

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Christopher Stults is an assistant professor of psychology at Baruch College and in the Health Psychology and Clinical Science Program at The Graduate Center, CUNY. His research is focused on LGBTQ+ health broadly with specific lines of research examining intimate partner violence and consensual non-monogamy in these populations. He is the principal investigator at the Baruch College Sexual and Gender Minority Health Lab. He is also a licensed psychologist in New York City.

Tanya Domi:

J. Stewart is a post-doctoral affiliate of the Relationship Health Research Team at Hunter College, CUNY and a graduate of the Applied Social and Community Psychology Program at North Carolina State University. Her research is guided by a rights-based approach to positive sexuality development and aims to improve health equity among sexually diverse youth. Specifically, she explores topics including sexual fluidity, sexual socialization, consensual non-monogamy, and HIV/AIDS.

Tanya Domi:

Today's guests are co-authors of a study, Consensual Non-Monogamy Relationship Rules Among Young Gay and Bisexual Men: A Dyadic Qualitative Analysis, published this year in the Archives of Sexual Behavior. In the field of psychology, there is a very strong emerging literature about the sexual health of gay men. This study focuses on relationship rules, the boundaries and understandings partners have about acceptable behaviors related to their consensual non-monogamous relationship associated with relationship functioning and sexual health risk among gay and bisexual men. Partnered young gay and bisexual men experience unique relational challenges and sexual health disparities. Thus understanding the nuances of relationship roles among young gay and bisexual men in consensual non-monogamous relationships is of particular importance.

Tanya Domi:

This current study sought to explore relationship rules among young gay and bisexual men in consensual non-monogamous relationships, including both those explicitly discussed and those implicitly assumed. Welcome to The Thought Project, Christopher Stults and J. Stewart, on this last day of Pride Month.

J Stewart:

Thank you so much for having us.

Tanya Domi:

So delighted to have both of you here. I would like to know what inspired both of you to study consensual non-monogamous relationships among young gay and bisexual men, and if you could, explain what was your methodology and the length of the study? Can we start with you J. Stewart because you were the lead author?

J Stewart:

Sure. Yeah, so I think my interest in consensual non-monogamy points to my general interest in identities and just kind of ways of living that sort of defy cultural norms and expectations. And I think consensual non-monogamy fits pretty neatly within that. And I suppose I'll let Chris take over the description of the study since it was really his baby in terms of the broader study.

Christopher Stults:

Of course. Sure. Well, I can speak a little bit about my interest in how I was motivated to pursue this study. Prior to coming to New York to pursue my graduate education at NYU, I was living in a town called Wilton Manors, which at least at the time was the second highest number of same-sex households in US outside of San Francisco. So a very gay, friendly gay centric town. But something that really stood out to me was that there was a lot of stigma around couples that were either open or poly. It'd be the sort of thing where you'd be out and about with your friends and you'd see a couple across the room and people would start to whisper and say things. Oh, I hear they're open or they're always cruising or this and that. And I was surprised for an otherwise such an open and kind of affirming place that that was a part of life that was still very much stigmatized and the door was closed still. So that was kind of what inspired me to pursue this research.

Christopher Stults:

And in terms of the methodology, so it's a qualitative study, meaning that instead of giving people, let's say surveys where they're filling out these questions and then we're computing these statistics or whatever. Instead, we're actually sitting down and interviewing them much in the same way that we're doing today and having a conversation. And then we take the transcripts of those interviews, transcribe them and then code them using a qualitative approach. So in total, we interviewed 20 people. They represented 10 dyads, 10 couples. As it happens, they were all in what we call either open relationships or monogamish relationships, meaning that they could have sex with other partners, but only while their primary partner was present.

Christopher Stults:

We would have been interested in interviewing poly couples if there were any, but we just didn't have any that were interested in participating in the study, which could be an artifact of the fact that these young men were all about age 22, 23. So that very well may be sort of like a developmental thing rather than some lack of interest in the long run.

