ABSTRACT

MOISAN, COURTNEY. Concealing and Revealing Polyamorous/Consensually Non-Monogamous Identities. (Under the Direction of Kami Kosenko).

Polyamory and consensual non-monogamy (CNM) have long been misunderstood and stigmatized identities. As a result, the decision to reveal one's identity and lifestyle can be very difficult for some individuals. Guided by Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM), this study focused on the motives for revealing and concealing a polyamorous or consensual non-monogamous relationship. Interviews with eight individuals suggested that individuals were motivated to reveal to achieve social validation, to access to professional support, to locate peers for support and new relationships, and to effect social change. Interviews also indicated that individuals were motivated to conceal to prevent negative outcomes, to protect their partner's comfort, to adhere to the standard of heteronormative monogamy, and to avoid misconceptions about their relationships and identities. This study also shed light on some further areas of research for the future.

Concealing and Revealing Polyamorous/Consensually Non-Monogamous Identities

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Courtney Moisan received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication and English from Florida Gulf Coast University in 2019, with a concentration in Communication Studies. During her time there, she formed an interest in interpersonal and sexual communication, which led her to pursue and develop her interests in the Master of Science in Communication program at North Carolina State University. Prior to her acceptance and attendance at North Carolina State University, she and her partner began exploring polyamory in their relationship. Through the trials and tribulations that this new adventure brought into their lives, Courtney, realized that there was a significant gap in research on the subject, and this began her journey into researching the subject. After graduation, she plans to continue doing dedicated research on polyamory and non-monogamy while pursuing her career in teaching communication.

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As of 2013, approximately five percent of the US population had participated in a consensually non-monogamous "CNM" lifestyle (Conley et al., 2013; Hutzler et al., 2016). On the surface, CNM is broadly referred to as an identity or lifestyle which focuses on sexual relationships (Klesse, 2006). Upon closer inspection, CNM has many formations including swinging, open relationships, and polyamory. Like CNM, Polyamory 'Poly', is another relationship variant that "allows for the possibility to maintain simultaneous intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 1). Due to the extensive overlap in the literature and populations of Poly/CNM relationships, this study will use the terms interchangeably. Although five percent of the population is already a significant amount, it is likely that these statistics underrepresent the number of individuals who have participated in these relationships due to the stigma surrounding non-monogamous lifestyles and fears about "coming out" as polyamorous (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2006).

Poly/CNM identities are not usually visibly identified. As a result, these individuals decide when and how to reveal their identity to others. They can choose to fully disclose, completely conceal, or selectively decide who to disclose to and when. This study will focus on the privacy management strategies and concerns of individuals in Poly/CNM relationships. Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) will be useful in assessing the dual management process that these individuals go through when deciding how to move forward with their private identity. Evidence suggests that Poly/CNM relationships are on the rise, and due to being under-researched and heavily stigmatized (Klesse, 2018) more exploration is needed to create greater understanding and acceptance. This study centers on the privacy management

concerns of those in Poly/CNM relationships. The following sections provide further detail on these unique relationship structures, stigmatized identities, and privacy management theory.

Poly/CNM Stigma

Polyamory and consensual non-monogamy have both been historically misunderstood identities. Although polyamory can include sexual relationships, it "emphasizes love at the core" (Klesse, 2006). "Polyamorous arrangements can be endlessly expanded or differentiated: open or closed group marriages, triads, quads, V-structures, poly webs, primary, secondary, and tertiary partners" (Klesse, 2006, p. 7). As mentioned earlier, CNM can frequently take the form of polyamory, but the official terminology is up to the individual and their partner(s) to decide based on what they feel their identity/relationship embodies (Klesse, 2006). Due to the uniqueness of these relationships, there is not an adequate language with which to talk about them. This can make finding a community of likeminded individuals difficult and isolation a real likelihood (Klesse, 2006).

The stigma surrounding Poly/CNM relationships and the lack of language with which to talk about them stems from 'Mononormativity' (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Conley et al., 2013). Throughout history, Christianity and other religious doctrines have advanced the relationship "script" that one must adhere to a heteronormative and monogamous lifestyle. This "assumption that monogamy is necessary to fulfil any individual's relationship needs permeates all aspects of Western culture" (Hutzler et al., 2016, p. 2) and has created a "culture of compulsory monogamy" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 4).

Another source of this stigma comes from the public's long-standing misconceptions that Poly/CNM people, and their relationships, are not just generally less acceptable but they are also: practicing unsafe sex, the sex is less satisfying and lower in quality, are rated higher in

promiscuity, considered to be less trustworthy, and lack morality (Conley et al., 2013; Hutzler et al., 2016). Despite these misconceptions of Poly/CNM individuals, evidence suggests that these relationships are more: emotionally intimate, likely to discuss sexual safety, practice safe sex, get tested for HIV, and are just as happy and satisfied in their relationship(s) compared to their monogamous counterparts (Conley et al., 2012; Cox et al., 2013; Morrison et al., 2013).

