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Discrimination Based On Family and Relationship Structure

Our laws were established to support the nuclear family, but [nuclear families peaked in the 1950s-60s and have never been the most common family form](#). Today, [only 18% of American households reflect a nuclear family](#), and major media outlets have highlighted how the family structure our laws and norms have supported as the cultural ideal for the past half century [has been catastrophic for many](#). Moreover, ignoring the existence of other family and relationship structures such as blended families, same-sex families, chosen families, single-parent families, families headed by relatives, single individuals, multi-partner families in policies and programs has left many families and individuals vulnerable and without needed resources and support.

Rising Prevalence of Relationship Structure Diversity

Interest and involvement in diverse relationship structures, including polyamory and open relationships are becoming increasingly common ([Moors, 2017](#)). In fact, over one in five people in the United States have engaged in a consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationship at some point, and approximately 4-5% of people are currently in CNM relationships, which is roughly the size of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities combined ([Haupt et al., 2017](#); [Rubin et al., 2014](#)). Over one in ten North Americans also indicate that CNM is their ideal relationship type ([Fairbrother, et al., 2018](#); [Moors, et al., 2021](#)) one-third of Americans (34%) describe their ideal relationship as something other than complete monogamy ([YouGov, 2023](#)). There's also evidence that tendencies toward monogamy vs. non-monogamy are rooted in an individual's biological disposition ([Hamilton & Meston, 2017](#)). In response to the increasing visibility of this population, the [LGBTQ Division of the American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#) established the first-ever [Consensual Non-monogamy Task Force](#) in January 2018, which was solidified as a permanent Committee in January 2021.

Nature of Stigmatization of those Involved in CNM

Despite the prevalence of consensually non-monogamous relationships, research indicates that involvement in nontraditional relationship structures is highly stigmatized. Two-thirds of people engaged in CNM reported recent discrimination, and 70% of those who have not experienced discrimination are not out about being CNM ([Mahar et al., 2022](#)). Among people who were not personally interested in consensual non-monogamy, 6 out of 7 people do not respect those who engage in consensual non-monogamy ([Moors et al., 2021](#)). Some examples of the general public's stigmatizing perceptions include perceiving people engaging in CNM as sexually risky, immoral, unfit parents, and having low-quality relationships ([Conley et al., 2013](#); [Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016](#); [Moors et al., 2013](#)). CNM relationships are perceived as being less trusting, less meaningful, and less satisfying, and they are more likely to be subject to harsh judgment on arbitrary characteristics such as how likely they are to walk their dog or pay their taxes on time compared to monogamous relationships ([Conley et al., 2013](#)). Moreover, engagement in CNM is commonly thought to be primarily motivated by an unnatural desire for sex ([Scoats & Campbell, 2022](#)), but individuals frequently report motivations for engaging in CNM

that are unrelated to sex, like personal growth and autonomy, identity development and exploration, value expression, and fulfillment of other needs such as community belonging ([Hnatkovičová & Bianchi, 2022](#); [Moors et al., 2017](#)).

Stigma and discrimination pervade even though people in both monogamous and CNM relationships report similar levels of relationship quality (e.g., trust, commitment, longevity) and well-being (i.e., the mental health of the individuals involved; [Conley et al., 2017](#); [Rubel & Bogaert, 2015](#); [Wood et al., 2018](#)). Some research demonstrates that those in CNM relationships may even score higher on measures of satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, passion, and love and are more likely to engage in positive problem-solving with partners over withdrawal tactics than those in monogamous relationships ([Brooks et al., 2022](#)). Thus, the overall health and functionality of CNM relationships repeatedly empirically defy pervasive societal mononormative assumptions that they are interpersonally risky, inherently amoral, and fraught with conflict ([Cunningham et al., 2022](#)).

Impact of CNM Stigma, Discrimination, and Lack of Resources

People engaged in CNM demonstrate resilience, but the stigma directed toward CNM families and relationships is pervasive, harmful, and often resembles stigma and discrimination faced by other sexual and gender diverse populations ([Moors et al., 2021](#); [Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021](#)). Consensually non-monogamous individuals face pervasive societal stigma and discrimination that harms their mental health and relationships. The additional stigma and discrimination experienced by the CNM community are internalized and lead to increased psychological distress (e.g., increased depression and anxiety) and worse relationship outcomes ([Borgogna et al., 2021](#); [Moors et al., 2021](#)).

Mental health providers are uniquely positioned to either help relieve or compound the impact of stigma experienced by their clients. Ideally, therapists would be trained to recognize and counteract the stigma associated with consensually non-monogamous relationships effectively. Unfortunately, it is rare for therapists to receive training about CNM, and individuals engaged in CNM who seek psychotherapy frequently encounter discriminatory or stigmatizing attitudes and practices by mental health clinicians ([Witherspoon, 2012](#); [Schechinger et al., 2018](#)). There is also limited empirical research and validated measures to support the treatment of the diverse relationship community, which further impairs clinicians' ability to properly assess and treat mental health ([Girard & Brownlee, 2015](#)). For example, in the most extensive study to date on CNM client experiences in therapy, despite half of the participants specifically looking for a CNM-affirming therapist, one-fifth of participants rated their therapist as lacking the basic knowledge of CNM necessary to be effective, and 10% indicated their therapist encouraged their client to end their relationship on the basis of it being CNM ([Schechinger et al., 2018](#)).

Lack of Legal Protection

The CNM community continues to face widespread and persistent discrimination across a variety of services and accommodations, including marriage/domestic partnership, family leave, foster care, assisted reproduction, adoption, healthcare, insurance, hospital visitation, workplace, housing, and lending ([Cardoso in 2014](#); [Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021](#)). Despite the known negative impact of such discrimination on mental health, no laws in cities or states currently protect CNM families and relationships from discrimination. As a result, CNM individuals and families are without legal protections to defend themselves. The [Polyamory Legal Advocacy Coalition](#) (PLAC) is committed to promoting the rights of the CNM community and is [proud to have supported the rise of polyamorous partnership ordinances](#). PLAC worked closely with city officials to [pass the first three domestic partnership ordinances](#), which allow individuals to enter into a domestic partnership with multiple partners. PLAC is also actively working with city officials to pass the first non-discrimination ordinances in the United States.