Tanya Domi:

Interesting. And let's just at the beginning of this conversation, like give us some of the key takeaways of this study.

J Stewart:

So Chris conducted all the interviews and really asked a variety of questions about their relationship. And one of the things that really jumped out at me in participating in the initial coding and going over the transcripts was the various rules and agreements that these couples had that kind of guided how they practiced their relationship. And so Chris was kind enough to let me lead some secondary analysis surrounding their relationship rules. And so what we found was three main themes regarding relationship rules and agreements. One category had to do with rules regarding how they would select

their extradyadic or in other words, casual partner. So this could be like whether or not ex-boyfriends could be casual partners or friends and acquaintances, strangers, things like that.

J Stewart:

The next category of rules that we found were rules regarding the actual extradyadic sex. So this could be things concerned with sexual safety. So all 20 participants in this study did report that they required condom use during extradyadic sex. And so it could also be things like no kissing or other rules that were meant to sort of limit the amount of intimacy that they could develop with casual partners. And then the last set of rules had to do with how they would manage their primary relationship. So this one really interesting rule that came up in this was prioritization of the primary dyad. So I think it was about half of the participants had this rule. And what this meant was that despite whatever casual sex or casual partners was happening in their relationship, they were really committed to prioritizing their primary relationship above all else.

J Stewart:

Other rules that fell within that category were things like veto power. So allowing their other partner to veto a certain partner or activity that could be happening. So, yeah. So those were the kind of three main categories. Chris, do you want to add to that?

Christopher Stults:

Yeah, I think the only thing I would add is that as you mentioned, condom use was a rule that was basically required by everybody, or at least a rule that was endorsed by everybody. And it's worth noting that these interviews were conducted in 2015. And so this was before PrEP, which is a medication you can take every day to prevent HIV infection, was really widely available or widely used by people. So I would imagine that that condom use rule might look different if we were to conduct these interviews in 2021 where a lot of young gay and bi men are on PrEP as a means of preventing HIV infection. But other than that, I think a lot of these rules would probably hold up if we were to conduct these interviews today contemporaneously.

Tanya Domi:

One of the rules that emerged as you both explained to me in a previous conversation between us was about there's some reticence and resistance to bringing a prior boyfriend back into the dyad. Can you guys address that?

J Stewart:

Yeah, I think that rule really pointed to this broader theme that we saw come up about a desire to limit the level of intimacy that could develop with casual partners. And a lot of people felt that ex-boyfriends kind of came with this preexisting level of intimacy and for that reason would be completely off limits. The interesting thing that I think the qualitative methodology really allowed us to uncover was while several people reported that ex-boyfriends were not allowed, some people did report that ex-boyfriends were allowed. And what the qualitative methodology allowed us to see was that regardless of what rule people had, they felt really emphatic about their rule. It was kind of like the obvious choice to a lot of them. So I thought that that level of nuance that that qualitative methodology allowed us to see was really interesting.

Tanya Domi:

Do you have anything to add Chris?

Christopher Stults:

Agreed. I think what's really cool about the qualitative approach is that like J. was saying, you can kind of follow up with them and ask them why they maybe chose the rule. I think as J. pointed out, a lot of that had to do with managing the level of intimacy. It was interesting because they would make the same rule or would be argued in two different directions. Like there would be one couple that would say, "Well, we don't hook up with our exes because that's just crossing a line. That's getting a little too close for comfort," or some version of that. But then other people would say, "These are people we know. And like we trust these people. And like if my partner is going to hook up with anybody, it'd rather be somebody that I know is not like a threat or somebody that's like an ax murderer or whatever."

Christopher Stults:

So it was really interesting how they would take the opposite ends of the argument to justify whatever their rule was. But the thing that also stood out too was just how thoughtful many of them were about these things. Like they had clearly given it some thought. Some of them had had a bit of trial and error in reaching whatever rules and agreements that they had. And so they had a rationale for what they were doing. It didn't usually appear to be anything that was sort of slapdash and not thought through.