These false perceptions of Poly and CNM relationships cause harm when they result in discrimination. For example, in an early study of CNM relationships and stigma, Nearing (2000) found that 43% of Poly participants reported personal experience with discrimination. In a more recent survey of nearly 4000 people who identify as Poly, 28.5% reported experiencing discrimination compared to much lower rates reported by the general population (Cox et al., 2013). Due to the struggles that individuals go through surrounding their stigmatized identity, many seek help from a therapist and other forms of counseling. However, multiple studies (e.g., Hymer & Rubin, 1982; Knapp, 1975; Ramey, 1975; Rubin & Adams, 1986; Weitzman, 2006) have found that this stigma permeates the walls of therapists' offices, too. Considering the potential lack of support from friends, family, and mental health professionals due to stigma, the likelihood of a Poly or CNM individual feeling isolated is high, and research suggests that "perceived lack of support for any type of romantic relationship is associated with lower self-esteem and poorer self-reported health symptoms" (Lehmiller, 2012, p. 2).

Concealing and Revealing Stigmatized Identities

While some individual's identity and stigma associated has basis in their physical appearance, other individuals possess concealed stigmatized identities (CSIs), which is "an identity that can be kept hidden from others but that carries with it social devaluation" (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009, p. 2). As one ages, one learns which identities are devalued, and, if one

embodies those stigmatized identities, then one might develop an internalized shame. This is because “one’s own beliefs about stereotypes, social rejection, and beliefs about others’ possible attitudes and action” (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009, p. 3) are not easily un-learned. “These individuals may even recall times when they themselves have discriminated against people with their identity” (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009, p. 3). Because of their stigmatized identities are not readily visible, Poly and CNM individuals are considered to have CSIs and are likely to experience anticipated stigma, which “refers to the degree to which individuals expect that others will stigmatize them if they know about the CSI” (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009, p. 3). Due to the hidden nature of CSI’s the individual frequently overhears “disparagement of their stigmatized group” (Wahl, 1999, p. 9), leaving the affected individual uncertain about how people will react when they learn about their stigmatized identity.

According to CSI research, the degree to which any given individual, who possess a CSI, will be affected by the accompanying anticipation and uncertainty is based on each individual’s identity and their: devaluation (perceived prejudice), centrality (how central to the self), salience (how many times a day do you think about identity), and cultural stigma (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). It was predicted in a 2009 study, and later confirmed in a follow-up study done in 2017, that the greater anticipated stigma/perceived prejudice will be related to increased distress, the greater centrality of the identity will be related to more distress, increased salience will be related to increased distress, and finally possessing an identity with greater cultural stigma attached to it will be related to more psychological distress (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Quinn et al., 2017). No matter the reason for the concealment, evidence shows that “actively concealing the identity more frequently with strategies (i.e., lying/avoiding, etc.) was predictive of worse physical and psychological quality of life” (Quinn et al., 2017, p. 3). This correlates with much of the “coming

out" literature, which suggests that disclosing the identity to others (i.e., being "out") comes with health benefits (Meyer, 2003).

One potential theory that can help make sense of Poly and CNM individuals' experiences with stigma and identity disclosures is Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM), which was created by Sandra Petronio (2002). This theory posits that one feels a sense of ownership over their own private information, which one surrounds with metaphorical boundaries. Revealing this information to others involves making them co-owners and negotiating privacy rules and boundaries. Throughout life, people acquire privacy rules that govern how they control their private information. These rules are influenced by five criteria: cultural, gendered, motivational, contextual, and risk-benefit ratio (Petronio, 2002). Cultural criteria are the basic expectations concerning how much someone is expected (based on cultural norms) to disclose about a certain issue. Gendered criteria explain how men and women typically disclose in different ways about different things and how this leads to patterned behavior. Motivational criteria account for how motivated a person is to reveal their private information at a given time. For example, if a poly person were previously considering coming out to their family and a situation presented itself, they would be more likely to come out compared to a poly person who had not contemplated the decision to come out. Contextual rules dictate the general time and place of appropriateness for revealing information. Finally, risk-benefit criteria is representative of people's intrapersonal thoughts and feelings, which result from weighing the potential pros and cons of revealing their private information (Petronio, 2002).

Although CPM has not been applied in this specific context, it has proven useful in understanding the privacy management concerns and processes of other CSIs, such as voluntary child-free (VCF) couples (Durham, 2008) and non-drinkers (Romo et al., 2014). For voluntary

child-free (VCF) couples, religion was a cultural criterion that affected their disclosure decisions and caused guilt and shame. These individuals described concealing their identities for fear of receiving negative reactions from others based on cultural norms and religious doctrine (Durham, 2008). This pronatalist stigma also applies to Poly/CNM individuals because of the multi-partner nature of their relationships. In a study of individuals who possess a non-drinking identity, Romo and colleagues (2014) found that not only is there a negative stigma against non-drinkers but there is also an inherent pressure placed on the non-drinker to smooth over interactions with the drinking crowd. The non-drinkers felt like they were deviating from norms which made them susceptible to adverse social and career ramifications. As a result they felt that making the drinking settings comfortable for drinkers was their responsibility. Given that Poly/CNM deviate from the norm of monogamy, individuals who possess these stigmatized identities may also feel a pressure to ensure the comfortability of conversations to ensure that they do not receive any career or societal backlash.

