supportive environment where open communication is prioritised and both partners are committed to validating each other's worth and desirability. Effective communication entails not only discussing feelings and experiences openly but also actively listening and providing reassurance to one another. Mogilski et al. (2023) suggest that such efforts help reinforce emotional security and maintain a positive relational dynamic despite the added complexities of openness.

Some participant experiences highlighted the idea that while open relationships can offer enriching and fulfilling experiences, they also require partners to navigate heightened emotional challenges. In a study by Balzarini and Muise (2020), participants conceptualised open relationships as enriching and fulfilling experiences but similarly noted challenges revolving around the need to navigate unexpected emotions. The increased visibility of interactions with multiple partners can make individuals more self-conscious and amplify insecurities related to attractiveness and performance. Addressing these concerns involves a considerable amount of emotional work and dedication from both partners to ensure that the openness intended to enhance the relationship does not lead to ongoing distress. Thus, the challenges concomitant with open relationships highlight the potential need for ongoing communication, emotional support and mutual validation. Addressing insecurities through diligent emotional work may assist partners in strengthening their connection and resilience and possibly foster a deeper and more enduring bond. This proactive approach helps ensure

that the relationship remains fulfilling and secure despite the complexities introduced by openness.

While listening to the participants during the interviews and later on while working with the transcripts, I kept wondering what might be affecting the participants' emotional responses to their relationship arrangement, their perceptions of jealousy, boundaries and their communication needs. During the course of my research, I experienced difficulties in completely separating my role as a researcher from my clinical experience. I work primarily within a psychodynamic framework and I found myself continually pondering the defences that participants might employ to frame their perceptions and experiences. Although I fully recognise that my role was not to work therapeutically with the participants and formulate, I nevertheless had an instinct to connect their narratives to underlying psychological mechanisms. This instinct made it difficult to establish a clear distinction between my two roles.

This conflict is highlighted by Morrow and Smith (2000), who point to how *a priori* knowledge and clinical experiences can enrich analytical processes within research, albeit complicating the boundaries of the researcher's position. Ultimately, maintaining a clear distinction between my roles required a process of ongoing reflection, personal therapy and thorough use of research supervision. I don't think it is possible to completely separate the research and clinical knowledge, however, it is important to remain aware of this difficulty at all times.

5.1.4. Challenging Traditional Structures

The boundary-pushing nature of open relationships required participants to rethink and redefine traditional relational structures, as has been documented in the literature by scholars such as Cathers & Sullivan (2022) and Ferrer (2018). In the present study, engaging

in open relationships involved questioning societal norms regarding monogamy, marriage, and sexual exclusivity. This countercultural shift was characterised by excitement and personal growth as participants explored new relational dynamics that better aligned with their evolving needs and desires.

In the context of open relationships, where interacting with multiple partners and managing complex emotional dynamics is part of the experience, participants found themselves reassessing what they thought they knew about relationships. This went hand in hand with reassessing traditional boundaries, such as those relating to privacy and emotional connections, to fit the new relational framework. Participants reconsidered what is acceptable behaviour, how trust is defined, and what level of openness feels right. Such re-evaluative processes offered opportunities to reconfigure personal limits and to adjust boundaries in alignment with their values, needs and preferences.

Importantly, the process of managing multiple connections challenged some participants' long-held beliefs about commitment, intimacy, and satisfaction. In some instances, participants were compelled to rethink their expectations around exclusivity, the quality of time spent with partners, or the emotional and physical dimensions of their connections. Via such reflective processes, they seemed to gain a nuanced understanding of their needs, and their newfound clarity assisted in the making of more informed choices about how the relationship should be structured. Ultimately, for some participants, this culminated in more meaningful and harmonious connections as they learned to navigate relational dynamics in a manner that felt authentic to them. This finding challenges studies in the literature that frame consensual non-monogamous relationships as superficial and limited to sexual satisfaction only (see, for example, Grunt-Mejer & Lys, 2022; Vilkin & Sprott, 2021) by highlighting the reflective and meaningful processes concomitant with them.

The flexibility of boundaries seemed to also present some challenges. The participants felt the need to further push the boundaries, no matter how much freedom might have been offered in the first place. The participants found pleasure and excitement in the continuous risk-taking and rule-breaking, which is in line with the studies of Perel (2006; 2018; 2019), suggesting that whatever is permitted is less exciting than the forbidden, and the novelty of flexible rules can also get old with the time.

Although the relational framework of participants had minimal constraints—such as rules pertaining to condom use, the prohibition of secondary partners in their home and restrictions on engaging in specific practices—participants still displayed an intrinsic desire to push these limits. This notion of boundary transgression manifested in my own experiences with some participants. I established a bounded professional relationship and delineated clear ethical boundaries at the outset of the research, ensuring that I maintained a researcher-participant relationship dynamic. Nevertheless, several participants attempted to engage with me beyond the formal context of this relationship and the research interviews. They reached out for informal conversations, posed personal questions, and asked me out. In response, I reiterated the necessity of maintaining professional boundaries and articulated the ethical rationale underpinning this necessity. The attempts to breach my pre-established boundaries nevertheless prompted me to reflect on the underlying motivations of such behaviours. It appears that the participants' inclination to push limits was a personal characteristic and a broader reflection of the allure of novelty and the excitement of the unknown. This desire to push boundaries, even in the context of professional relationships, mimics their experiences within their own relational framework, pointing to a complex interplay between the quest for connection, intimacy, and the inherent human inclination to challenge constraints.

5.1.5. Developing New Ways of Communicating

Finally, the necessity of developing new ways of communicating emerged as a critical theme, as has been documented in various studies (see, for example, Wood et al., 2021; Mogilski et al., 2023). Open relationships demand a level of transparency, honesty, and emotional articulation that often surpasses the requirements of monogamous relationships. This means being forthright about one's interactions with others, sharing feelings openly, and addressing concerns as they arise. Participants frequently noted that the openness required in these relationships was not just about sharing factual information but also about being emotionally honest and vulnerable. They revealed that this level of honesty helps to build trust and ensure that all partners are on the same page regarding expectations and boundaries.

Participants underscored the importance of being able to express feelings—whether they are related to jealousy, insecurity, or excitement—in a manner that is constructive rather than confrontational. Developing the ability to discuss complex emotions without causing unnecessary conflict was revealed to be essential for maintaining a healthy relational dynamic. Against this backdrop, regular check-ins were highlighted by participants as an important strategy for managing the difficulties. The participants mentioned that the check-ins with themselves were as important as the check-ins with their partners, suggesting that open relationships can stimulate not only communication in a couple but also an honest internal dialogue. The check-ins with partners involved scheduled discussions where they could openly review and discuss their feelings, experiences, and any issues that may have arisen. For some participants, this proactive approach enabled partners to address potential problems before they escalated and ensured that all partners were aligned with the evolving dynamics of the relationship.

Establishing safe spaces for dialogue was another crucial aspect mentioned by participants. These safe spaces constituted environments within which partners could speak candidly about their needs and concerns without fear of judgment or retaliation. Creating such spaces assisted in fostering a supportive atmosphere where difficult conversations could be had constructively and empathetically. Participants emphasised the importance of continuously reassessing these parameters to ensure they remained relevant and supportive. This ongoing evaluation enabled partners to adapt their agreements as their relationship dynamics changed, ensuring that boundaries were not only clear but also aligned with current needs and circumstances.

