Consensually nonmonogamous relationships are defined by explicit mutual agreements to have multiple emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationships. But is there really a type of person who engages in this type of relationship? And are these relationships actually lower in quality compared with monogamous relationships? Research has revealed several misconceptions about consensually nonmonogamous relationships and patterns of how others judge people in these relationships.

In this episode of the podcast, Amy C. Moors, psychologist who researches and teaches about LGBTQ+ issues, consensual non-monogamy, gender, and inclusion in higher education at the Kinsey Institute and Chapman University, demystifies common misconceptions about consensually nonmonogamous relationships. She explores this topic further in a recent article published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

Unedited transcript:

[00:00:14.050] – Ludmila Nunes

Consensually nonmonogamous relationships are defined by explicit mutual agreements to have multiple emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationships. Is there a type of person who engages in this type of relationship? Are these relationships lower in quality compared with monogamous relationships? What
are the consequences of engaging in consensually non monogamous relationships? Research has revealed several misconceptions about consensually non monogamy and patterns of how people in this type of relationship are judged. This is under the cortex. I am Ludmila Nunes with the Association for Psychological Science to speak about misconceptions about consensually non monogamous relationships. I have with me Amy Moors from Chapman University and the Kinsey Institute and author of a recent article published in Current Directions in Psychological Science. Amy, thank you so much for joining me today. Welcome to under the cortex.

[00:01:26.950] – Amy C. Moors

Thank you so much for having me.

[00:01:29.950] – Ludmila Nunes

So I read your article, and in this article, you talk about five specific misconceptions or myths that people believe about consensually non monogamous relationships. Do you want to start telling us what sparked your interest in this type of research and why do you think it’s important?

[00:01:52.950] – Amy C. Moors

Yeah, that’s a great starting place. I’m really interested in this idea that in our society and even in our science, we seem to be fine with the idea that platonic love is endless. Like, we can love multiple friends or family members, no moral panic ensues. If someone is like, hey, I have multiple best friends that I love or I love my mom or my dad or my dad’s, we’re fine with that type of love. But when it comes to romantic love in our society and even in our psychological science, there seems to be this idea that romantic love is limited, and if you long or lust for more than one person, that something must be wrong with you or wrong with your relationship. And I find this just really interesting because as a scientist, I had been taught at a young age that we’re trying to do objective research, we’re trying to understand patterns of human behavior. And at the same time, scientists kind of shy away from topics that they deem stigmatized or taboo. And one of those is consensual non monogamy. There is this idea that just a small number of people are doing it, but it turns out one out of five people have engaged in consensual non monogamy at some point during their life.

[00:03:11.920] – Amy C. Moors

And to put that into perspective, that’s as many people in the US. Who have a pet cat. So it’s a really common behavior, but we’re not taking it necessarily seriously in the scholarship. And so this paper was a way for me to communicate a really rapidly growing body of research on the topic of non monogamy and kind of help do some science communication and dispel some of these misconceptions that many people might have.

[00:03:40.550] – Ludmila Nunes

So do you think this might be an example, in which social norms are directly affecting what researchers are studying.
Oh, yes, social norms in terms of who gets hired and promoted or what topics. Even though universities are ostensibly founded on the idea of academic freedom, there is certain types of science that are viewed more favorably than other types of science, and that is even filtered into the way we obtain grant funding. And so I’ve definitely felt it in my career. And I know other people who study the topic of non monogamy or other stigmatized topics also feel it the dictation from social norms as well.

[00:04:22.370] – Ludmila Nunes

So let’s talk about these misconceptions that you identified. Yeah, I don’t know if you want to follow the order of the article.

[00:04:31.360] – Amy C. Moors

Sure, let’s do that.

[00:04:32.650] – Ludmila Nunes

Let’s do that. Okay, so let’s start the first one. The first misconception is that there is a type of person who engages in consensual non monogamy. So a type of person who’s more predisposed to engage in this type of relationship. What does the research say?