Given that Poly and CNM individuals have CSIs and ownership over this private information, they have control over that information and the decision to disclose. Decisions to conceal and reveal both come with their own risks (i.e. physical and psychological distress, five CPM criteria, social devaluation, boundary breaching) and benefits (i.e. relational closeness, positive health/psychological effects, reduced sexual promiscuity). Due to the potential ramifications (real or perceived) that a Poly or CNM individual may experience if they reveal, it is imperative that greater understanding is achieved, and further research done to continue to identify the privacy management concerns of individuals with stigmatized identities. Because of the nature of privacy management for Poly/CNM individuals, CPM is uniquely positioned to

inform our understanding of their individual experiences and concerns. Based on the assumptions of CPM, the following research question was posed:

RQ: What motivates people to conceal or reveal their polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous relationship status?

Methods

For this study, I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one, zoom interviews with individuals who either identified as polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous. The following sections describe the recruitment requirements and process, the full participant experience, and how the data was analyzed.

Recruitment

For this study, I initially aimed to interview up to 30 individuals who met the following recruitment criteria: (a) in some form of Poly or CNM relationship (or having been in one within the last year); (b) at least eighteen years old; (c) able to read, write, and speak English; and, (d) able to access the Internet. Recruitment flyers were posted on my personal social media pages (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) and were passed along to fellow graduate students to spread to their students. Further recruitment was done through snowball sampling by participants who passed the flyer to their friends/family.

The Participant Experience

After discovering and reading the flyer, interested parties emailed me to express their interest, and I followed up by sending them a Qualtrics survey to verify eligibility criteria. Once eligibility was confirmed, potential participants were sent an email link to complete the IRB consent form and then were scheduled for an interview. These interviews were all conducted online through zoom, and participants had the option to consent to audio only recording or note-

taking only. All the participants were given a $15 Amazon gift card for their participation in the study so long as they showed up to their scheduled interview time. At the beginning of the interview, I informed the participants that they could revoke consent and end the interview anytime they felt the need to and still be eligible for the gift card. At the beginning of the interview, all the participants were also asked to select a pseudonym in place of their name to protect their anonymity in participant quotations. Following these announcements, recording began based on their individual consent preference, and the participants were asked a series of questions relating to their background, relationship history, and about the conversations that they have had surrounding their polyamorous and consensually non-monogamous relationship status. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to share the flyer with anyone who they thought might qualify and be interested in participating.

The final participant count for this study ended up being eight individuals. These participants were recruited and interviewed between August of 2021 through December of 2021. Although this sample is smaller than I had hoped for, due to the heavy stigmatization associated with these identities, it is not surprising that recruitment was challenging. Future research on this subject would need to allot extra time for recruitment and possibly more money to compensate participants and encourage participation. Interviews ranged in length from 16 to 58 minutes. Of the final eight participants, one identified as being open, one identified as being consensually non-monogamous, and the other six identified with different types of polyamory (i.e., “V” structure, poly triad, polycule, standard polyamorous, and poly sexually but emotionally monogamous). “V” structures are made when two people both date the same individual separately and don’t date each other. A poly triad occurs when three individuals date each other as a group. Polycules are ambiguous; they can mean different things to different people. Some

are “V” structures, others are platonic, and, for some, a polycule includes all individual within a polyamorous person’s network. Standard polyamory also differs from person to person. For example, some may call two people going out and having a threesome standard polyamory, while others may understand this term to be what others may call a poly triad. Finally, poly sexually but emotionally monogamous refers to situations in which two or more individuals are in an emotional and/or sexual relationship together while also being able to have sex with others outside the relationship, so long as there are no emotional attachments outside of the relationship. Some of the participants volunteered additional information about their sexual identities and relationships. One identified as being aromantic and ace/asexual, which is a general disinterest in sex or romantic connections. Two participants identified themselves as being relationship anarchists and explained that relationship anarchists do not believe in hierarchies in their relationships, both romantic and non-romantic, because they are all unique and equally important. Two participants volunteered that they identified themselves as transgender.

Participants described relationships of varying lengths, ranging from two months to five years, with three participants having been in a relationship for three years at the time of the study. For five out of the eight participants, this was the first polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous relationship that they had participated in. This was not to say that they were or were not interested in them prior to; two said they had always been open to the idea, four said that they had never really thought about it until after high school, and the remaining two said that they had never considered it until their first relationship of this nature. As far as the way that these participants formed their dynamics, three participants said they started out in a monogamous partnership and at some point, decided to add a third, three started out as a solo partner who started dating someone in a pre-existing duo, and the remaining two participants

started dating as a monogamous partnership that each found their own separate partners whom they dated individually.

Data Analysis

To determine saturation, or the point at which no new data needs to be collected, the interviews were transcribed immediately after completion and briefly analyzed throughout the data collection process. Concurrent data collection and brief analysis allowed for necessary adjustments to be made to the interview schedule and recruitment strategy. The data set was further analyzed later using parts of Charmaz's (1995) three-step grounded theory analytic technique. First, the transcribed texts were analyzed line-by-line to identify preliminary themes. During the second step, the preliminary themes were refined to make way for larger themes/codes. In this step, overlapping codes were collapsed into single categories. The third step of analysis was writing up preliminary drafts of the findings. After this three-step analysis process was completed, the participants were all sent the preliminary write up and asked to answer a short Qualtrics survey to help determine the validity of the study findings before a final write up was solidified. Of the eight individuals who participated in this study and were contacted to review the preliminary write up, five participants responded to the request, and each described the findings as an accurate representation of their individual experiences.

Results

Interviews with polyamorous and consensually non-monogamous individuals shed light on the main reasons for revealing and concealing their lifestyles. Motives for revealing and concealing are discussed separately below; however, it should be noted that there is some overlap in terms of participants' reasons for and approaches to disclosing and maintaining their privacy.

