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‘My partner was just all over her’: Jealousy, Communication and Rules in Mixed-Sex Threesomes

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Abstract

Drawing on findings from interviews with 28 men and women, this study explores experiences related to communication and jealousy in mixed-sex threesomes. Findings suggest that those in relationships often experience feelings of exclusion when engaging in threesomes, although open communication is a method by which the negative effects may be mitigated. Some romantic couples agree on particular rules during their threesomes, symbolically demonstrating the specialness of the relationship as well as protecting it from further progression into non-monogamy. Although communication appeared less important for those having threesomes when not in a relationship, it still played a role in determining participants' use of contraception whether the threesome occurred while in a relationship or not. Study findings are contextualised using the concept of monogamism, with it being suggested that threesomes involving romantic couples can serve to help maintain institutional monogamy, rather than trouble it.

Keywords: communication; consensual non-monogamy; jealousy; monogamy; threesome

Introduction

A presumption of elevated jealousy is often a reason why people do not consider consensual non-monogamy a viable alternative to monogamy (Aguilar 2013; Conley et al. 2012; LaSala 2004). Missing from this assumption however, is a consideration of the different ways in which jealousy can be conceptualised (Ritchie and Barker 2006) or worked through (De Visser and McDonald 2007) so as to minimise, or even neutralise its negative impact. Related not only to jealousy but other issues as well, those engaging in consensual non-monogamy have been found to adopt a range of communicative strategies, rules and arrangements that help their relationships function (LaSala 2004; Philpot et al. 2017; Wosick-Correa 2010). In contrast, very little is known about jealousy, communication or rules within the context of mixed-sex (including both men and women) threesomes. This article draws upon interviews with 28 men and women to explore their experiences of jealousy and use of communication/rules during their threesome experiences. It theorises how threesomes may serve to further reaffirm the primacy of the monogamous couple.

Agreements and Communication in Consensual Non-monogamy

The cultural hegemony of monogamy, which is referred to as 'monoganism' (Anderson 2012) or 'mono-normativity' (Pieper and Bauer 2005), means that alternative relationship and sexual possibilities are often culturally stigmatised (Anderson 2012; Conley et al. 2012; Grunt-Mejer and Campbell 2016). As a result, consensual non-monogamy is often presumed to be inherently deficient in comparison to monogamy (Conley et al. 2013). One such presumed deficiency lies in the higher levels of jealousy associated with consensual non-monogamy (Aguilar 2013; Conley et al. 2012; LaSala 2004). Stigmatising cultural dialogues around consensual non-monogamy however, often overlook the range of strategies that practitioners may adopt to help navigate problems.

In contrast to monogamous relationships, consensual non-monogamy often includes proactive discussions around issues like jealousy - acknowledging it as a potential problem and taking active steps to address the emotion (De Visser and McDonald 2007; Robinson 1997). Giving specific examples, De Visser and McDonald (2007) describe swingers alleviating feelings of jealousy through communication, or even manipulating it so as to foster sexual arousal or excitement. Using a similar approach, jealousy can also be re-contextualised through the creation of new terms such as 'compersion'—whereby someone derives pleasure from seeing (or knowing of) their partner enjoying themselves with another (Ritchie and Barker 2006).

Helping facilitate the smooth-running of relationships or sexual encounters, consensually non-monogamous arrangements often place emphasis on honesty and communication (McLean 2004; Shernoff 2006). This may mean practitioners already have rules or arrangements in place before they even encounter a particular scenario. Speaking of her polyamorous participants, Wosick-Correa (2010, 147) writes, '...almost all respondents, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, have some kind of agreement about being in a poly relationship'. These agreements are often in a state of flux and may develop as the relationship does.

Monogamism, however, does still manage to influence some dominant practices in consensual non-monogamy. Oftentimes arrangements will be constructed around privileging the primary relationship (Bringle and Buunk 1991; De Visser and McDonald 2007) so as to minimise the potential negative impacts on this relationship (McLean 2004). Perceptions of what might be harmful to a relationship will, however, differ. For example, a restriction of emotional contact is frequently found in both swingers and open marriages (Bringle and Buunk 1991; De Visser and McDonald 2007; Kimberly and Hans 2017) but is less common in polyamorous arrangements (Ritchie and Barker 2006; Wosick-Correa 2010). In contrast, the most prevalent practices of those who engage in threesomes is severely under-researched.