[00:04:52.960] – Amy C. Moors

Right. We have this idea that whoever is doing it couldn’t live in our neighborhood or attend our same church, or somehow this sense of otherness emerges. And to look into whether or not there were these big sociodemographic differences between who is engaged and who is not engaged, my colleagues and I at the Kinsey Institute conducted two different nationally representative surveys where we asked people if they’d ever been in a consensually non monogamous relationship. We provided a clear definition, and then we also asked people all about their identities and gender, race ethnicity. And we found that there were very few differences between people who had engaged in consensual non monogamy and those who had not, meaning that people from all walks of life, different races, ethnicities, religions, income levels, education backgrounds, where they live in the US. Their age, all of those things did not predict whether or not people had engaged in non monogamy. And then that research also replicated in a nationally representative sample of Canadians.

[00:06:00.930] – Ludmila Nunes

So the idea that people who engage in consensual non monogamy are different is a myth.

[00:06:09.010] – Amy C. Moors

Right? Turns out everyone’s doing it. Your grandmother might be into it, you might be into it. I don’t know everyone.

[00:06:17.130] – Ludmila Nunes
Also, another common misconception that you write about is that people try consensual non monogamy to fix that monogamous relationship, which, again, is this idea that people are just engaging in non monogamy because ultimately they want to fix what is the social norm, which is a monogamous relationship.

Right. And I hear this a lot. It’s even kind of just assumed that this is why people are engaging in non monogamy and not different other motives. And so Jessica Wood and colleagues a couple of years ago published a really interesting study where they asked over 500 people to describe the reasons why they were engaging in consensual non monogamy. So what were the motivations? And these people left all of these different reasons and not a single person mentioned that they’re engaging in consensual non monogamy or they had opened up their relationship to fix their formerly monogamous relationship. Instead. What all of these people were saying were kind of categorized within six different themes of motivations. So things like the idea that monogamy was too rigid or traditional was a motivation or sometimes people were saying practical motivations so they were in a long distance relationship so it made sense to have multiple partners or to have an open relationship. Other types of motivations were building a community nourishing the growth of themselves or their partners. And then the 6th theme was exploring sexual desires. So again, this starts to tell us that people have a variety of different motivations as to why they’re engaging in consensual non monogamy.

And it doesn’t seem like a main motivation is to fix their relationship.

So these are misconceptions that people and even researchers have about the people or the type of people who engage in consensual non monogamy. But you also talk about misconceptions about non monogamous relationships themselves. And your first example of that is the idea that people engaged in this type of relationship actually have poor quality relationships. That non monogamous relationships are worse than monogamous ones, right?

And that is replicated in some of my research on stigma and other scholars where we consistently find this idea that people perceive those engaged in consensual non monogamy as having really low quality relationships and being seen as unfit parents and not loving their partners and so on. And so to understand, are there actually differences on popular measures of relationship quality? My colleagues and I conducted one of the largest comparative studies to date where we gave people in monogamous and consensually non monogamous relationships upwards of almost twelve standardized kind of valid common measures that we use in relationship science to assess quality. And we found that there were very few differences between people who are self reporting in monogamous and non monogamous relationships on how their relationships are functioning. So people in both types of relationships reported similarly high levels of passionate love that they felt for their partners, similar levels of commitment and similar levels of relationship satisfaction. We did find a couple of differences. People engaged in
consensual non monogamy reported slightly higher levels of trust and satisfaction and lower levels of jealousy compared to people who practice monogamy. And then subsequently other researchers have replicated these findings also included other measures of relationship quality.

[00:10:20.890] – Amy C. Moors

So some other research has found that people engaged in consensual non monogamy report higher levels of positive conflict resolution strategies compared to people engaged in monogamy and also higher levels of secure attachment than people engaged in monogamy.

[00:10:38.990] – Ludmila Nunes

So these findings are really interesting to me because when we talked about a type of person who’s more likely to engage in non monogamous relationships I start thinking you probably need lower levels of jealousy, a more secure attachment to be comfortable and satisfied with these type of relationships. Would you say that’s a trend there?

[00:11:03.530] – Amy C. Moors

Yeah, I agree. I think that people who are engaging in non monogamy have to have a really robust toolkit for self soothing and, like kind of intrapersonal coping around jealousy or rumination and then also a really robust toolkit around interpersonal communication. And being transparent and direct, but empathetic about other people’s feelings because they’re managing, for lack of better words, multiple different bonds, and trying to figure out how to keep these relationships flourishing in a way that is healthy and sustainable.

[00:11:42.130] – Ludmila Nunes

So another myth that you talk about is this idea that people in consensually non monogamous relationships are more likely to engage in unsafe sex. And this is also a myth, right?