Being able to adapt communication practices to address changing dynamics was revealed as crucial for maintaining relational stability and emotional intimacy. Importantly, the need for effective communication was inextricably linked to building emotional resilience within open relationships. By fostering open dialogue and mutual understanding, partners revealed that they could navigate the challenges of jealousy, insecurity, and other emotional hurdles more effectively. This resilience was not just about managing conflicts but also about supporting each other through the ups and downs that were concomitant with an open relational structure.

In summary, the findings suggest that open relationships can offer a unique opportunity for some individuals to explore their identities and desires, challenge traditional relational norms, and develop innovative communication strategies. These relationships can foster personal growth, emotional resilience, and a deeper understanding of one's needs and boundaries, ultimately contributing to more fulfilling and dynamic partnerships. Overall, the findings of the present study align with the existing literature on the subject.

5.2. Methodological Considerations

5.2.1. Strengths

The methodology employed in this study is concomitant with various strengths. Firstly, it prioritised capturing the depth and complexity of participants' experiences, which quantitative methods are not able to capture. Quantitative methods use closed questions, which do not allow for unexpected insights. The use of semi-structured interviews was particularly adept at eliciting personal narratives and provided nuanced insights into the phenomena under study. It offered participants a platform to document their experiences with minimal interruptions in an unelusive manner due to the use of open-ended questions and minimal probing.

The chosen analytic approach allowed for a flexible and in-depth exploration of data, enabling me to identify patterns and develop themes based on participants' narratives, thus ensuring that findings are genuinely grounded in participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2023, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Silverman, 2020). Further, my critical realist stance acknowledges the existence of multiple realities, which aligns well with my aim to explore subjective experiences (Willig, 2013). This stance enabled the interpretive nature of the research to be focused on understanding the variety of ways in which participants make sense of their experiences (Fletcher, 2017; Roberts, 2014).

The selection criteria for participants and the recruitment strategy included a diverse sample by reaching out to both heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ couples, which has enriched the present study's insight into open relationships across different contexts. The committed practice of reflexivity through the use of a reflexive diary and ongoing personal therapy has offered a conscious effort to mitigate researcher bias, a vital aspect of producing credible, qualitative research.

5.2.2. Limitations

The present study has provided interesting insights into the topic of open relationships. However, it is important to acknowledge that several limitations require further exploration. The interpretation of the data may still be influenced by my personal experiences and worldview, which despite being expected in the reflexive thematic analysis, still has to be kept in mind by the reader. Although the use of a reflexive journal, personal therapy and research supervision can help mitigate this, they cannot entirely eliminate this inherent subjectivity.

It is also possible that pre-existing assumptions, based on my personal experience and background, could influence both the responses provided by participants and the overall narrative constructed from these responses. Being in a monogamous relationship myself might have created a certain prejudice against open relationships, an idea that it is a less functional way of relating. According to Olmos-Vega et al. (2022), reflexivity is a critical component in qualitative research, underscoring the need to consider the researcher's impact on the data collection and analysis processes. My academic familiarity with the topic of open relationships may have inadvertently shaped the way I approached the initial coding and development of sub-themes, potentially guiding the focus toward aspects that align with my prior knowledge and expectations. My reflexive approach played an important role in managing this limitation.

This familiarity could have led to confirmation biases, where certain themes and patterns are emphasised because they resonate with my preconceptions rather than emerging purely from the data itself. For instance, I held specific beliefs about the reasons why individuals might enter into open relationships, and these perspectives might influence which elements of the participants' narratives are highlighted during the coding process. These

beliefs include the notion that open relationships are pursued primarily to achieve greater personal freedom, explore new aspects of one's identity, or address unmet needs that traditional monogamous relationships might not fulfil.

My clinical experience of trauma-focused work combined with a personal belief that deep romantic connection requires a monogamous context made me prone to look for the reparative function of open relationships. Additionally, I held the view that open relationships might offer opportunities for self-discovery by exiting the comfort zone and challenging conventional relationship norms. However, these perspectives might be seen as somewhat clichéd or overly simplistic, as they reflect common stereotypes and broad generalisations about open relationships.

The idea that such relationships inherently lead to personal freedom, growth, and self-exploration may not capture the full complexity of individual motivations and experiences. As a result, there was a risk of reinforcing a limited understanding of why people choose open relationships rather than fully appreciating the unique and varied reasons that individuals might have. While the themes and sub-themes were grounded in the data obtained from the series of interviews I conducted, there was the potential for my own experiences and background knowledge to impact the findings; however, I tried to mitigate these biases by adopting a reflexive approach.

The range of participants in this study is another notable limitation. The sample may not fully represent the diversity in ethnicities, cultures, or age groups that would provide a more comprehensive view of experiences in open relationships. Further, while a purposive and snowball sampling strategy is suitable for accessing a hard-to-reach population, it may also limit the diversity and breadth of the sample. Participants referred through purposeful and snowball sampling may share similar characteristics or views, which can bias the data.

Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that the findings of the study should be interpreted with these limitations in mind and that further research is needed to fully explore the topic of open relationships.

It is also possible that Western ideologies shaped both the interpretation of data and the framing of findings. Western societies often hold monogamy as the normative standard for romantic relationships (MacDonald, 1995). This cultural bias may have led to interpreting open relationships primarily through the lens of their deviation from traditional monogamous norms. In many parts of the world, non-monogamous practices are embedded within different cultural and social contexts that may not align with Western notions of gender equality and monogamy (Ferrer, 2018). In some African settings, for example, polygamous practices remain common and are permissible (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). As a result, there may be a tendency to emphasise how open relationships challenge Western norms, potentially overshadowing other motivations for non-monogamous arrangements that are not directly related to these traditional ideals.

In relation to polygamous practices for example, Ikuenobe (2018) notes “from a Western cultural perspective of romantic love and Judeo-Christian tradition, certain liberal cultural values and prejudices are used presumptuously to criticise polygamy in African traditions. These criticisms assume, circularly, the superiority of Western cultural monogamous values over African cultural traditional practice of polygamy” (p. 373). Moreover, Western values of gender equality may have influenced how power dynamics within relationships are perceived. This perspective may have led me to ignore gender dynamics due to assumptions of gender parity. In polygamous marriages, there is existing evidence which points to the potential for the unequal and discriminative treatment of wives

by their husbands, regardless of their social, economic, religious or cultural background (Thobejane & Flora, 2014).

The Western emphasis on individualism may have also biased the research findings. Western cultures often prioritise personal freedom and self-expression (Kim & Shearman, 2007), which may lead to an overemphasis on how open relationships contribute to personal growth, self-discovery, and autonomy. In contrast, in cultures with a more collectivist perspective, where relationships are seen through the lens of group harmony and social obligations, these aspects might be underrepresented. This bias could limit the understanding of how collective or relational dynamics impact participants' choices and experiences. The research, therefore, may be situated very firmly within these Western beliefs, potentially overlooking how open relationships are conceptualised and experienced in other cultural settings.

5.3. Clinical Implications

The insights gleaned from this qualitative analysis of open relationships have significant clinical implications, particularly within the therapeutic setting where individuals or couples might seek guidance in navigating their non-monogamous arrangements. I hope this study acts as a reminder of the legitimacy of varied relationship structures and the importance of acknowledging and validating the spectrum of open relationships. The study offers insight into how counselling psychologists and other clinicians might tailor their interventions to support the unique configurations and agreements that clients present. It highlights the importance of working with non-monogamous clients to articulate their own rules for their relationships, together with the awareness of the possibility of ongoing revision of the rules. This involves assisting them in exploring their boundaries and establishing safety

whilst ensuring ongoing, open communication to mitigate misunderstandings that can exacerbate feelings of jealousy or insecurity as they arise.