Threesomes

While research has illustrated nuances in how different relationship forms may be aided by particular agreements, in comparison to other forms of consensual non-monogamy we know relatively little about threesomes, especially outside of male, same-sex relationships (Adam 2006; LaSala 2004). Although there a number of studies touch upon mixed-sex threesomes (e.g. Jonason and Marks 2008; Joyal, Cossette and Lapierre 2014; Hughes, Harrison and Gallup 2004), none focus on threesomes specifically, and thus lack the depth of detail needed to accurately comprehend people's engagements with such practices; with but a very few exceptions (e.g. Rupp et al. 2014). Those studies focusing on mixed-sex threesomes, often only draw upon quantitative data (e.g. Thompson and Byers 2017; Morris, Chang and Knox 2016) or are extremely dated (Karlen 1988). While quantitative explorations of social phenomena are undoubtedly valuable, they cannot capture the detail that qualitative methods provide. In contemporary threesome research, there is only one in-depth qualitative exploration of mixed-sex threesomes (Scoats, Joseph and Anderson 2018). This study explored the threesome experiences and desires of 30 heterosexually-identifying male university students. It found that a third of the men had engaged in a threesome, a rate comparable to Thompson and Byers' (2017) results. Although these instances were more heavily weighted towards female-female-male (FFM) threesomes in both experiences and desire, some of these men still showed a willingness to engage in male-male-female (MMF) threesomes.

While beneficial in helping us develop a better overall understanding of young men's threesome experiences and attitudes, Scoats, Joseph and Anderson's (2018) study tells us little about the role of communication in threesomes. Associated with communication, we also know little regarding the safe-sex practices in threesomes. Looking at research on all-male threesomes, it is clear that communication can be vital in establishing boundaries and having discussions around condom use (Adam 2006; LaSala 2004). We should not, however, presume that the extent of communication is necessarily comparable within mixed-sex threesomes. Already being outside of the charmed circle of "normal" relationship behaviours (Rubin 1984) may mean that these types of conversations happen more readily among sexual minorities (Coelho 2011; Martin 1999).

Furthermore, qualitative studies on threesomes have not sought to understand threesomes within a monogamist (Anderson 2012) culture. Schippers (2016) describes the *Threesome Imaginary* as a collective cultural fantasy about threesomes that reflect and reproduce existing power relations and social privilege. These fantasies constitute

the dominant, maybe even hegemonic understandings of what a threesome is, and what it should be. Schippers (2016) thus proposes that acceptable mixed-sex threesomes are primarily constructed as a monogamous couple temporarily inviting (or imagining) a third to join them. Engaging in, or fantasising about, a threesome is an acceptable way for a couple to add energy to their sex life, so long as the practice remains a temporary occurrence, and does not constitute a regular sexual practice or structural feature of the relationship.

These impermanent forays outside of the tedium of monogamy can help ease some of the pressures of monogamy without threatening the dyadic couple. This function is similar to how cheating may also serve to preserve monogamy (Anderson 2012). Threesomes may, therefore, actually serve monogamism by creating an acceptable outlet for temporary extra-dyadic practices whilst reifying the monogamous couple as the core relationship type (Schippers 2016). Consequently, the present study aims to explore the impact of jealousy, communication and rules during participants' threesomes, as well as to theorise how best we might understand threesomes in relation to monogamy.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 28 participants (12 men and 16 women) who had engaged in a mixed-sex threesome. Participants were drawn from Britain, North America, and Western Europe and were predominantly white (26), with only one participant identifying as mixed-race and one as Black. Participants were aged between 19-57, with mean ages of 26.2 (men) and 31.2 (women). Seventeen of the sample had at least a bachelor's degree, and nine of those 17 had gone on to postgraduate education (master's degrees, PhDs or medical degrees). At the time of interview, 17 participants stated that they were currently students.