Tanya Domi:

So very interesting. So can you also both of you address your findings with respect to reported rules that were not endorsed by their partner? But you did find a very few contradictory discrepancies in partner's reports. In other words, you interviewed the dyad and you found very few discrepancies in terms of how they agreed or disagreed on the rules. And that's also interesting, I think, because when you talked about the stigma, Christopher, this kind of transparency between the partners seemed to yield to a better functioning relationship. Could you address that?

Christopher Stults:

Sure. So the one thing I should add is that we interviewed the partners separately. And oftentimes, I wouldn't go and like let's say revisit the previous partner's transcript when I interviewed the next partner. So it wasn't an effort to kind of like cross-check when I was meeting with them. So it's possible that if I had actually asked them, "Hey, listen, what about this rule or that rule?" That they might've said, "Oh yeah, we have that rule too."

Christopher Stults:

The way that the qualitative interview works is that it's very open-ended. So I would ask them something along the lines of like, some couples have rules or agreements about how they manage their relationship. Do you have any rules? And then they would just start talking. They would start listing off the ones that came to mind. It's possible where two partners didn't list all of the same rules, it's not that they didn't necessarily have those rules as a couple. Some rules were just more salient to one person than the other or one person's more thorough maybe than the other person.

Christopher Stults:

And really, there were only a few instances where there were discrepant rules. Where one partner said like, "We have to disclose when we have sex with another person to the other person." And the other

person said, "Oh, no, we don't have to disclose it. It's only if we're ever asked." And I remember that one kind of being like, "Ooh, that seems like that could potentially be a headache down the road." But yeah, by and large, it seemed like there was quite a bit of concordance between the two partners in terms of what they perceived the rules to be. Did you want to add to that J. because I know that that was like a really key element of the paper that you worked on?

J Stewart:

Yeah, I think just kind of reiterating what you said about some rules being potentially more salient to each partner, which is potentially an interesting avenue for future research. But the other thing I wanted to mention is what we saw in a lot of these rules were that they operated on a more implicit basis. Participants described that they hadn't actually explicitly discussed some of these rules with their partner, but that it was just kind of an assumed thing.

Tanya Domi:

[crosstalk 00:14:54] understand.

J Stewart:

Yeah, which was interesting because sometimes there would be a fair amount of concordance in implicit rules. So perhaps they're finding other ways to communicate about them without actually communicating about them. But yeah, so I thought that that was an interesting aspect of it. And then also despite that the fact that a lot of people did report rules that their partners did not mirror, again, I think there were only six instances where partners actively contradicted each other.

Tanya Domi:

Very interesting. So how do you think... I'd like both of you to respond to this. How do you think the findings of this study aligns with or contrasts with societal perceptions of consensual non-monogamy in others? You opened, Christopher, talking about stigma and this is where there's rulemaking and your findings yield to some very interesting conclusions. Could you address that?

Christopher Stults:

Sure. Yeah, I think one way in which this potentially contrasts with, I think, societal stereotypes is that the partners in these types of relationships don't truly love each other and don't care about each other. I think there's this kind of misconception that like, why I could never do that with my partner. Therefore these people must not really love each other or care about each other. This isn't necessarily... I guess I was about to say this isn't a code, but it actually is.

Christopher Stults:

One of the things we coded for was this idea of prioritizing the relationship. And I think most of the couples in some way, shape, or form had a way of making sure that they were protecting and making a priority their primary relationship. I think if maybe more people out there in the world knew that, they might have a different impression of CNM relationships broadly. That these are in fact, people that care very much about each other and they're going to great lengths to make sure that they're protecting their partner and the relationship as a whole.