The findings underscore that open relationships may serve as a pathway toward personal fulfilment, growth, and the expression of sexual desires for some. The process of carrying out this research has reminded me of the importance of exploring one's own personal biases towards traditional and non-traditional relational set-ups and that a non-judgmental stance is crucial to supporting clients in this endeavour. The theme of personal autonomy and the quest for self-discovery within open relationships suggests a need for therapeutic support that fosters individual differentiation and the enhancement of self-concept. It illustrates the importance of therapists encouraging personal development as a component of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, the narratives highlight that a history of relationship trauma and challenges could influence the individual's perception and approach towards non-monogamy.

The deliberate management of emotional complexities such as jealousy and insecurity underscore the necessity for therapists to aid clients in developing robust emotional regulation skills. Therapists can support clients in exploring their insecurities cultivating resilience against internal insecurities and external societal judgments that can arise within the context of open relationships. Clinical work might foster acceptance and focus on enhancing self-esteem, encouraging clients to desist from detrimental social comparisons and nurturing a secure sense of self within the constellation of their relational experiences. It might also focus on preparing clients for the potential increase in both the frequency and depth of conversations required in open relationships.

This study revealed the notion of jealousy as a feeling when it arises, informing clients, like a signal, of what is going on underneath in terms of unearthing personal

insecurities or past trauma. Therapists can, therefore, support their clients in exploring what is underneath their feelings of jealousy, as well as in reconceptualising jealousy as a common human emotion, thereby mitigating the stigma attached to it and supporting clients in feeling validated in their experiences. The findings also highlight the importance of creating safe therapeutic environments within which clients can deeply explore challenging past events, process their feelings, attribute meanings to those events and explore how the past might be linked to their present and their relational challenges. I haven't explored attachment styles in my research, however, there is evidence that relationship choices might be linked to attachment styles (Bowlby, 1979). Therefore, it could be helpful for counselling psychologists to help their clients explore early attachments to determine how they might have impinged on present-day feelings, assisting them in linking their past experiences and current emotional patterns.

The dynamic nature of emotional and sexual agreements within open relationships indicates that therapeutic interventions should encompass strategies for managing change, including renegotiating the terms of relationships as partners' needs and life circumstances evolve. This approach requires therapists to be adept in facilitating difficult dialogues around shifting boundaries and expectations. Ultimately, the themes developed in this study elucidate that open relationships demand a high level of emotional intelligence and communication skills, which can be fostered in a therapeutic setting. Clinicians can play an instrumental role in developing these competencies, supporting clients in cultivating a relationship dynamic that is grounded in consent, mutual respect, and explicit negotiation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study might be helpful for counselling psychologists and other clinicians in broadening their understanding of consensual open relationships. The therapeutic interventions need to be greatly personalised and fluid, akin to

the open relationships they aim to support. Versatility and cultural competence are important for meeting the diverse needs of clients engaged in these complex relational patterns, focusing not only on the management of jealousy but also on the broader emotional and relational dynamics at play. The principles of open, honest communication, emotional self-regulation, self-discovery, and the renegotiation of boundaries might be central to therapeutic practice where open relationships are concerned. It is through the skilful navigation of these areas that therapists can effectively assist individuals and couples in achieving a harmonious balance between personal desires and relational commitments, thereby enhancing the health and sustainability of open relationships.

5.4. Societal Implications

The research findings of the present study extend significantly into the broader mosaic of societal attitudes towards relationships, offering insights into cultural norms, personal development, and human sexuality. At a societal level, the existence and discussion of open relationships challenge the conventional monogamous paradigm that has long been considered the standard or normative framework (see, for example, Kanazawa & Still, 1999). Acceptance of open relationships reflects a shift towards a more pluralistic understanding of intimacy and partnership, recognising that traditional structures may not accommodate the diversity of human needs and desires (Bauer, 2010).

The normalisation and better understanding of open relationships could lead to a diminishing of the stigma associated with non-monogamy (see, for example, Rodrigues et al., 2022; Valadez et al., 2020; Conley et al., 2013). As more narratives emerge that discuss the benefits and challenges of open relationships, society may become more accepting of diverse relational frameworks, thereby fostering an inclusive environment that respects individual choices and personal fulfilment. This openness could cultivate a cultural ethos that is less

judgmental and more supportive of personal exploration and the pursuit of happiness, tailored to the needs and desires of the individuals involved (Pearce et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the insights offered by those in open relationships could serve to enhance the quality of relational interactions more broadly. For instance, recognising the value of the sense of personal freedom, sexual acceptance, continual negotiation, effective communication strategies, and the significance of maintaining emotional connections might benefit monogamous relationships as well. Such cross-pollination of ideas between different relationship models could encourage all couples to adopt a more intentional and adaptive approach to relationship maintenance.

Moreover, the acceptance and integration of open relationship models may instigate a reconfiguration of institutional norms, including the way relationships are recognised and supported both legally and socially (Whitacre, 2022). This could have implications for marriage laws, parental rights, and the acknowledgement of relationship diversity in the workplace and other social institutions.

In conclusion, the research findings around open relationships reinforce the idea that personal and relational growth stems from intentional, consensual, and well-communicated practices. These findings urge a move away from prescriptive models towards an embrace of the rich complexity of human relationships. As these dialogues continue to permeate the public consciousness, they may foster a more empathetic and pluralistic society that better accommodates the varied ways in which people choose to connect and form bonds with one another.

5.5. Suggestions for Future Research

Given the nuances described in the emergent narratives surrounding the motivations, experiences, and emotional landscapes of open relationships, the following suggestions for future research emerge.

The influence of attachment styles on the participants' perceptions of jealousy wasn't considered in the present study. However, there is evidence that attachment style can influence the ways individuals relate and connect, including their experience of jealousy (Bowlby, 1979). Individuals who have an avoidant attachment style may distance themselves emotionally in response to their feelings of jealousy, potentially exacerbating pre-existing feelings of being isolated within the relationship. Framing jealousy through the prism of attachment offers a more nuanced understanding of how emotional responses may not be merely responses to external circumstances but rather are potentially shaped by past relational experiences. Researchers could investigate how attachment styles and the need for emotional security evolve in individuals engaged in open relationships over time via longitudinal studies that follow couples' experiences. Examining changes in attachment patterns, relationship satisfaction, and strategies for maintaining emotional security can provide deeper insights into the personal growth experienced within these relational dynamics.

Given the influence of cultural norms on relationship structures, future studies could explore how different sociocultural contexts shape the practices and experiences of individuals in open relationships since the present study was primarily situated within a Western context. Comparative cross-cultural research may uncover the interplay between societal attitudes, stigmatisation, and the personal philosophies underpinning open relationships.

Another avenue for research is a qualitative examination of the personal narratives of individuals in open relationships, focusing on their psychosocial health. This could involve in-depth interviews that probe further into how individuals manage their self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being while negotiating non-monogamous arrangements. In-depth analyses of communication patterns within open relationships would be valuable, as they are essential for maintaining trust and setting boundaries. Such studies can focus on communication styles adopted by individuals in open relationships, as this can provide insight into how partners delineate boundaries and express their needs.