Participants' sexual identities were varied, particularly among the women. From the male participants, ten identified as heterosexual (three 'definitely' heterosexual; six heterosexuals; one 'mostly' heterosexual), one identified as queer, and one struggled to put a label on his sexuality. Of the female participants, only two identified as heterosexual, four identified as heterosexual with some qualifying statements, three as bisexual, one as bisexual/pansexual, one as pansexual, and two as queer. Three remaining participants were unsure of the label they would ascribe themselves. With regards to relationship styles, five participants identified as currently being in consensually-non-monogamous relationships.

Recruitment Strategy

Participants were recruited through personal connections in addition to snowball sampling (Denscombe 1998). Following the example of Browne (2005), initial respondents comprised of friends whom had either engaged in or knew people whom had engaged in a threesome. Initial connections subsequently served as *de facto* research assistants (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), sourcing and connecting the authors with potential participants. The use of personal acquaintances has the benefit of being able to access those who would not answer advertisements for research but would

perhaps respond to a personal request (Browne 2005). This approach to snowball sampling therefore resulted in a convenience sample.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of data collection and were undertaken both in person and via Skype. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Participants were asked questions related to their threesome experiences; including the themes of jealousy, rules and contraception as well as more open-ended questioning (e.g. were there negatives related to your threesome?). Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, complexity and clarity in participants' answers (Sarantakos 2005).

Since the taboo nature of some of these topics (Rubin 1984) may encourage participants to give socially desirable answers, the authors were open to disclosing their own personal sexual and relationship experiences to help put the participants at ease and encourage more truthful disclosure (Anderson 2012). Participants were thus invited to ask the interviewer questions on these topics if desired, although it is recognised that this approach can have both positive and negative influences on participant responses (Berger 2015).

Participants were also actively reminded that they were permitted to not answer any questions they were uncomfortable with (Hutchinson, Marsiglio and Cohan 2002) as the study of highly personal topics has a higher chance of causing anxiety (Renzetti 1990, as cited in Bahn and Weatherill 2013). Additionally, all were given a description of the purpose of the study, the right to anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time (Arksey and Knight 1999). The ethical procedures of the British Sociological Association were followed.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are comparable to those associated with interview-based studies of sexuality that use a small and selective sample, specifically issues of representativeness (Gledhill, Abbey and Schweitzer 2008) and the reliability of self-disclosure (Gribble et al. 1999). Emergent research on sexual topics is often based on a convenience sampling, owing to the difficulties with finding participants willing to speak about intimate sexual behaviours (Harris, Cook and Kashubeck-West 2008). In particular, it is possible that those with negative experiences, and experiences that they want to forget, are under-represented in the findings. The conclusions drawn from these findings should, consequently, be restricted to those who share similar characteristics, while at the same time acknowledging that without further contemporary empirical evidence on men and women's experiences of threesomes, we cannot also claim that other experiences are necessarily any different to this sample.

Results

Feelings of Exclusion

Predominantly, it was those that had their threesome with a romantic partner who described occurrences of jealousy. The most common examples of experiencing the

emotion were when one participant in a relationships did not feel they were receiving enough attention. In other words, they felt excluded by the attention the other two people engaged in the threesome were giving to each other. Despite these experiences, some participants were able to overcome these feelings by discussing them with their partner (and sometimes the other person). In addition, a proportion of participants found threesomes to be much less problematic than other potential options for extra-dyadic sex and suggested that threesomes could be good for one's relationship.

Feeling 'left out,' manifested itself in different ways. It sometimes happened in a corporeal sense when one of the threesome participants was less physically involved in sexual activities, but exclusion was also constructed psychologically when a participant felt that the other two were predominantly interested in each other. These sorts of experiences have also been documented in LaSala's (2004) research on gay male couples who engaged in threesomes.

Among participants, seven highlighted instances where they had felt somewhat left out. Most commonly, this feeling stemmed from the behaviour of their romantic partner during the threesome. For example, Lauren suggested that her boyfriend had not been good at sharing his attention: 'My partner was just all over her and wasn't very good about dividing'. Sue described a similar situation with her husband: 'He concentrated virtually solely on her'. She did, however, feel that had this not been the case, the experience could have been better: 'I probably would have been okay with sharing if it had been real sharing, but seeing how much more interested he was in her was just horrible'.