Motivations for Disclosing a Poly/CNM Relationship and Identity

Reasons for disclosing one's polyamorous and consensually non-monogamous relationship statuses and identities varied greatly, but participant motives cohered around four central themes. Participants described disclosing to achieve social validation for their relationships and identities, to seek professional support, to find peer support and new relationships, and to effect social change.

To Achieve Social Validation

Participants described several reasons why it was important to reveal their relationship and identity to others for the purpose of validating their relationship. Many participants described wanting partners to meet their friends and family and not wanting to lie or omit the truth. For instance, Star, who identified as transgender, said:

> It was fairly recently after, we had formed the triad, and person number three was, like, coming over to my house more, on her own, then like, before. And, so, I was like, 'Oh yeah, I should probably let you know [referring to their parents], just because, yeah, we, we, are also together, just for your information, so that you're aware of the situation.'

On a similar note, Daniel, a bisexual man, stated:

> You know, that sort of internal honesty was important to me, so just being able to not hide that aspect of myself was important. But, like my family, they're going to meet these people, and, if I had to pretend that one person wasn't my boyfriend, then that would negatively impact their lives personally. And it's like that was super important to me to work to avoid.

These individuals both chose to disclose their relationship status to their families because they did not want to hide their identity or partners and wanted the true nature of their relationship

recognized by their social network. Participants also emphasized the importance of disclosing one's relationship status to family to head off awkward questions and interactions. For example, Kate, who is dating the husband of a poly couple, explained:

> I wanted to tell my family because I want my family to, at some point, meet my partner; he's very important to me. And I've just thought it would be really disrespectful to ask him to remove his wedding ring or ask him not to talk about his wife. So, I thought it was really important to, kind of, come out to my parents. And I guess the same for my friends. Just, you know, I didn't want there to be this moment of like surprise like, 'Oh my God, he has a wife!' There was a moment where he and I were out one night, and he stepped away to go to the bathroom or something, and someone said to me, 'You know, I've seen him with another woman.' And, my response was, 'Oh yeah, that's his wife.' You know my partner and I will go to, we, we, go to this bar like every week, and we talked about it for weeks, like do we tell them [referencing the bartenders]? Like they know our names; like we're always here. Like do we just warn them that we might show up with somebody else? Like it's not weird; like it's only weird if you make it weird.

All the participants who were motivated to reveal their status described wanting to introduce partners to others in their social networks and to have their relationship recognized and validated.

To Seek Professional Support

Several participants mentioned disclosing their relationship status and identity to access needed support from doctors and therapists. These individuals saw polyamory as central or related to their health issues and felt obligated to disclose to get help for those issues. Kate recounted:

> I do have a therapist that I see once a week. I think she's a lot more understanding now that, you know, we've spent the last year, or so, kind of, delving into it. It's more difficult to find those people that specialize in those things [referencing poly/CNM relationships], and I think a lot of them end up being, kind of, more like relationship counselors, which isn't necessarily, you know, what I was looking for. But, just someone who understands that like, you know, people do things differently, and it doesn't mean it's wrong or bad. It's just, you know, people just choose to.

Kate described wanting to be able to talk with a counselor about her poly/CNM relationship, which necessitated disclosure of Kate's identity. Garlan, who identified as transgender, shared a similar story:

> I have had conversations, with, you know, therapists and counselors, um, uh, about polyamory and especially with the polyagony part. Um, and that, that was definitely, um, definitely kinda gets very in-depth and personal, with the um, these circles, both like within ourselves, and within the relationships, um, and how those are working, and has really been ways of, I guess, to be fully honest. Both me and my partner, and my partner and her boyfriend are in separate couples counseling.

In refencing polyagony, Garlan was describing the concept that is connected to these open, multi-partner relationships, in which there are feelings of jealousy, confusion, anger, and frustration. These are all completely normal and healthy to have, yet sometimes they contradict what one expects or wants to feel in a relationship. Later in the interview, Garlan also touched on therapy by saying, "it was super important for me to seek these types of connections to fully explore my mental state on these matters, in order to be fully honest with myself and my

partners". Brooke, a bisexual female, articulated the importance of disclosing to one's personal physicians:

> I think that like your sexual health is so important, and so many people don't put enough weight into like what it means to be responsible for yourself and other people. So, she [referencing her physician] understands my relationship dynamics. Obviously, like therapists, psychiatrists, like anyone in that network--I think that's an important component, as well.

Morgan, also a bisexual female, echoed Brooke's sentiments:

> My health care provider--I'm very open with them just because that's my health, and they need to know everything in order to be able to properly take care of me. But, being a part of the health care system, kind of, allows me to be more comfortable and be more open, because I know personally when you hide things it makes it a lot harder to care for you.

These participants all highlighted how motivations to reveal their identity and relationship status came from a desire to receive the appropriate professional care necessary. It was also hinted at within both Kate's and Garlan's comments that there may have been some struggle in finding the right therapist who understood their unique situations.

To Find Peer Support and New Relationships

Quite a few of the participants also admitted to being open and revealing their identity and relationship status on dating apps and online forums in order to find peers, or others in poly/CNM relationships, and potential new partners. Sarah, who identified as aromantic, described disclosing their identity on social networking and dating apps in order to find peers and potential partners:

> Right now, I'm on Bumble BFF, and I'm only looking for friends, but, like, Her, when I was on Her earlier, couple months ago, or whatever, and I was looking for more of like a connection, whatever it may be.