A range of methodologies, including qualitative interviews and surveys, could be utilised to assess the preferences of partners and how effective they are in various relational contexts. Aside from examining communication styles, whether direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal, future studies can also investigate the conflict resolution strategies employed by partners in open relationships. Gaining nuanced insight into how individuals in open relationships manage conflicts can offer important cues about which communication strategies are successful in such contexts. Future studies could specifically assess the forms of conflicts that are common in open relationships and the prevalent methods employed by partners to resolve them.

The focus on communication and communication styles in open relationships could be expanded further to include the role of technology. The pervasive nature of technological tools and platforms such as dating apps and sites presents an interesting framework for examining how technology affects the dynamics of intimacy-building and boundary-setting in open relationships.

While the present study included individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, it did not extensively consider cultural differences in communication and how these impinge on

interpersonal dynamics in open relationships. Future studies could focus on how cultural contexts shape social norms and values about open relationships, how these norms are internalised by individuals in such arrangements, and how they, in turn, shape interpersonal dynamics. Against this backdrop, future studies could also examine how social factors such as social norms, societal stigma, and family and peer influence exert pressures on open relationships and the forms of communication required to counter these.

It would be of interest to conduct comparative studies examining the emotional labour, satisfaction levels, and relationship longevity between open and monogamous relationships. This could help identify the unique challenges and benefits inherent in each relationship style and assist in developing support interventions for individuals in each relationship style. The current study had a mixed sample of homosexual, bisexual, bi-curious and heterosexual participants, while open relationships within non-binary and LGBTQ+ communities may present unique dynamics that have not been adequately explored. Research could focus on how these relationships are shaped by the interplay of gender, sexual identity, and cultural acceptance. Future studies could focus on how factors such as gender identity and sexual orientation determine the experience of open relationships, particularly in societies where non-monogamous arrangements are not fully embraced. Such inquiries could reveal the extent to which stigmatisation or cultural acceptance shapes relationship dynamics in open relationships.

Investigating how intersectional identities pertaining to race, class, gender and identity influence experiences within open relationships could provide nuanced insights into power dynamics, privilege, and marginalisation that may affect relationship negotiations and individual experiences. For example, individuals from marginalised backgrounds may have varying experiences from those who are comparatively privileged with respect to their access

to emotional support and their position within relationship negotiations and power dynamics. Understanding how intersectional identities shape relationship dynamics can reveal the complexities of emotional labour involved in open relationships.

There is a scarcity of literature on family dynamics when it comes to co-parenting and child-rearing in open relationships. Since this study did not examine parental dynamics in relation to consensual non-monogamous relationships, future research could explore the psychosocial outcomes for children and how parents negotiate and manage their open relationships within the context of family life. As open relationships include sexual activities with multiple partners, there is a need for ongoing research into the implications for sexual health. Studies could comparatively assess risk management strategies and sexual health outcomes for those in open versus monogamous relationships. Analysing the role of social support systems in the lives of those in open relationships is an important research frontier. How do friends, family, and community contribute to or detract from the success and well-being of individuals engaging in these relationships?

While the present study and growing body of literature on open relationships have illuminated many dimensions of these complex relationship models, the suggestions for future research above indicate the breadth of exploration still necessitated by the nuanced and multifaceted nature of non-monogamous engagements. These proposed research directions aim to build a more holistic understanding of open relationships, considering the myriad personal and social variables that contribute to their unique emotional and interactional experiences.

5.6. Potential Vulnerabilities of the Participants

Vulnerability of the participants was an important consideration in this study particularly in relation to interviewing participants about sensitive topics related to their

personal relationships and sexual lives. Consensual non-monogamous relationships often challenge dominant cultural norms around monogamy, and discussing these relationship structures may have evoked complex emotions or led to psychological distress, especially if the participants felt their relationship choices were being scrutinised or misrepresented. I prepared to support the participants by being sensitive to their reactions during the interviews, being ready to pause or stop interviews at any point and by offering an opportunity to withdraw from the study. Post interviews I offered the participants to read the transcripts and also signposted them to organisations and charities offering relevant psychological and emotional support. None of the participants showed distress during or after the interviews, however, I assume that reading the published study might potentially cause some discomfort or distress to the participants. In this case the participants might want to refer to the debrief sheet (Appendix 7.5) containing contact details of available support services.

Additionally, while participants in consensual non-monogamous studies often report high levels of satisfaction, autonomy, and fulfilment in their relationship structures, they may also experience unique challenges, including stigma, discrimination, or emotional distress related to their relationship choices. These vulnerabilities are not always immediately evident during the recruitment or data collection stages, especially if participants are relatively well-adjusted or if they feel empowered by their relationship choices. However, the social and cultural context in which consensual non-monogamous relationships exist—especially in Western societies where monogamy is viewed as a norm—can shape both the participants' experiences and their willingness to disclose sensitive information. For example, participants may feel the need to conceal aspects of their relationships out of fear of judgment, rejection, or the potential social or legal consequences that may arise from being publicly identified with non-monogamy. At the same time, Western ideologies around individual freedom and choice may also create a framework within which participants in non-monogamous relationships

justify their decisions. The focus on personal agency in Western societies can encourage individuals to view non-monogamy not as an aberration, but as a valid expression of personal desire or relational orientation. Yet, the tension between liberal ideals of personal freedom and the persistence of mono-normativity in many societal institutions (e.g., marriage, family, religion) means that those in consensual non-monogamous relationships may still struggle with societal expectations or experience conflicts between their relationship ideals and mainstream cultural norms. These ideological forces may shape both the participants' motivations for pursuing non-monogamy and the ways they navigate societal perceptions of their choices.

The implications of the vulnerability delineated above extend to future research and clinical practice. Researchers must ensure that participant confidentiality is safeguarded and remain sensitive to the potential emotional and social risks participants may encounter. Furthermore, it is imperative to ensure that research designs account for these risks by implementing procedures such as post-interview debriefing, resources for support networks, or follow-up checks on participant well-being. Ethical considerations must include a robust framework for assessing the potential psychological impact of the research process, which may be intensified if participants are not given adequate space to reflect on or process their own experiences in the study.

In clinical practice, this vulnerability underscores the need for mental health professionals to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to support individuals in consensual non-monogamous relationships. Professionals must be aware of the unique relational dynamics, challenges related to jealousy, communication, and boundary-setting, and the impact of societal stigma on individuals in non-monogamous relationships. It is critical for clinicians to adopt a non-judgmental, open-minded approach, acknowledging that the emotional and psychological needs of individuals in non-monogamous relationships are as legitimate as those of individuals in monogamous relationships.

The publication of research papers on consensual non-monogamous relationships can also impact the participants. For example, reading a study that includes their personal data or experiences might bring up complex emotions, such as pride, validation, or, conversely, shame and anxiety. If a paper inadvertently reinforces stereotypes or fails to adequately represent the diversity and complexity of consensual non-monogamous relationships, it could contribute to further stigmatisation of the participants. Therefore, both the content and the tone of published research must be handled with sensitivity, ensuring that the voices of participants are portrayed accurately and respectfully and that their vulnerability is acknowledged in the research process.

5.7. Conclusion

This study explored consensual open relationships and the benefits and challenges they offer to relational and sexual satisfaction. This study was conducted from a critical realist perspective, and the data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The research findings emphasised the importance of active communication, emotional intelligence, and consistent boundary renegotiation for satisfaction in open relationships. The study reveals that while open relationships can offer personal growth, sexual autonomy and profound intimacy, they also require significant emotional labour, continuous self-reflection and increased frequency and intensity of communication. The study highlights that open relationships require vigilance and adaptability from all parties involved. Participants valued the autonomy and exploration facilitated by open relationships, but the foundational bond of the primary relationship remained a touchstone for stability and reassurance. Emotional security is attainable through the construction of rules that honour personal needs while respecting the core partnership. Open relationships are not a utopian ideal but a complex relational choice that requires conscientious tending.

