

Non-Monogamy: Measuring Degrees of Sexual and Romantic Exclusivity in Relationships

Anne-Laure Le Cunff, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London.

Contact: annelaure.lecunff@kings.ac.uk

Abstract

It has been speculated that monogamy exists on a continuum as opposed to the traditional view of a discrete class. This research, using a convenience sample of 509 individuals who self-identified as either polyamorous, ambiamorous, or monoamorous, examines the potential validity of a scale to experimentally measure degrees of sexual and romantic exclusivity, ranging quantitatively along a spectrum. The scale was designed to measure the attitudes of participants towards the ideas of their partner and/or themselves being sexually and/or romantically involved with other individuals. Participants exhibited a range of scores signifying various degrees of acceptance towards the idea of multiple sexual or romantic relationships, supporting the hypothesis of monogamy and polyamory as members of a spectrum. The evidence is discussed and future development based on these findings are suggested.

Keywords: *consensual non-monogamy, polyamory, romantic relationships, sexual relationships*

1. Introduction

“Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.” – Alfred Kinsey, 1948.

Despite being the norm in most societies, monogamy is not universal: it has been estimated that approximately 4% to 5% of people in the United States are involved in consensual non-monogamous relationships (Rubin et al., 2014)—as defined as relationships in which all involved partners have openly agreed to sexual and/or romantic experiences with other individuals—with other higher estimates suggesting that approximately one in five people engaged in consensual non-monogamy at some point in their lifetime (Hauptert et al., 2017). While consensual non-monogamous relationships can take many forms of arrangements, this study will focus on polyamorous relationships. Polyamory, from the Greek *poly*, “many”, and the Latin *amor*, “love”, is the ability to openly, honestly, and consensually love while being committed to more than one person at a time (Haritaworn et al., 2006). Polyamorous people reject the view that sexual and relational exclusivity are necessary for long-term loving relationships (Klesse, 2011). While polyamory is often put under the umbrella of non-monogamy (Barker & Langdridge, 2010), it is additionally defined by its consensual, ethical, and responsible approach (Klesse, 2006). It has been speculated that monogamy and non-monogamy exist on a continuum as opposed to the traditional view of a discrete class (Robinson, 2013), in a similar fashion that gender identity and sexual orientation are not binary, but very little research has been conducted so far. The goal of this study is to test this hypothesis by designing a scale to measure the levels of sexual and romantic exclusivity in individuals, and in turn their position on a hypothetical sexual and romantic exclusivity rating scale.

2. Methodology & Participants

A convenience sample of adults aged 18-65 (N = 509) were surveyed through an online questionnaire in English, which was distributed via Internet communities such as Reddit, Facebook and Twitter, with 60.5% of participants from the United States (n = 308), 9.6% from New Zealand (n = 49), 6.7% from the United Kingdom (n = 34), 5.7% from Canada (n = 29), and the others from various countries such as France, Germany, India, with 18 countries in total. The panel was slightly skewed towards women, with 52% of respondents identifying as female (n = 268), 40.1% as male (n = 2014), and 7.3% as non-binary or another gender (n = 37). The average age was 33 years old, with almost half of the participants in the 25 to 34 age bracket (n = 237).

Age bracket	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
n	80	237	128	51	13
r	15.7%	46.6%	25.1%	10.0%	2.6%

Table 1. Sample population age distribution.

The acronym LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and other sexualities and genders. 55.2% of the panel identified as LGBTQ+ (n = 281), 37.9% did not identify as LGBTQ+ (n = 193), and 6.9% were unsure (n = 35), with a wide range of unique combinations falling of sexualities and genders (n = 67). 75.4% of the respondents identified as polyamorous (n = 384), 11.2% as monoamorous (n = 57), and 10% as ambiamorous (n = 51).