Kate also mentioned revealing her poly/CNM identity to others online in an effort to locate information support from peers. She said:

> I'm in like several like social media groups, every, you know, Instagram influencer or whatever, just because I wanted to see how people are making these relationships work, and handling, you know, the emotional work that comes with these things. Yeah, I just like, I wanted to get as much information as I could that way. And, just like every polyamorous slut out there, yes, I'm on multiple dating apps.

Although Morgan did not describe disclosing in order to seek peer support, she did mention revealing her identity in order to serve as a source of peer support. She explained, "I've never posted directly in a forum. I'm a part of other forums and will happily throw out my opinion on matters, and they normally get pretty positive feedback." Garlan also talked about needing to disclose in order to access peer support groups:

> I've found, like, any group centered around, like, LGBTQ identities, that especially I feel a lot more comfortable in. I think both because, a lot of us already get the feeling of like having relationships, or even just moving through the world, as, seen as unconventional at best, and outright wrong and inappropriate at worst. Um, and I also understand tend to see, I think anecdotal, but it seems like LGBTQ people tend to be more likely to delve into polyamory, maybe that barriers just, of weirdness has already been broken, so it's like alright, why not give this a shot. I have met a couple people through there, who are,

> um, part of a polycule, and like a lot of the people in that polycule go to the same meetings.

Participants like Garlan described revealing their poly/CNM identity in order to find like-minded individuals for support or possible relationships.

To Effect Social Change

Some participants felt motivated to disclose their poly/CNM identity to destigmatize these relationships and effect social change. As Brooke said:

> I think the more I talk about it, the more it normalizes it, because someone's felt that. And, maybe me talking about it makes them feel more comfortable like discussing that openly or acknowledging that. So, I think that it's kind of the same thing for me, that I don't really care who I talked to about it. It's just, if you wanna know, I'll tell you.

Kate echoed these sentiments:

> The main reason why I wanted to participate is because I do want to, like you know, be part of some sort of small movement to end the stigma against it. So that I don't have to feel weird about talking about it; so that people don't have to feel like we're doing something that is abnormal or wrong, or that I am like this immoral sinner because I have chosen to have multiple relationships, whether they're romantic or not. Yeah, I mean, I, I, think I just I just want it to be like an accepted thing. And, I think, realistically, like if you look into history, like long before any of us were on the planet, people were having these types of relationships anyways, even in like biblical times. And, so, it's like, yeah, I mean, I think really it's such a personal thing. It's like your religion or your dietary restrictions. It's like I never want to push this idea that everyone should be in

> polyamorous relationships because I don't think that's necessarily right for everyone. I just want people to not think it's weird.

Both Brooke and Kate revealed their identities in an attempt to normalize polyamory and consensual non-monogamy. Sarah described disclosing in order to disrupt the perceived normality of the dyadic, monogamous relationship:

> I almost always bring it up. I generally just like to like fuck things up and like fuck up people's ideas about the world. And, so, any chance I have to like interrupt any kind of like normalcy, I take it. So, that was my intent or reason—lifting the rose-colored glasses, and just like, 'Oh, you're assuming something.'

Of the participants who discussed revealing in order to effect social change, they all referenced how it was not only important for them but also for others to create a society that is more accepting of polyamory.

Motivations and How to Conceal Poly/CNM Relationship Status and Identity

Reasons for concealing one's polyamorous and consensually non-monogamous relationship statuses and identities constituted a wide range, but participant motives centered around four central themes. Participants described concealing to prevent negative responses, to protect their partners, to adhere to heteronormative monogamy, and to avoid misconceptions.

To Prevent Negative Responses

The first motivation behind concealing one's relationship status and identity comes from wanting to prevent negative outcomes associated with polyamory and consensual non-monogamy, such as stigmatizing responses from others. Star talked about the difficulties disclosing as a trans-person in a polyamorous relationship:

> It's difficult for me to figure out how much of that is, how much of my discomfort would be from, my saying that I am in a polyamorous relationship, versus how much of it would be, you know, the fact that I'm trans, the fact that I'm queer. 'Cause there is also a lot of other levels just baked in already. It just ends up being kinda an all or nothing situation.

Sarah described how past stigmatizing responses to their identity disclosures have made them more wary of disclosing again:

> I was definitely uncomfortable during; I had kind of a wall between myself and the thing. Like I knew when I brought it up that it wasn't going to go over well, kind of thing, like people weren't gonna agree with it. I definitely was like less inclined to be like participating in the conversation. I related less, and like, also felt like they had just like delegitimized my relationship.

Morgan also concealed her relationship out of fear of a negative, stigmatizing response from her family:

> My family doesn't know, um for reasons of they're very religious; some of them are very religious. My parents are not, but, at the same time, I don't know how they would react. So, I'm not ready personally to bring that up. So, things are kind of hush hush about that aspect of my life around them. I feel like, as far as like, the Christian population, because that's what my family partakes in, is still highly scorned. Like even the topics of sex workers, drugs, that's like highly forbidden at my family gatherings. So, for me to be able to like come up and be like, 'Yes, I see multiple people. No, I'm not locked down within my relationship.' It's, it's still very scorned, and I don't think that that community will ever warm up to the ideas.