While open relationships offer avenues for sexual and emotional fulfilment uncommon in traditional monogamous constructs, they simultaneously pose a gamut of emotional challenges that can be mitigated but not entirely avoided. The versatility of open relationships taps into the deeper human quests for connection and autonomy, demonstrating that satisfaction in these realms is less about the relationship model and more about the capacity for navigating the intricate and evolving landscapes of human desires and fears. Ultimately, open relationships stand as a testament to the diverse expressions of human intimacy, challenging conventional norms and inviting individuals to consciously construct their unique relational paradigms. As society progresses in understanding the spectrum of relational configurations, this research contributes to a broader discourse on the interplay between freedom and commitment, the pursuit of personal autonomy, and the deep longing for emotional and sexual fulfilment within the fluidity of human connections.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Ethical Approval

City, University of London

Dear Sofia

Reference: ETH2324-2355

Project title: RELATIONAL AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

Start date: 20 Dec 2022

End date: 1 Oct 2024

I am writing to you to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted formal approval from the Psychology low risk review. The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation. Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly. You are now free to start recruitment.

Please ensure that you are familiar with City's Framework for Good Practice in Research and any appropriate Departmental/School guidelines, as well as applicable external relevant policies.

Please note the following:

Project amendments/extension

You will need to submit an amendment or request an extension if you wish to make any of the following changes to your research project:

- Change or add a new category of participants;
- Change or add researchers involved in the project, including PI and supervisor;
- Change to the sponsorship/collaboration;
- Add a new or change a territory for international projects;
- Change the procedures undertaken by participants, including any change relating to the safety or physical or mental integrity of research participants, or to the risk/benefit assessment for the project or collecting additional types of data from research participants;
- Change the design and/or methodology of the study, including changing or adding a new research method and/or research instrument;
- Change project documentation such as protocol, participant information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, letters of invitation, information sheets for relatives or carers;
- Change to the insurance or indemnity arrangements for the project;

- Change the end date of the project.

Adverse events or untoward incidents

You will need to submit an Adverse Events or Untoward Incidents report in the event of any of the following:

a) Adverse events

b) Breaches of confidentiality

c) Safeguarding issues relating to children or vulnerable adults

d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues a) and b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than five days after the event. Issues c) and d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate, the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions, such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries relating to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me. On behalf of the Psychology low risk review, I do hope that the project meets with success.

Kind regards

Alison Welton

Psychology low risk review

City, University of London

Ethics ETH2324-2355: Mrs Sofia Likhacheva (Medium risk)

7.2. Recruitment Leaflet

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON RELATIONAL AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

We are looking for heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ individuals who are currently in a consensual open relationship for at least 12 months or have been in a consensual open relationship for at least 12 months in the past 5 years.

As a participant in this study, you will be invited to share your experiences of an open relationship, and the benefits and challenges this type of relationship brings.

The research is being conducted as part of a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology dissertation at City, University of London.

To take part in this study, or for more information, please contact the researcher:

Sofia Likhacheva

Sofia.likhacheva@city.ac.uk

7.3. Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Title of study: RELATIONAL AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

REC reference number: ETH2223-0696

Date and version of the information sheet:

Name of principal researcher: Sofia Likhacheva

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. You will be emailed a copy of this information sheet to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?

Nowadays non-monogamous relationships become more and more popular. However, there is little research on relationship satisfaction in consensual open relationships. This study aims to develop further understanding of consensual non-monogamy, shed light on relational and sexual satisfaction in open relationships and, therefore, promote inclusion and diversity of sexuality.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate in this study as you are currently in an open relationship for at least 12 months, or have been in an open relationship for at least 12 months in the past 5 years. You are also over the age of 18. Please inform the researcher if any of these details are inaccurate.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to participate in the project. You will be able to avoid answering questions that you feel are too uncomfortable or intrusive without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw up to one month after the interview date and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

If you wish to take part, you will be invited to attend an interview at a time convenient to you. The interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured; there will be approximately 7 open-ended questions which are expected to lead onto further topics. You will be encouraged to take the lead in sharing your experiences. The interview will be audio recorded, and all recordings will be made on an encrypted recording device and transferred to a password-protected computer for storage. Recordings will be accessible only to the researcher. After the interviews, the recordings will be transcribed, replacing any identifying information with pseudonyms to ensure your identity remains anonymous. Your contact information will be kept separately from the transcripts. The data will be analysed by looking at your insights and how you have made sense of your experiences. The study is expected to last until September 2024. The recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and destroyed following the completion of the research project.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Due to the nature of the topic, it is possible that exploring your relational and sexual satisfaction might cause some emotional response. Please remember that your participation is voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any stage of the interview and up to one month after the interview date.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This is an opportunity to share your views and experiences of an open relationship. You will also be contributing to research on an important topic that seeks to promote inclusion and diversity of sexuality.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information you disclose will be treated confidentially. All recordings will be accessible only by the researcher and stored securely on a password-protected computer. Confidentiality will only be broken if the researcher feels there is a risk of serious harm either to yourself or others, or where the researcher is legally obliged to do so. All identifying information will be replaced by pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. Your contact details will not be shared with any third parties and will be used only if you express interest in being informed of the results of the study once completed.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your right to access, change or move your information is limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To

safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal-identifiable information possible (for further information, please see https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/public-task/).

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. If you wish to receive the results of the study, your contact details will also be kept for this purpose. The only people at City who will have access to your identifiable information will be the researcher, Sofia Likhacheva. City will keep identifiable information about you from this study for 1 year after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how City handles data by visiting https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/legal. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (IOC) https://ico.org.uk/.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of this study will be written up as part of a thesis for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. The findings may also be included in various future academic publications. All details, including direct quotations from interviews, will be listed under pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. There will be no identifiable or personal information in the final thesis or any other publications, so there will be no way for readers to identify you. If you would like to be sent the results of the study, please inform the researcher and consent to your contact details being kept for this purpose on the 'participant consent form'.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by the City, University of London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you can phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary of the Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is *RELATIONAL AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN OPEN RELATIONSHIPS.*

You can also write to the Secretary at:

John Montgomery

Research & Enterprise Office

City, University of London

Northampton Square

London, EC1V 0HB

Email: j.montgomery@city.ac.uk

Insurance

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study, subject to the terms and conditions of the policy. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study, you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Further information and contact details

Researcher: Sofia Likhacheva

Sofia.likhacheva@city.ac.uk

Research Supervisor: Dr Martina Gerada

Martina.gerada@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

7.4. Consent Form

Title of study: *RELATIONAL AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN OPEN RELATIONSHIPS*

REC reference number: ETH2223-0696

Name of principal researcher: Sofia Likhacheva

Please initial box

1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can choose not to participate without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. If I choose to participate, I still can withdraw up until one month after the interview without giving any reason.	
3.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded. I understand that any information I provide is confidential and that no identifiable personal information will be published or shared with third parties. I understand that the original recordings will be accessed only by the researcher, and will be stored securely and destroyed following the completion of the research project.	
	I understand the information I provide will be used as part of the researcher's doctoral thesis in counselling psychology, and the findings may also be included in various future academic publications. A pseudonym will be used when referring to my information, including direct quotations, as a way of maintaining anonymity.	