When asked about their current relationship status, 41.3% of participants declared being in a polycule (n = 210)—this includes all the participants who responded with “polycule”, “V”, “N”, “triad” or “quad”—followed by 16.7% in a non-exclusive couple (n = 85), 13.6% in an exclusive couple (n = 69), and 11% currently single (n = 56). The remainder of the participants declared being part of more complex constellations, open marriages, or casually dating. 50.3% currently lived with one partner (n = 256), 40.3% lived alone or with one or several roommates (n = 205), 6.3% lived with more than one partner and/or metamour (n = 32). The remainder of the respondents lived with their parents or had other living arrangements. Finally, 68.6% of respondents said they had children (n = 349); the rest confirmed they didn't have any.

Relationship anarchy—a philosophy in which people are free to engage in any sexual or romantic relationship they choose, without a clear distinction between partner and non-partner—was the most favoured philosophy, with 28.9% of participants identifying with it (n = 147). Other polyamory philosophies included polyfidelity—where the relationship involves more than two people, but which does not permit the members of that relationship to seek additional partners without the approval of existing members—with 11.0% of respondents (n = 56); solo polyamory—which emphasises autonomy and the freedom to choose their own relationships without seeking permission from others, without forming traditional relationships—with 9.3% of respondents (n = 47); hierarchical polyamory—which features a ranking system amongst relationships, often through the use of “primary” and “secondary” partners—with 8.9% of respondents (n = 45); and other philosophies such as egalitarian polyamory and libertarian polyamory.

A style of polyamory practiced by participants was what is colloquially called “kitchen table polyamory”—which emphasises family-style connections even amongst people in a network who are not

in a relationship with each other, so named because the people in a network can gather around the kitchen table—with 49.7% of respondents aspiring to this style of polyamory (n = 253). On the other hand, 20.0% of participants (n = 102) favoured "parallel polyamory"—in which the relationships a person has are largely independent of one another, and there may be little or no contact or relationship between a person's various partners. The remainder of participants favoured other styles or a combination of "kitchen table" and "parallel" polyamory.

A veto is an agreement in some polyamorous relationships which gives one person the power to end another person's additional relationships, or in some cases to disallow some specific activity, such as some specific sexual activity. 49.9% of respondents had no veto at all in their current relationship (n = 254), 23.0% had a conditional veto agreement (n = 117), and 5.5% had an absolute veto agreement (n = 28)—where one partner may reject another partner's additional relationships unconditionally.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that 63.5% of respondents (n = 323) defined themselves as "kinky"—used to refer to any consensual activities or lifestyles between adults which include erotic power exchange, dominance and submission, bondage, and discipline.

3. Results

As non-monogamy can involve additional sexual and/or romantic relationships from one or several existing partners, participants were asked to answer the following questions with a score on a Likert scale with levels ranging from 0 to 6. Since the goal is to measure the participant's attitude towards an idea that ranges from positive to negative, the scale includes a neutral point in the middle (Krosnick & Fabrigar, 1997).

Personal Sexual Openness scale	<i>I can only see myself sexually involved with one person at a specific time in my life.</i>	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6	<i>I can see myself sexually involved with multiple people at a specific time in my life.</i>
Personal Romantic Openness scale	<i>I can only see myself romantically involved with one person at a specific time in my life.</i>	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6	<i>I can see myself romantically involved with multiple people at a specific time in my life.</i>
Partner Sexual Openness scale	<i>I don't like the idea of my partner being sexually involved with another person.</i>	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6	<i>I love the idea of my partner being sexually involved with other people.</i>
Partner Romantic Openness scale	<i>I don't like the idea of my partner being romantically involved with another person.</i>	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6	<i>I love the idea of my partner being romantically involved with other people.</i>

Table 2. Proposal for a Sexual and Romantic Exclusivity Rating Scale.

The four labels “Personal Sexual Openness”, “Personal Romantic Openness”, “Partner Sexual Openness”, and “Partner Romantic Openness” were not presented to the participants to describe each scale, and are instead being introduced here for added convenience in analysing the results. An overall Relationship Openness Score (ROS) was calculated by averaging the score of all four openness scales.

	Monoamory	Ambiamory	Polyamory
Personal Sexual Openness	1.96	4.63	5.24
Personal Romantic Openness	1.23	4.14	4.97
Partner Sexual Openness	1.09	3.88	4.74
Partner Romantic Openness	0.63	3.24	4.48
<i>Relationship Openness Score</i>	<i>1.23</i>	<i>3.97</i>	<i>4.86</i>

Table 3. Degree of openness across monoamory, ambiamory, and polyamory respondents on a 0-6 Sexual and Romantic Exclusivity Rating Scale.