Colette had not felt excluded often; on the few occasions when she did, it mainly focused on the fear of being less desirable than the other person. She referred to: 'those little tiny feelings of [my boyfriend] liking her more than me'. These feelings were reported to be at their worst during one particular experience: 'I felt threatened because she was really, really good looking and I knew that my boyfriend really wanted her, and he pushed a little bit with that threesome'.

Much like other participants in relationships, when having a threesome Sarah wanted to feel part of a three, rather than an appendage. Although Sarah and her male partner, Robert, had a somewhat open relationship, when Robert instigated things with another woman without her, it created anxieties for Sarah. She said:

I think I was a little insecure as Robert told me he had been making out with our mutual friend all night and he was bringing her home for me, I felt like I had no power in that situation. Like I wasn't even consulted.

By not being consulted on bringing someone home for a threesome, Sarah felt left out. She suggested: 'It can't just be you fucking the other person and then I'm off to the side'.

From within the context of a polyamorous triad, Julia also discussed experiences of exclusion: 'I had several triad poly relationships and I always found it very hard when my partners didn't want to engage in intimacy and sex with me, but they did want to engage with each other'. Julia felt that her experiences of exclusion had mainly been down to a lack of communication: 'Communication wasn't always as bright as I would want it to be. Jealousy was very much a part of it'.

On other occasions, the behaviour of the person joining the couple would cause issues. Demonstrating this, David suggested that a problem had only occurred when, in

a repeat threesome with the same woman, this woman had shifted her attention from his partner to him:

The girl wasn't really interested in me, which I think made my girlfriend less jealous, because the girl fancied her more than myself. And that's why I think it got to [my girlfriend] the second time, because the girl had spent more time with me than with her.

For Joanna, her feeling of exclusion built over a number of repeat encounters with the same woman:

Partly I got the impression that she was quite attached to [my boyfriend]. And we discussed the reasons that this could be, such as only having been with guys and so this is how she is with guys. Or maybe she was projecting her desire for a boyfriend on to him, or maybe she did have strong feelings for him. I felt that she was really into my boyfriend at that point and the situation became uncomfortable for me. So, I said to my boyfriend that I didn't want anything to happen anymore with her.

Three women suggested that when they had felt excluded, communication was often able to resolve, or at least minimise its impact. For example, Lauren described talking with both her male partner and the other woman after a threesome where she had felt neglected:

The second time I made sure we all sat down and made sure that we all knew what was happening, and that the expectations were the same for everybody. I know it alleviated a lot of anxieties I had, and I think it's alleviated some anxieties that she had, because I think that she was a little uncomfortable with the fact that he had been so focused on her.

Meika suggested that the result of these conversations could then feed into future behaviours: 'I often noticed that with my partner, he feels left out, and so maybe he is more insecure because of that'. Because of this, Meika felt that sometimes she would need to disengage from the situation: 'You have to keep a balance and at some point, you need to be able to take a step back and just watch and think okay it's not my turn now'.

In contrast to experiencing exclusion, having threesomes with one's partner was seen by some as a good way to feel included when compared with other arrangements that allowed for extra-dyadic sex. Fred suggested that he and his female partner were happiest engaging in extra-dyadic sex together: 'We would never go off with other people separately'.

Rosie described a situation with her male partner when they were engaged in an open relationship, but neither of them were entirely happy with the other having sex with new people. Consequently, having FFM threesomes as a couple was a compromise they came to. After coming to this arrangement, Rosie's partner stopped pursuing sex with other women, alleviating her negative feelings: 'The only time when I get jealous is

when he is with other girls on his own. Other than that, I've been completely fine with it'.

Philippa, who although not in a relationship, felt similarly about a man who she would regularly 'hook-up' with; the same man she had her threesome with. She said: 'When we had a threesome I didn't feel any jealousy at all, but when we sleep with other people outside of this threesome situation, I do sometimes'.