4.	I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on the university complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (1998).	
5.	I would like to be informed of the results of this study once it has been completed and understand that my contact details will be retained for this purpose.	
6.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

7.5. Participant Debrief

Today you may have discussed personal information about your experience of open relationships, and sexual and relational satisfaction. I'm aware that this discussion may have raised an emotional response, some concerns or discomfort. If you feel you need to talk to someone about these issues, please see below the list of organisations which might be able to support you. You can also talk to your GP about being referred to your local counselling service.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research!

This study was evaluated and approved by the City, University of London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee, which classified it as a moderate risk study (REC reference number ETH2223-0696).

Further information and contact details
Researcher: Sofia Likhacheva
Sofia.likhacheva@city.ac.uk
Research Supervisor: Dr Martina Gerada
Martina.gerada@city.ac.uk

List of support services
Relate
Relationship counselling and Sex therapy
https://www.relate.org.uk/about-relate

Marriage care
Relationships and marriage-related support and therapy
https://www.marriagecare.org.uk/

SASH
Support and advice on sexual health and sex-related issues
https://www.sashlondon.org/home

If you need urgent support, please call Samaritans' free 24/7 helpline on 116 123.
If you're in immediate danger or think that someone else is, don't hesitate to call 999.
If you are worried about any kind of abuse, the free National Domestic Abuse helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 0808 2000 247.

7.6. Interview Schedule

Areas of Interest

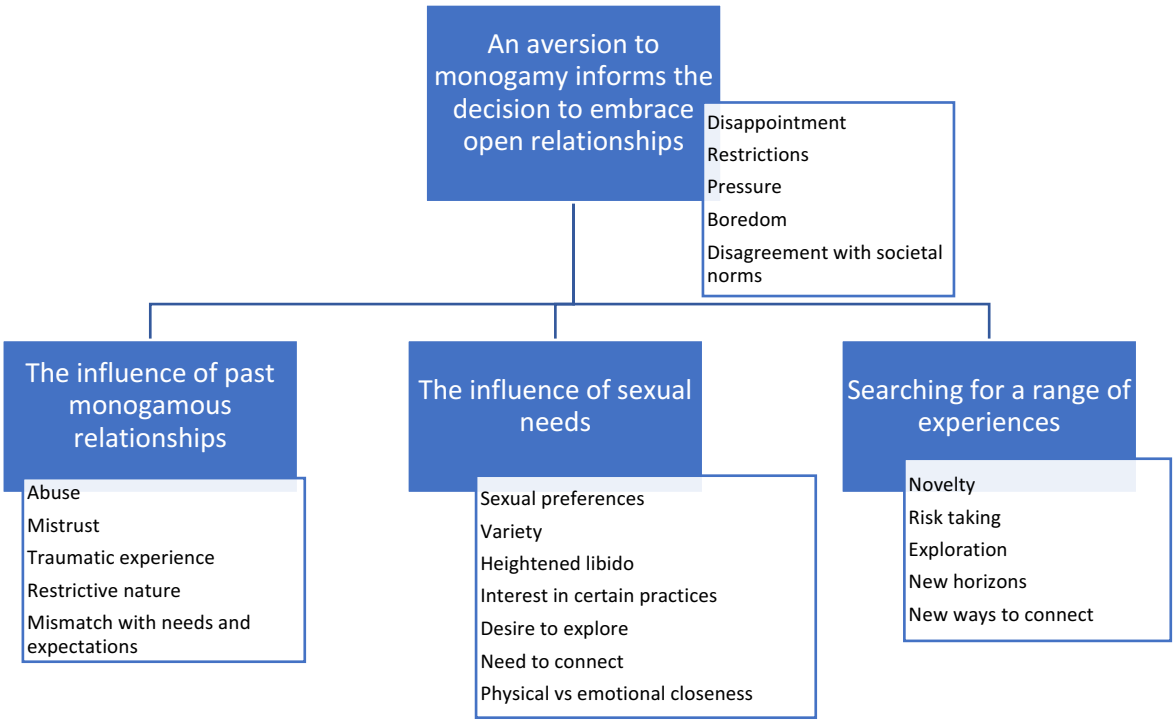
- Benefits of consensual open relationships.
- Challenges of consensual open relationships.
- Relational and sexual satisfaction in consensual open relationships.

Examples of interview questions

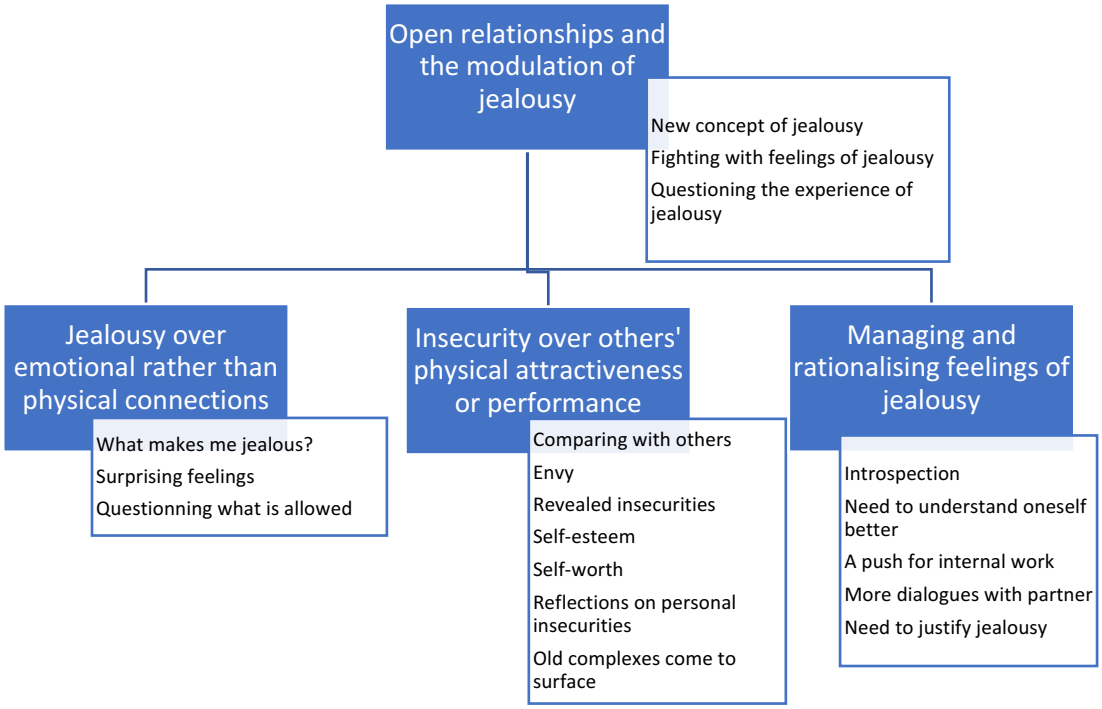
1. Can you tell me about your experience of open relationships?
2. How did you make the choice to be in an open relationship?
3. What benefits does an open relationship bring/brought to your life?
4. What challenges does an open relationship bring/brought to your life?
5. How does your relationship style affect your relationship with your partner (or how did it affect the relationship, if the relationship is over)?
6. How does your relationship style affect your sexual satisfaction (or how did it affect your sexual satisfaction at the time of the relationship)?
7. What else do you find important to share?