Unsurprisingly, respondents identifying as polyamorous scored highest on all openness scales, being more comfortable with the idea of themselves or their partner engaging in sexual or romantic relationships with other people. More surprisingly, only 29.8% of respondents identifying as monoamorous (n = 17) scored zero on the overall ROS.

The degree of comfort respondents have invariably follows this order, from more comfortable to least comfortable: (1) Personal Sexual Openness; (2) Personal Romantic Openness; (3) Partner Sexual Openness; (4) Partner Romantic Openness. In other words, respondents are overall more comfortable being involved in additional sexual and romantic relationships themselves than they are with their partner doing so, and they are more comfortable with additional sexual relationships than with additional romantic relationships, both for themselves and for their partner. This holds true for monoamorous, ambiamorous, and polyamorous respondents. Polyamorous respondents also made a smaller distinction between sexual and romantic relationships both for themselves and for their partner than monogamous people.

	Female	Non-binary	Male
Personal Sexual Openness	4.84	5.16	4.59
Personal Romantic Openness	4.57	4.78	4.06
Partner Sexual Openness	4.28	4.32	4.03
Partner Romantic Openness	3.84	4.27	3.75
<i>Relationship Openness Score</i>	<i>4.38</i>	<i>4.64</i>	<i>4.11</i>

Table 4. Degree of openness across female, non-binary, and male respondents on a 0-6 Sexual and Romantic Exclusivity Rating Scale.

Female respondents consistently scored higher than male respondents on all openness scales—both sexual and romantic openness scores, both for themselves and their partners. The small sample of non-binary respondents scored higher than female and male respondents on all individual openness scales and on their overall relationship openness score.

While female respondents made a smaller distinction between the idea of their own sexual and romantic relationships ($\Delta = 5.6\%$) compared to their partner's sexual and romantic relationships ($\Delta = 10.2\%$), male respondents made a bigger distinction between their own sexual and romantic relationships ($\Delta = 11.5\%$) compared to their partner's relationships ($\Delta = 6.8\%$).

In other words, women seem to better differentiate sexual and romantic relationships when it is their partner's, whereas men differentiate sexual and romantic relationships better when it is their own.

Non-binary respondents made a significantly smaller distinction between their partner's sexual and romantic relationships ($\Delta = 1.3\%$) compared to male ($\Delta = 6.8\%$) and female ($\Delta = 10.2\%$) respondents.