In addition to avoiding potential problems, some participants suggested that pursuing sex together had been good for their relationships. Sarah suggested that threesomes could be relationship affirming when done in a couple: 'There is something bonding about it, experiencing something with your partner. It's like a shared experience'. Similarly, Rosie said: 'I never felt so connected to John as I did after the threesome'.

So, while feelings of exclusion did occur with many of the participants who had a threesome with a partner, there were ways in which some participants attempted to minimise or avoid these feelings in future encounters. Open communication about feelings of exclusion or acting as a "unit" both emerged as potential strategies for dealing with these issues (Adam 2006; De Visser and McDonald 2007). Consequently, it may be hypothesised that romantic couples engaging in spontaneous threesomes might be more at risk of complications. Without having necessarily discussed their expectations beforehand, participants may hold different beliefs as to what is acceptable or desirable during the experience.

Protecting the Primary Relationship

Alongside feelings of exclusion, another commonly perceived problem was the potential impact a threesome might have on one's relationship. Consequently, specific behaviours were sometimes deemed as "special", reserved only for the couple. Reibstein and Richards (1992) have suggested that 'sexual exclusivity is symbolic of "specialness" in couple relationship' (c.f. Jamieson 2004, 36). While not demonstrating absolute sexual exclusivity, some participants were motivated to maintain a distinction between dyadic sex and threesome sex. As found in other studies (De Visser and McDonald 2007; Jamieson 2004; Kimberly 2016; Wosick-Correa 2010), this sometimes meant restricting particular behaviours, such as how their partner orgasmed or whether or not they were allowed to engage in penetrative sex.

Demonstrating a restriction in behaviours, Jennifer explained that during her threesome: 'We said that my boyfriend had to cum in me and not her'. Similarly, Kirsty, her male partner, and the female that joined them had discussed beforehand the types of things they were not comfortable with: 'I had kind of said that I didn't want her to have [penetrative] sex with [my boyfriend]'. In the same way, Colette described a situation where the woman joining them was the one most concerned with preserving their relationship:

[She] felt she couldn't do everything, or certain things with my boyfriend because she didn't want to jeopardise our relationship. So, they were more reserved on certain aspects like maybe kissing too long, or she didn't want to get penetrated, because for her that was a line that she did not want to cross.

Colette reasoned that this concern might have come from the fact that the third person had been her close friend. Therefore, not wanting to damage the friendship (Byron 2017), this friend was perhaps tentative in the behaviours they felt they could engage in.

Although not talking about certain acts specifically, Emma described regrets around her threesome in that she had allowed someone else into what she saw as a special part of her relationship: 'It just felt a bit wrong, it's hard to describe how you feel afterwards but it's the feeling that she had shared something with my partner that we should share. Like it was our something special'.

Repeated threesomes with the same person were also sometimes seen as a potential threat to dyadic relationships. For Kirsty and Jennifer, each suggested that if things continued for longer than one or two meetings, then the encounters would become something they did not want. Kirsty said, 'I didn't want it to become a thing with her. It was our relationship!' She continued, 'I probably would have considered it with somebody else, but I just didn't want it to become a regular thing with one person, because then it's more of a relationship'. Jennifer suggested a similar desire to protect her relationship from repeated sexual encounters with the same person: 'Because it's her, it might get a bit weird. It's sort of adding a third person to the relationship almost...I kind of just wanted it to be what it was'.

In contrast, those not in committed relationships were somewhat less likely to discuss restrictions or arrangements beforehand. When things were discussed, they usually focused on one person's specific desire to not engage in a specific act. For example, Cathy said that she did not want to have sex with the man in her threesome. For Stuart, in one of his threesomes the man quickly made it apparent that he did not want any same-sex sexual interaction. In Stuart's other threesome, one of the women said she: 'Didn't want me to cum on her or in her at all'. Only Mike, who had a lot of experience of multi-person sex, had engaged in any sort of in-depth discussion.

It might seem quite rule heavy, but it seems safer that way because there won't be any awkward situations. Obviously, you want to be relaxed whilst you're having sex, so I quite like the rules being in place because everybody knows where they stand. There is no worrying about if I do this will it be okay? You know it's going to be okay before you enter into the situation.