7.7. Initial Map of Coded Themes

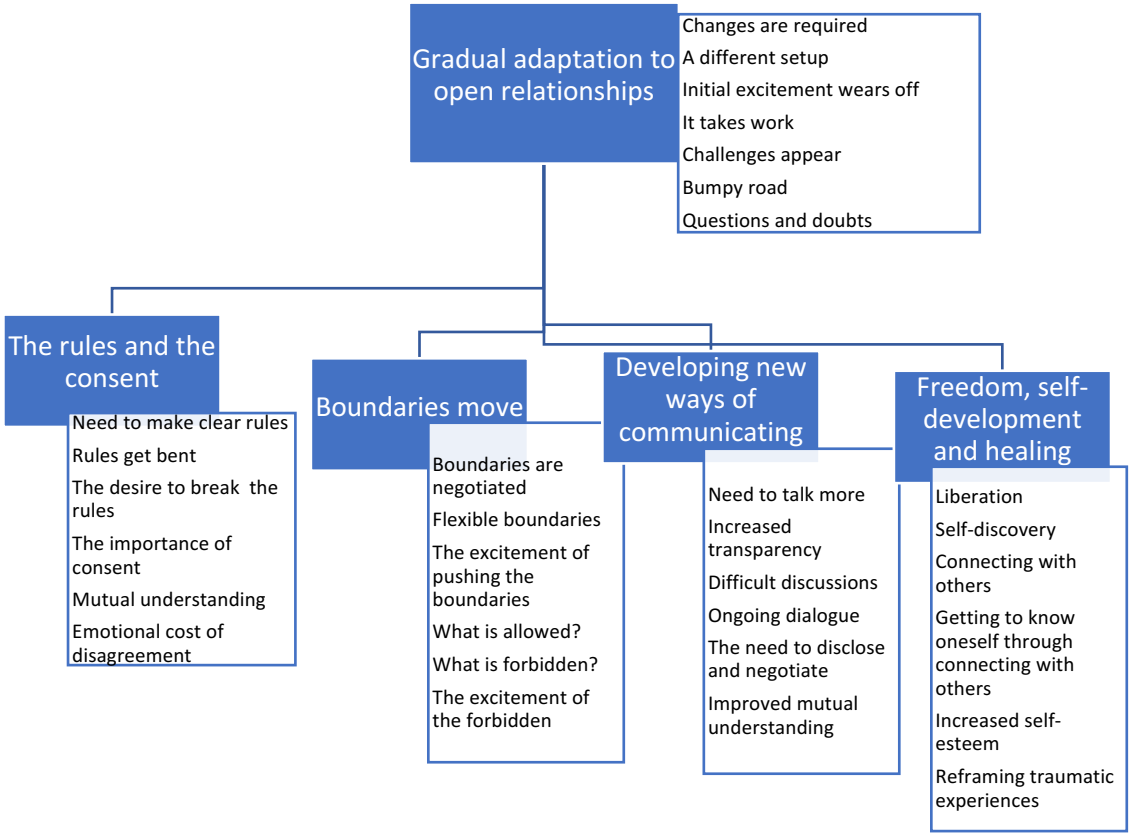
Theme 1



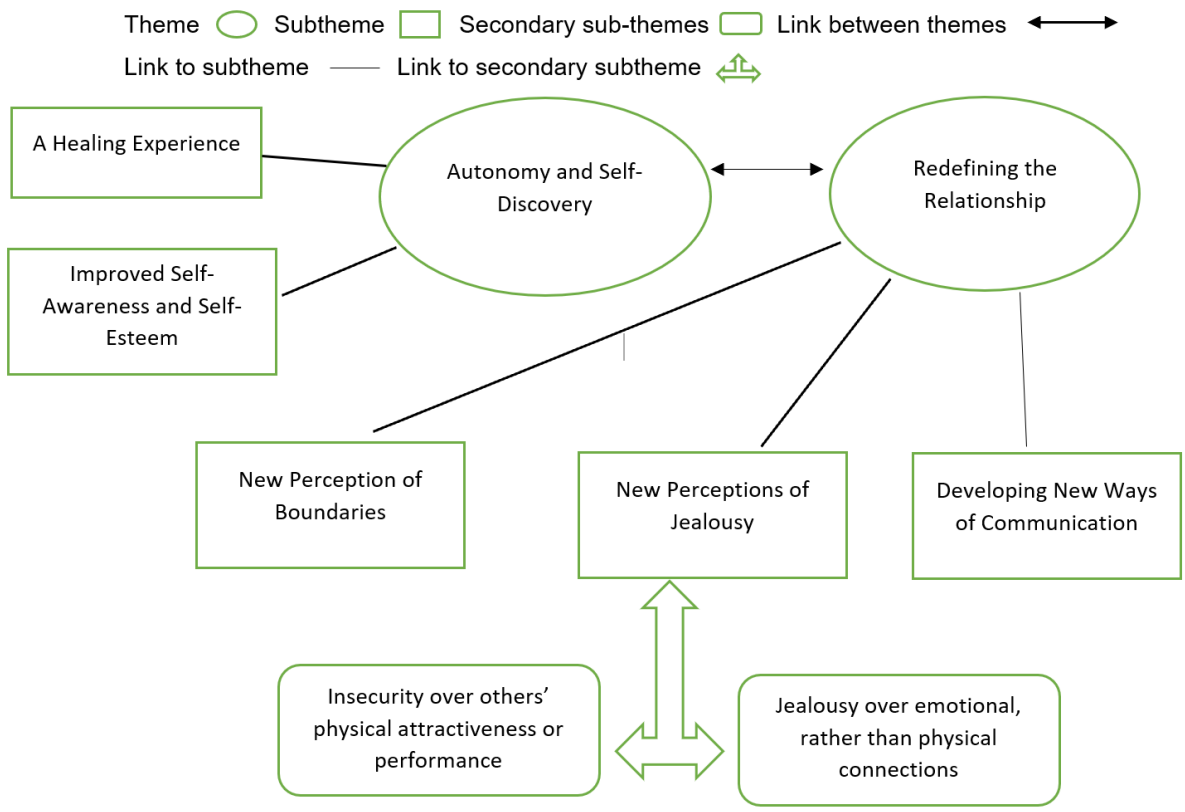
Theme 2


Open relationships and the modulation of jealousy
New concept of jealousy
Fighting with feelings of jealousy
Questioning the experience of jealousy
Jealousy over emotional rather than physical connections
What makes me jealous?
Surprising feelings
Questionning what is allowed
Insecurity over others' physical attractiveness or performance
Comparing with others
Envy
Revealed insecurities
Self-esteem
Self-worth
Reflections on personal insecurities
Old complexes come to surface
Managing and rationalising feelings of jealousy
Introspection
Need to understand oneself better
A push for internal work
More dialogues with partner
Need to justify jealousy

Theme 3


Gradual adaptation to open relationships
Changes are required
A different setup
Initial excitement wears off
It takes work
Challenges appear
Bumpy road
Questions and doubts
The rules and the consent
Need to make clear rules
Rules get bent
The desire to break the rules
The importance of consent
Mutual understanding
Emotional cost of disagreement
Boundaries move
Boundaries are negotiated
Flexible boundaries
The excitement of pushing the boundaries
What is allowed?
What is forbidden?
The excitement of the forbidden
Developing new ways of communicating
Need to talk more
Increased transparency
Difficult discussions
Ongoing dialogue
The need to disclose and negotiate
Improved mutual understanding
Freedom, self-development and healing
Liberation
Self-discovery
Connecting with others
Getting to know oneself through connecting with others
Increased self-esteem
Reframing traumatic experiences

7.8. Revised Map of Themes and Sub-Themes



7.9. Final Map of Themes and Sub-Themes

7.10. Individual Interview Coded Transcript (Sample)

First experience of open relationships

Past experience of monogamy

Decision to engage in an open relationship

Gradation of experiences

Initial doubts

Cultural/societal/gender factor

Conditions needed for open relationships to work

Benefits of open relationships

Reflections prompted by non-monogamy

Negotiating the setup and rules

Researcher: I've started the recording and may I ask you please about your experience of open relationships?