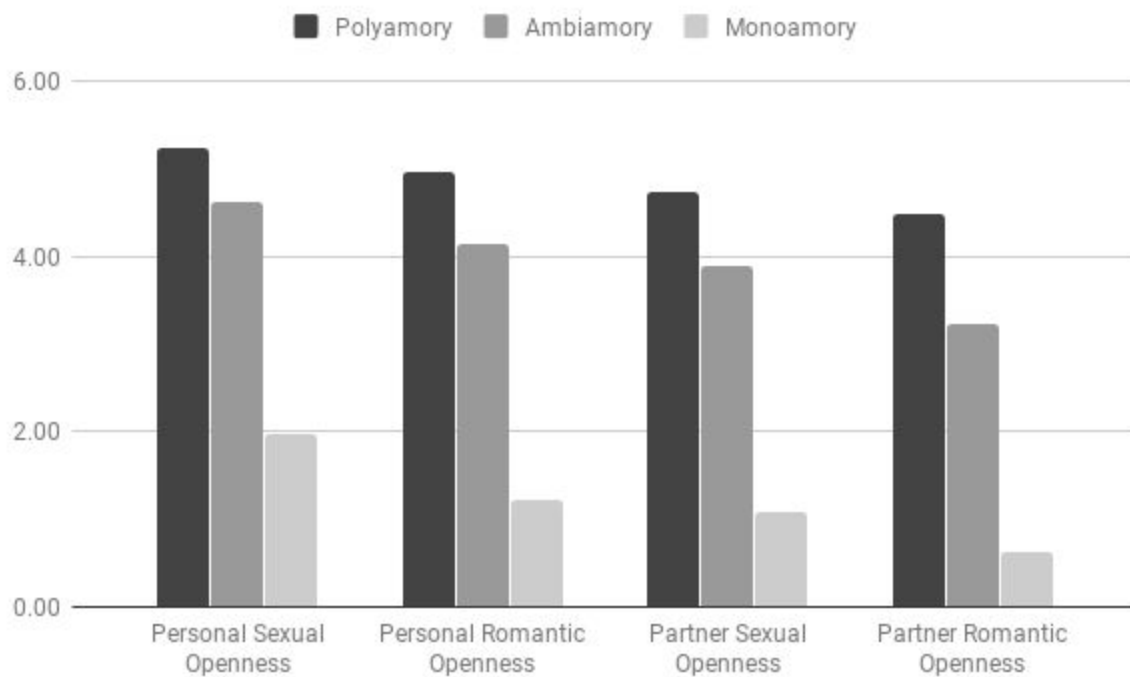


Figure 1. Degrees of relationship openness across monoamory, ambiamory, and polyamory respondents on a 0-6 sexual and romantic exclusivity rating scale.

4. Conclusions

Overall, there seems to be evidence that non-monogamy exists on a continuum as opposed to the traditional view of a discrete presence or absence, with individuals identifying as polyamorous displaying the highest Relationship Openness Score (ROS) on this experimental sexual and romantic exclusivity rating scale.

The degree of relationship openness follows this order across monoamorous, ambiamorous, and polyamorous individuals, from more open to less open: (1) Personal Sexual Openness; (2) Personal Romantic Openness; (3) Partner Sexual Openness; (4) Partner Romantic Openness. This seems to confirm that sexual openness is more acceptable than romantic openness, and an individual's own openness, whether sexual or romantic, is more acceptable than a partner's openness to other relationships.

Furthermore, women seem to have a more positive attitude than men towards non-monogamous relationships, consistently scoring higher than men on all openness scales—both sexual and romantic openness scores, and both for themselves and their partners. Non-binary respondents appear to have a more positive attitude than both men and women towards non-monogamous relationships across all dimensions.

5. Discussion

The experimental sexual and romantic exclusivity rating scale used in this survey has several limitations: (1) it considers only four dimensions where many more may exist, and considers these dimensions to be separate, where interdependence of factors may exist; (2) people have a tendency to respond towards the middle of Likert rating scales rather than choosing the extremes; (3) rating scales often fail to measure the true attitudes of respondents, as demonstrated by this comment from a participant:

“I just want to clarify that the last two spectrum questions aren’t closer to the middle because I’m less excited whether my partners have sexual or romantic relationships with other people. It’s more that I don’t care either way. It’s closer to the love side of the spectrum though because ultimately, the freedom for my partners to pursue other relationships has enriched my life by making it more interesting, making my partners happier, and I don’t have to carry the weight of being the only person my partners rely on to have their needs met. I also wouldn’t be dating any of my partners if it were any other way because they were all already in relationships when we met. So in regards to that, I’d say I’m on the “love” side of those spectrums. The indifference comes from me being content whether my partners choose to see other people or not, because it should be up to them and I fully support them either way.” – Female respondent, 27, United States.

While participants could share comments at the end of the survey, these limitations would be further addressed with structured qualitative interviews to consider additional dimensions, mitigate the respondents’ tendency to respond towards the middle by asking further questions, and understand the true attitudes of respondents.

The survey itself has limitations: (1) it was self-administered rather than administered by a trained interviewer providing ongoing feedback, which can affect the data quality and scoring (Bowling, 2005); (2) the country of origin was heavily skewed towards the United States, where there is more awareness and acceptance of polyamory culture, particularly on the West coast; (3) some specific population samples were much smaller, adding fragility to the results. Given additional resources, these limitations could be addressed in follow-up studies by recruiting a trained interviewer to administer the survey in person, with a larger and more diverse panel.

5. References

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