Thus, rules and arrangements seemed most important for those in relationships and were used as a method by which to limit threats to the relationship (LaSala 2004; Philpot et al. 2017; McLean 2004; Wosick-Correa 2010). In addition, those in relationships usually viewed threesomes as most acceptable when they were an occasional occurrence (Schippers 2016) that privileged the existing relationship (Finn and Malson 2008). Threesomes in this manner, consequently and perhaps unexpectedly, do not necessarily challenge the norms of monogamy; but instead serve to support them by constructing the monogamous dyad as the most important thing.

Talking "Safe Sex"

As highlighted in the previous sections, for those having a threesome from within a relationship, the communication of expectations and desires were important for

avoiding potentially negative outcomes. Those not having a threesome in this context, however, rarely had such discussions. In contrast, both groups had similar discussions around safe sex and contraception.

From the sample, 22 out of 28 participants described being aware of some sort of protection present during their threesome(s); often discussing which method was suitable for their needs. Of the remaining six participants: four could not remember whether they had used protection, one got STI tested after sex, and the remaining participant had used no protection. The most popular form of protection was condoms, used by 14 of the participants, and most favoured by those having sex while outside a relationship (ten participants). No participants identified using protection for oral sex.

Participants only used condoms for penetrative sex and the effectiveness of their usage for STI protection varied. Of those who used a prophylactic, and where there was penetrative sex with two different partners, five participants had experiences of changing condoms when switching between partners, whereas three did not. Not changing condoms between partners can lead to elevated risk of 'third party transmission of infectious agents' (Friedman, Mateu-Gelabert and Sandoval 2011, 5) between those who might not necessarily engage sexually. Importantly, for these three participants who did not change condoms it had not been a conscious choice, but a lack of knowledge that meant they had not considered it.

It is also important to note that when participants did change condoms, it was not necessarily their own idea. For example, Mike suggested that: 'They actually swapped it themselves. I was hot and ready to go into the other one, but they stopped and swapped it'. Likewise, James suggested: 'They made me change the condom between each other'. Nevertheless, other participants were proactive about this themselves. Meika, who had a lot of experience with group-sex, highlighted that it was often something that others did not consider when engaging in threesomes or group sex:

I remember having sex with a couple and the guy's fantasy was to have the girl and I both in doggy style next to each other on the bed and he would go back and forth. Then I said, "That's great but you have to change condoms" and it kind of ruined the whole thing for him.

For those that chose not to use condoms, oftentimes they used a combination of birth control methods (such as an implant or a contraceptive pill), in combination with STI testing, suggesting that for many, the main perception of risk was around pregnancy (rather than STIs). For example, when talking about her threesome with her male partner and another woman, Jennifer stated, 'I don't think we used any [condoms] because I've got the implant and so does she. I got tested afterward and so did he; so, it was fine'. Before Philippa's threesome, all of the threesome participants discussed whether they had been tested recently as they preferred not to use condoms:

So, he and I don't use protection but if we sleep with other people we do. So, we've both been tested and are clean and he had spoken to her beforehand and suggested that maybe if we were having a threesome it might be awkward to use a condom. So, he talked to her about STIs and asked her if she had been

tested, and she recently had. So, we all agreed we weren't going to use a condom.

Despite a difference in perceived need for communication, both those having threesomes when in relationships and those not, still attempted to practise some form of safe sex when in a threesome. Participants' responses suggest that the main worry was related to accidental pregnancy; while STIs were potentially treatable. Some participants did, however, still want to protect themselves from STIs and possessed the knowledge of how threesome sex differs somewhat from dyadic sex in the potential risks.

Discussion

This research draws upon data participants who had experienced a mixed-sex threesome in order to explore their experiences of jealousy, communication, and contraception within this context. Issues of exclusion were most commonly highlighted by participants who had had their threesome while with a romantic partner. Twelve of the female participants had engaged in a mixed-sex threesome when in a relationship, whereas only three of the male participants had. Of these 15, ten women expressed that they had at some point felt excluded in connection to one of their threesome experiences.