Participant B: Yeah, that's quite broad, isn't it? Um, I think technically the relationship I'm in now, which has been going for five and a bit years, um, is the first one I'd be able to confidently label as open. The others have been monogamous. I've probably had five or six serious relationships before my current partner. And yeah, in all those previous relationships, we had sort of loosely had an exclusivity conversation. And I think that is the pivot at which relationships technically go from being open and sort of keeping options open to not being open and being exclusive and not able to, by default, assume that you're able to be physical with other people. So, this is the first one, and it really... We came from a place of not feeling that we needed to be exclusive to still be, uh, romantic and committed and serious with each other. Um, I was, I'm a bit flippant sometimes when I say, obviously guys are more likely to pursue that kind of arrangement if they can stomach it, and if they

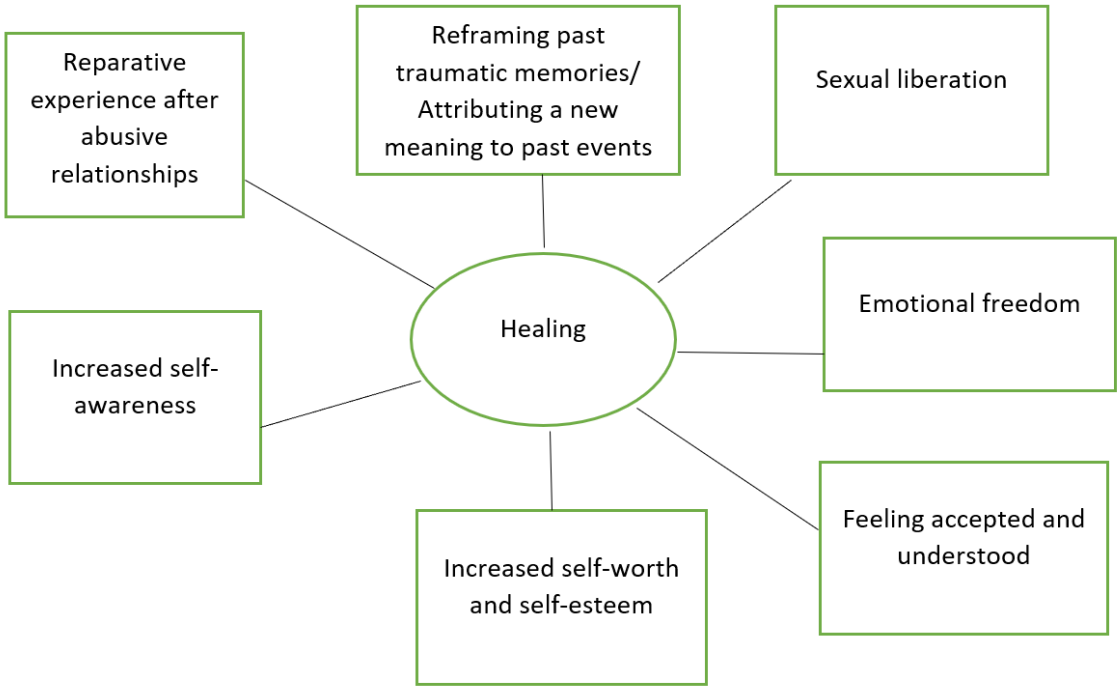
can negotiate it logistically, uh, navigate it logistically. Girls are, it maybe comes to them less readily because of societal and religious and, uh, social pressures. Uh, but if they have achieved a certain degree of sexual liberation and confidence and, and yeah, maybe self-discovery, they can, you know, engage in that just as heartily. Guys are more readily, more readily do so. Um, what else can I say? What's my experience with it? I mean, generally it's been quite fulfilling having experienced, experienced closed and open relationships. Um, it's obviously far more immediately liberating, um, uh, psychologically engaging and sort of you have far more conversations and discussions with yourself and with your partners. That's far more exciting than just being in an exclusive relationship. I'm going to say it is boring, not having to ever ask yourself those questions. Maybe you would ask yourself a couple of questions about, why am I lusting after people, and everyone realistically lusts after people. But you have to have a conversation about, why am I denying myself the next step in that natural process of desiring someone. I'm going to take this jacket off, sorry. It's like a different and more colourful and dynamic way of conducting your lifestyle. Um, when it comes to being able to express yourself physically with people that you want to engage with.

Researcher: How did you make the decision to be in an open relationship? You said you had a number of monogamous relationships before.

Participant B: Well, I've always been open with my partner, my current partner, the whole time. And there was maybe a conversation where we said, I'm happy with the fact that, you know, I'm using words like I love you and I'm committed to you and I'm devoted to you, but I, you also give me the, uh, extended liberty of going home and getting naked with other people. And it doesn't affect how I feel about you, so I don't assume that it affects how you feel about me. If anything, it brings you closer together because you give each other that liberty. Um, and there are other benefits I'll talk about as well. But, you know, we just sort of said, if you're happy doing this, then I'm happy doing this. And we can work out exactly what boundaries might be or the frequency, the number of partners, what is realistic so that we're not becoming distracted in terms of attention, money, time,

because you do have a commitment to someone that you say you're committed to, you're faithful to, you are not faithful, but anyway, like, um, dedicated to, and the limits of that would be, yeah, you, you should be able to put your partner first in certainly situations of emergency, physical and emotional, but beyond that, you have to manage your, yeah, your time and your, um, attention, right? So it's all about being realistic with that. The best way to do it is to think about how often you see friends, close friends, right? So you, if you have, some people, I know, I don't have lots of close, close friends, but... Some people I know will hang out with their friends twice a week. So if you find someone that's like that, and you have a partner that maybe you see twice a week, because when you're best friend you see twice a week, that might be a legitimate way of, you know, seeing a close extra playmate, third, whatever you want to call them, uh, twice a week might be appropriate for some open couples. Uh, realistically, I see my friends. Every two months. So I apply the same frequency with partners, like extra playmates. Once every two months is realistic.

Researcher: And what would you say are the main benefits that open relationship brought to your life?

Participant B: Um, well it's immediately far more sexually exciting and you could say gratifying. Hard to articulate now, but it's just the feeling that you are able to express yourself. That sounds very wishy washy, but it is freedom to literally fulfil some sort of primal urge without upsetting anyone because of this semi artificial understanding that you've made that fights totally against your programming, your biological programming, as I said, to capitalize on the lustful feelings that you have. And, uh, a heightened libido. I think I have a heightened than average libido. And I don't think, I don't know if that follows my relationship style or the relationship style is following my libido. But I was a late starter sexually, and some people said, oh, you're just catching up with, you know, lack of experience.

7.11. Cross Participant Map of Themes and Subthemes (Sample)