Morgan also worried about how her employer would respond:

> I don't want their image of my capability and my ability to be who I am, do. What I want, future wise, like I don't want them to think any less of me. I don't want to be thought of as like weird or an abomination because they're people that I have to see like a lot of, people that I talk to on a daily basis. So, for their opinion of me to change, for them to start treating me differently, would really have a huge impact on my mental health. 'Cause I could care less what 'Joe-blow' over there thinks, but someone that I have to communicate with on a daily basis, those insecurities, and self-doubt that I've been battling against to make it so I don't care what 'Joe-blow' over there thinks, lies within that cluster of people that I have to see every day or talk to everyday.

Daniel echoed these sentiments:

> I'd say the workplace and the classroom to be just sort of places you see other people all the time and you just don't want to add something that could come up later to be a problem. You never know, like it's one thing when there's a coworker you see two or three times a week. But, it's another thing like if information that I think could negatively impact my life, it was to be in the wrong hands, like my boss, they don't know about my relationship status and they don't need to. I don't need to run the risk of it causing a problem in my life.

Brooke also worried about the ramifications of disclosure for her career:

> Yeah, and my career progression as a whole, but I also think that opening it up has people, like they look at you in a sexual light, whether you like it or not. Like if you talk about sex, they're gonna think about it, and I think just especially the industry in which I work. I mean, yeah, I'm a woman, and I'm often questioned for my role. And you have to kind of keep that like, 'Guys, I'm professional, and I don't talk about anything else',

> because you don't want them to question it. I feel uncomfortable in the workplace, but I also, I feel uncomfortable saying that I have like any form of relationship, or like any sexual orientation. Like, I just don't mix those for me, that I'm here to talk about like what I offer to the business, not what or who I want to sleep with. It's like, 'Uh weird'. But, I think that's when it comes into like those subconscious bias and things of that sort, of like, if I'm talking about even my sexuality, it's like that gets into people's minds.

These participants described concealing their poly/CNM status for fear of negative responses from family and employers.

To Protect Their Partner

Some participants described concealing their poly/CNM relationship out of concern for their partners. These individuals recognized that this private information was co-owned and, thus, required careful management of privacy boundaries. Sarah talked about wanting to disclose but abiding by the wishes of partners who wanted to conceal the relationship:

> I wanted to be open about my relationship, but like, my previous partners have not wanted to. Almost all the people I've dated are, have not been out with their family, and so, around family, I'm a friend, around some friend groups, I'm a friend, because they know that they're dating like the other person.

Morgan had a slightly different experience with her long-term partner:

> He will, he will stop me mid-sentence talking about things, just kind of like give me that look like, 'not here, not now', or whereas, he's more comfortable talking about that around his family because he doesn't care, I'm more like, 'not here, not now, please, like let's not discuss this, please'.

Brooke described a similar experience:

> This is the first non-monogamous relationship that he's been in [referring to her fiancé], and there's a really big pushback like, 'Well, I don't want my friends to know that my girlfriend is with other people.' So it's like, 'Do I disagree with where you're coming from on that? Yes!' I think it has like weird sexist and misogynistic roots. 'We'll unpack that later, but I respect your boundaries. And, like if that's a line for you, that's a line for you.' Wouldn't discuss it with his parents because it's a conversation like he doesn't feel comfortable with, so, of course, I'll respect that. But, again, in just like communication, like we can talk about where your line is and I'll respect it. But, let's also address why and maybe figure out if there's a root there that isn't necessarily fair.

These participant quotes demonstrate how spaces that are open for some may discourage disclosure for others. Although they might not have agreed with their partners' wishes, these individuals were motivated to conceal the relationship out of concern for their partners.

To Adhere to Heteronormative Monogamy

A few of the participants mentioned that society's emphasis on and commitment to heteronormative monogamy makes it difficult to discuss polyamory, thereby encouraging concealment. Sarah said:

> I don't think people for the most part like view polyamorous relationships as like legitimate, or as legitimate as a monogamous relationship. And we see that, just in the way that we celebrate monogamous versus non-monogamous relationships, the way that we celebrate and label like our relationships, and like how people like approach you and assume things about you based on your relationship status. People like generally believe that like a real committed relationship is two, just two, people.

Later in the interview, Sarah added information about working in the unique dynamic of private education:

> I work in this weird private school thing, and so, I can only imagine what it would be like to bring up my relationship status over lunch. They barely can recall that I use they/them pronouns. So, yeah, I think workplace settings are completely, are really tricky I guess. Like I had a student, a 12-year-old child, ask me if I had a boyfriend, and like, typically when I have that question is when I would respond that I'm polyamorous, but like, not appropriate, not necessary, right? But just like, how much I may have to like argue, or assert, or like explain something. It's not something that I'm like actively bringing into the conversation either. And that has a lot to do with like, I just don't wanna like discredit myself I guess, any more than I already am.

Star offered a similar perspective:

> Because a lot of people have a lot of ideas wrapped up in their brain about relationships, and because relationships are so highly valued, all of those ideas and conceptions about the way a relationship should look are given such significant weight, that it's difficult to challenge that. And so, if relationships weren't viewed as such an important, end-all-be-all life goal, most important thing in your time that you can do or have, whatever. If, like, if, if, people just kind of chilled off on that, it would be a lot easier to be like, 'Yeah, the relationship I have looks different than the one that you picture in your mind and that's not a problem.' Because relationships, like, they're nice, they're fun. But, like, if I have a roller-skating hobby, and I'm doing roller-skating differently than you think that roller-skating should be done, or different than the way that you like roller-skating, or the way that you've seen roller skating be done, you wouldn't be like, 'What the fuck dude!'.