[00:11:57.720] – Amy C. Moors

Right. And on the surface level, it seems like this could be true. Research by Justin Le Miller and colleagues has found that people engaged in non monogamy do actually have more sexual partners than people who engage in monogamy. And so if you have more sexual partners, arguably you are at a higher risk for STI exposure. Although, very interestingly, if you ask people engaged in consensual non monogamy about their safer sex strategies so their condom use, their testing sharing results, it turns out people engaged in consensual non monogamy are implementing safer sex strategies at a really high rate. So they’re consistently using condoms for all different types of sex acts and correctly using them, especially when we compare them to another group of people who have multiple sexual partners. So people who say that they’re monogamous but they’re actually cheating on their partner. So now when you compare these two groups of people who have multiple sexual partners, one group is consensually, has these agreements to have multiple sexual partners and then the other group of people are it’s non consensual non monogamy, so they’re having an affair. It turns out that people engaged in consensual non monogamy are implementing safer sex strategies across the board.
And finally, the last myth or misconception you talk about is the idea that people in consensually non-monogamous relationships are bad parents.

Right? And so a researcher, Eli sheff a sociologist by training, she has been studying parents who engage in polyamory. So that’s a specific form of consensual non-monogamy. And she’s been following them and their kids since 1997. She actually did her dissertation on the topic of polyamory and parenting. And so over the years, she’s followed more than 175 parents and their kids over time and started to get an idea of what are the psychosocial outcomes of these kids. So she takes a different approach in her research than maybe a psychologist might. And she finds that the parents report a whole host of benefits of their family dynamics. So pooled resources in terms of financial resources and time, saying that their kids have multiple adult role models that are really positive. And then from the kids perspective, they’re saying things like they love all of this adult attention. So they particularly say that the benefits are they feel cared for and they have different people to drive them around or expose them to new hobbies and they just frankly really enjoy having all of these adults in their life. It does change when the kids get a bit older in middle school teenage years when they start to become aware of peer comparisons and that their family is engaging in a type of relationship that is likely different from their peers.

So they’ve probably had conversations with their parents at that point to maybe not disclose their relationship to avoid stigma or discrimination. But that isn’t saying that parents are unfit by any means. That’s just a reflection of societal norms and not actually having anything to do with their parents parenting style.

Exactly. And do you think that by exposing these misconceptions science and research will be more open to the study of non-monogamy, specifically consensual non-monogamy and what effects might that have for people in these type of relationships?

Right, yeah, it is my goal to communicate broadly and widely that there are options for people in terms of what relationship that they want to do and then also to help shift the field of psychology. I mean, I can’t do it all alone but I’m earnestly trying to make a difference where talking about these misconceptions. Doing this review piece is just one small piece of a larger project and career goal of mine is to help kind of shift the field of psychology to be more inclusive of diverse family structures. I’d like to see in the near future more consistent and better training for clinicians and therapists on the topic of non-monogamy, especially because it is so common. They’re going to see many people who engage in these relationships. And unfortunately, some of my other research has shown that many people engaged in non-monogamous relationships do not have a good experience in therapy based on their relationship, meaning that their therapist is judging them or telling them to even renounce their
relationship because they view it as bad, sick or immoral. And so I hope that having these frank conversations and continuing to study the topic of non monogamy is going to have some effect where psychologists and even social scientists more broadly are starting to consider these topics more seriously.

[00:17:09.920] – Amy C. Moors

The law is already moving that way. There are three places in the state of Massachusetts where people can get multi partner domestic partnerships. There’s also one municipality in the state of Massachusetts where there’s now antidiscrimination law around multi partner families or multipartner relationships where you can’t get fired from work on the basis of your relationship status. And we’re going to start to see more cities and municipalities across the US pass these types of policies and legislations. And so as scientists we should be studying aspects of what is happening on our society and understanding human behavior and helping move different legislation forward for those of us who are interested in the intersection of science and law.

[00:17:59.530] – Ludmila Nunes

Thank you so much, Amy. It was great speaking with you.

[00:18:03.480] – Amy C. Moors

Likewise. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:18:06.650] – Ludmila Nunes

This is Ludmila Nunes with APS. And I’ve been speaking to Amy Moors from Chapman University and the Kinsey Institute. If you want to know more about this research, visit psychologicalscience.org. Also follow us on Twitter and Instagram @psychscience.