These feelings of exclusion during a threesome were often linked to the behaviour of a romantic partner. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the majority of these participants were going from an entirely monogamous relationship, where all attention is focused on one other person, to a threesome situation where attention is now divided. The novelty of the new person may mean that one person within the three may receive more than an equal share of attention from one or more of the couple. But while threesomes did present problems for some participants, others suggested that they had relationship building qualities through the shared experience they offered.

For the ten female participants who described experiences of exclusion, open and honest communication—including discussions around expectations—appeared to be a method by which they could navigate feelings in a positive way, although this did not always happen. This is in line with findings from other research on consensual non-monogamy (De Visser and McDonald 2007; McLean 2004; Robinson 1997; Shernoff 2006; Wosick-Correa 2010). Through these conversations, while exclusion might have still been experienced, its influence became less, and it did not necessarily lead to long-term damage to the relationship. Although few men reported experiences of feeling excluded, this is not to say that they do not experience such feelings. It is likely that this finding is a consequence of the sampling procedure that resulted in few men who had had threesomes while in a relationship.

Some participants in relationships also adopted rules in order to reserve particular behaviours only for the romantic couple, thus emphasising the importance of the relationship and creating an easily discernible demarcation between threesome sex, and sex within their dyad. In a similar way to how Anderson (2012) suggests that cheating may paradoxically demonstrate the presence of love within a relationship, having a threesome with ones' romantic partner may also send a comparable message. By restricting the behaviours that are available to the participants in the threesome it

proclaims the importance of the couple's relationship. Additionally, to the person joining the couple it emphasises the recreational nature of the sex, eliminating the potential of the threesome becoming something more serious.

Furthermore, some participants were also cautious to ensure that the primary relationship was protected from what were perceived as more permanent additions to the relationship (Schippers 2016). Seemingly, these participants were keen to protect their monogamous status (Conley et al. 2012), while at the same time, often enjoying their extra-dyadic experiences.

Although communication was seen as important for having a positive threesome experience within a relationship, when not in a relationship, it appeared less of a concern. This lack of communication may be related to less concern for the other people's desires during casual sex (Backstrom, Armstrong and Puentes 2012; Boyer and Galupo 2015; Stinson, Levy and Alt 2014). It may also reflect the preference for minimal verbal communication during casual sex (Kratzer and Aubrey 2016; Weaver, Mackeigan and Macdonald 2011). The comparatively high frequency of feeling excluded for those who have threesomes when with a romantic partner suggests that in this scenario, individuals are likely to benefit from discussions regarding their threesome-related expectations.

The one area where similar communicative behaviours seemed to cross over between those in relationships and those not, was the issue of contraception and safe sex. Across both groups, the majority of participants used some form of protection when having sex or discussed their justifications not to. Approaches to protection varied but seemed to reflect those used when hooking-up (Moran and Lee 2014), or when engaged in longer-term casual sex (Konkle-Parker et al. 2018; Weaver, Mackeigan and Macdonald 2011). In line with this, those having threesomes when not in a relationship most commonly used condoms; other participants often discussed different forms of contraception that would protect against pregnancy (but not necessarily STIs). Some participants did, however, highlight a lack of knowledge around why some dyadic strategies for protection may be less effective during group-sex. Consequently, it may be useful to consider the inclusion of group-sex in sex and relationship education programmes.

Overall, this research demonstrates that threesome practitioners—particularly those having a threesome while in a relationship—use some similar communication strategies and rules to those engaging in other forms of consensual non-monogamy. In addition, perhaps because of the perceived casual nature of the sex, approaches to contraception seemed to be similar to those adopted during hook-ups/casual sex (Moran and Lee 2004).

Threesomes do not, however, necessarily appear to disrupt monogamy in the same way that other more regular forms of consensual non-monogamy (i.e. forms that are a more day-to-day part of participants' lives) may do (Ritchie and Barker 2006). In fact, rather than challenge the institution of monogamy, threesomes may actually support it, particularly when engaged in by romantic couples. Threesomes may offer couples a sexual "release"; allowing access to extra-dyadic sex while reaffirming the primacy of their committed relationship (Schippers 2016). Accordingly, threesomes may present a challenge to monogamism when engaged in by individuals, but paradoxically, reproduce it through an emphasis and privileging of the couples who engage in them.

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