> You'd be like, 'Okay, I guess you just roller skate differently'. Also, a lot of people place value on relationships based on its length and whether or not it is going to last. I think that's dumb; relationships can have value, regardless of their length, and their length does not determine their value.

Karen, a lesbian female, specifically drew from American norms and religion:

> I feel like, well, in terms of America, religion is a huge thing, and so, a lot of people strive, or they're goal is always to be married to this one person, and, you know, a lot of Americans are Christians, so their whole thing is like being loyal to this one person, so I don't really think people are that open.

As evidenced in these participant quotations, our society is based around the heteronormative monogamous unit; for those individuals who do not fall into that category it is easy to feel as though your relationship and identity are not valid because they do not fit with how most people see and define romantic relationships.

To Avoid Having to Educate Others

All participants mentioned that they would either omit the truth about their relationship and identity or avoid the conversation all together because they did not feel like dispelling the myths and misconceptions surrounding polyamory and having to do the work of educating others. Star explained:

> A lot of people, um, don't really understand it and there's a lot of misconceptions out there, I really think that, um, I don't know, I think, um, it's not super well understood, which is where a lot of that problem, well a lot of that stigma comes from.

Karen explained how past disclosures led to tiring and frustrating questions:

> A lot of them don't understand why I would be in a relationship with somebody if I'm seeking other people, and they don't really see the point of it. Yeah, I was talking to my friend about it and she said, ‘What is the point of being in an open relationship?’ They were confused. Was it the fact that like I had somebody at the end of the day that I could come home too, or whatever?

Morgan described how past disclosures resulted in comments and questions about jealousy:

> They're all like, I could never do that at all. I don't know how you guys like don't get super jealous, or how I’ve been doing this for so long. There's always some aspect of jealousy there; I’ve been jealous on several accounts. People say there's no place for that in these kinds of relationships, but it's just a natural emotion.

Brooke also experienced comments related to jealousy:

> The number one is jealousy. Everyone’s like, ‘I could never share my partner’, like, things of that sort, and it's like, I think to assume that means that you hold some sort of ownership over them, and I don't think that I, like, loan him out to anyone. It’s like he’s his own person; he can do what he wants. ‘I can't imagine anything worse than having my partner with someone else’. It’s like, but, if they're connected to you, and you feel that emotional intimacy, like, that's nothing that is gonna break overtime. It's just a physical expression, I suppose. You're talking with someone, and they question like your dynamic, they’re like, ‘Oh I could never do that’. I'm not like bothered by it I guess, but I think a lot of that, it comes from men in that like ownership of a partner, of like I tell my partner what to wear, and I tell them who they should be talking to and what they should be doing. When you sign up to be in a relationship, you are kind of releasing that part of yourself.

On a slightly different note, Garlan, described the process of having to debunk misconceptions if they revealed to others:

> It's mostly just worrying about like, what kind of preconceived notions are being brought to the table here, that I'm gonna have to now debunk or something like that, which is really just why I haven't told much of anyone yet. Especially like, well just almost like preemptively worrying about like, defending the reputation of my partner. Like, I just think that's always my fear, is that people are gonna be like, 'Okay, so, your partner is dating two people, but you're not dating anyone else, and you're not dating this other person'. It could easily look like a way, to like, to get around cheating, or like trying to take advantage of multiple people, and they really don't want that, because that's not what's happening here, and it's never been, even from the beginning.

Daniel extended this concept on cheating by saying:

> The sort of the stigma of like 'oh how could you ever have the same feelings for two separate people?' and sort of having to explain that it's at least from myself it's not the same feelings for multiple people is having distinct and separate feelings that get to exist on the same level, and so like sort of that's the big thing is sort of for other people, like, 'I could never', they sort of can't wrap their head around it, they can't sort of empathize on myself and how I could possibly have success with those relationships. Another stigma that I see is people not, not, understanding how essential the consensual part of consensual non-monogamy is.

As evidenced by these participant comments, one of the reasons individuals feel discouraged from disclosing is due to the extra work of educating others that comes with it. In order to do

this, participants identified that they would lie and omit information and sometimes avoid conversations all together to avoid having to educate others about polyamory.

Discussion

This study examines individuals' motives for concealing or revealing their polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous relationship status. Participant responses emphasize how mononormativity (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Conley et al., 2013), religious doctrines, and social scripts based in a "culture of compulsory monogamy" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 4) have permeated Western culture and complicate privacy management for poly/CNM individuals (Hutzler et al., 2016). Participant comments also demonstrate how anticipated stigma, uncertainty, and Petronio's five criteria for disclosure decision-making affects the privacy management concerns and processes of those in poly and CNM relationships. These findings are discussed in further detail below.

Findings from this study parallel that of previous research pointing to stigma and its negative effects on individuals in poly/CNM relationships. Sadly, this study confirmed findings from others (e.g., Hymer & Rubin, 1982; Knapp, 1975; Ramey, 1975; Rubin & Adams, 1986; Weitzman, 2006) that found that stigma permeates the walls of therapists' offices, too. Both Garlan and Kate had mentioned that their experiences finding therapists were trying at times because there was a lack of understanding and acceptance from some providers. They also mentioned the difficulty involved in locating providers who specialize in these unique relationship dynamics. Accessing professional support can be difficult, as is, because it requires disclosing one's poly/CNM identity; it becomes even more arduous when accessed support is not supportive at all.

Participant comments also demonstrate how anticipated stigma influences disclosure decision making. Previous studies on concealable stigmatized identities found that many individuals with CSIs also experienced anticipated stigma, which "refers to the degree to which individuals expect that others will stigmatize them if they know about the CSI" (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009, p. 3). Other studies found that those with concealable stigmatized identities frequently overheard "disparagement of their stigmatized group" (Wahl, 1999, p. 9), leaving them unsure of how others would react when the stigmatized identity was no longer concealed. This was evidenced by many participants, especially those who anticipated stigmatizing responses from religious family members. For example, Morgan explained that her family was Christian and even the discussion of drug use or sex work was forbidden, which made her fearful of disclosing her involvement in a polyamorous relationship. Other participants feared stigmatizing responses from co-workers and employers and, as a result, concealed their poly/CNM identities in at work to avoid being treated differently or having their competency questioned.

Quinn and Chaudoir, in a series of studies (2009; 2017), in a 2009 study, found that the degree to which an individual was affected by stigma anticipation and uncertainty was based on each individual's: devaluation (how much prejudice they perceive), centrality (how fundamental the stigmatized identity is to the self), salience (how much the identity affects one's thoughts and actions), and cultural stigma (how much of that prejudice they have internalized). When each of those factors is high, participants experience increased distress. Quinn and Chaudoir also found that "actively concealing the identity more frequently with strategies (i.e., lying/avoiding, etc.) was predictive of worse physical and psychological quality of life". Although this study was not designed to assess levels of distress, it was able to assess how open participants were and what

strategies they employed for concealing and revealing. Of the eight participants, only one was completely open in all aspects of their life. This participant was also new to the polyamory lifestyle, so it is possible that they had not yet had enough experiences to negatively impact them. But, the remaining seven participants described actively concealing their poly/CNM identity in at least some settings, such as the workplace. Strategies for concealment included lying by omission and avoiding the topic. Additional quantitative data would have helped assess the impact of these concealment strategies on participants' quality of life and other aspects of their mental health.

This study used Petronio's 2002 Communication Privacy Management Theory, which describes five criteria that influence the rules that govern privacy management decisions--cultural, gendered, motivational, contextual, and risk-benefit ratio. Cultural criteria dictate how much a person is expected to reveal or conceal in certain settings. Participants touched on this issue when they described the need to reveal in order to access professional support. As far as gendered criteria, this study did not include questions about gender identity, but some participants volunteered that they identified as transgender. Petronio's theory frames gendered criteria in terms of the traditional gender binary, which provides little insight into the experiences of non-binary individuals. Additional research on how being non-binary affects privacy rules would be beneficial. Although this study focused on motivational criteria, participant comments also addressed contextual and risk-benefit criteria. Contextual criteria refer to perceptions of the appropriate time and place to discuss certain topics. When asked about this specific issue, most participants said that there was not necessarily an appropriate or inappropriate place in which to discuss these things, but they did indicate that some spaces and places made them more comfortable and, thus, more likely to disclose than others. For example, almost all participants

described being uncomfortable with disclosing in the workplace. They also mentioned discomfort discussing the topic of polyamory in the presence of children and students because they felt that it was not their place to potentially bring up a topic that parents might not want discussed with their children. Finally, CPM describes privacy rules governed by a risk-benefit calculation. Participants in this study addressed the risk-benefit ratio when they talked about weighing the pros and cons of revealing their identity in any given place or with any given person. Although participants applied the risk-benefit calculation when considering if and how they should reveal their identities, they did not describe engaging in the same calculation with respect to concealing. Further research is needed to determine if the privacy management criteria described in CPM are equally applicable to decisions to reveal and decisions to conceal.

In line with previous research, for many of the participants, the decision to reveal did come with benefits, such as connection with like-minded individuals, access to professional support, and opportunities to find new partners. But, as mentioned earlier, this decision to reveal comes with some negatives that might outweigh the positives. Given that individuals self-selected to participate in this study and these results may be skewed towards individuals who felt comfortable enough to reveal to me in a one-on-one interview, the full range of negative consequences associated with revealing or concealing might not have been captured in this dataset. In addition, the small sample size was a limitation. Researchers interested in studying the experiences of those in polyamorous or consensual non-monogamous relationships should plan on longer data collection periods and more incentives that I was able to spend on this study.

Conclusion

This study supports and extends research on concealed stigmatized identities (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2017) and communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) by addressing

the privacy management concerns of individuals in polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous relationships. These two models served as useful lenses through which to view the motives for revealing and concealing a polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous relationship. This study offered insight into when, why, and how individuals in these relationships disclose to others and/or conceal their identities from others. In addition to offering some additional insight into the privacy rule criteria described in communication privacy management theory, this study has practical implications, such as the need for greater access to and acceptance among therapists. Overall, this study speaks to the importance of spreading knowledge on these identities and relationships to create more inclusive environments for all.

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