Christopher Stults:

And I think the second one might be, I think there's probably a stereotype that these types of relationships are very, for lack of a better word, promiscuous or slutty or something like that. And perhaps these people are having more sexual partners than a monogamous couple, but I didn't get the sense at all that these people were having a greater number of partners than the average single person or the average person that's sexually active in their early 20s. These are folks that are going to school, they're going to work, they've got family commitments, they've got commitments in their relationships.

Christopher Stults:

So it's not some sort of like wild free for all where... These are people that are being very thoughtful and very intentional about their sex lives and they're recognizing, I think in a lot of cases, that we're young. Maybe this is one of our first relationships. We still feel like we've got some sexual exploration to do, but we don't want to blow up this relationship just because of that. Why not control for that? Why not build it into the structure of our relationship so that we can maintain and improve upon this relationship while at the same time recognizing our own need for sexual exploration or sexual development and the like? So those are the two that stand out to me most straight away.

Tanya Domi:

And J.?

J Stewart:

Yeah, I would just add to everything that Chris just said. I think that going along the lines of this idea that CNM relationships are just free for all and kind of a reflection of not really caring about the relationship or your partner, I think that the reports that we saw point to that these are highly communicative relationships and they really thought through their expectations and boundaries with their partner in really very articulate and intentional ways. And I think to me, I got the impression that they generally have a very deep love and respect for their partners.

J Stewart:

And I would also add to the idea about a lot of people think that these more promiscuous relationships obviously carry more sexual risk. And again, while there is a level of sexual risk that is heightened by just the mere inclusion of more partners, I think even in instances where their condom use rule was violated, we also saw them report that violation to their partner. So my point being that there's an additional level of accountability that was sort of built in where if their rule was broken, their partner would also be on them to make sure that they were getting tested and taking the proper precautions that might not be there if it was just a single person or perhaps someone cheating in a sense. So to boil it all down, I think that what we saw in this study goes against a lot of the broad stereotypes about CNM relationships.

Tanya Domi:

Preconceptions. Yeah. So this is, I think really pertinent. How should this study impact clinical work like this population? Do you want to start Christopher?

Christopher Stults:

Sure. I think the first way in which it should impact clinical practice is that I would hope that any practitioners out there that are either working with people in CNM relationships or interested in

working with people in CNM relationships, read this paper and papers like it to dispel any of their own misconceptions or potentially biased attitudes towards CNM relationships. Because I do have a small private practice and I see couples and individuals who are in CNM relationships and they often report to me kind of like horror stories from other therapists that either made them feel shameful for being in a CNM relationship or implied that they didn't really love their partner or that sort of thing. So I hope that at the very least that people read this and listen to this and start to maybe unpack any biased attitudes that they might have towards these types of relationships.

Christopher Stults:

And then the second thing is I hope that... And I say this to my clients all the time is when it comes to CNM relationships, more communication is always better than less communication. And that in some ways, you could and probably should talk through a lot of this stuff to the point where it feels redundant or unnecessary. But making sure that you're both on the same page, that you're unpacking any sort of feelings that come up after a certain experience, revising the rules and agreements as you need to as you realize either things are working or not working for you.

Christopher Stults:

And I think clinicians can be allies in that process. I think clinicians can help couples or individuals to figure out, okay, what are the things that you're really comfortable with? What are the things that you're not comfortable with? What are your goals? Like what's the reason that you're doing this? Are you doing this because you and your partner, like I was talking about earlier, are just young and developmentally, this is a point in your life where you want to be more explorative sexually, or are you doing this because you and your partner have mismatched schedules and that's impacting your sex life in some way, or are you doing this to address some sort of deficiency in your relationship?

Christopher Stults:

Because that's the one area I would say, I think for a lot of couples, this can be icing and a cherry on top of the cake. But if there's a problem with the actual cake, you should maybe address the cake first and then get to the fun stuff later. If you're doing this because you feel lonely, if you're doing this or if you're interested in doing this because you feel lonely or if you're interested in doing this because there's some really fundamental mismatch between you and your partner, you should probably talk about those things first before jumping into the world of consensual non-monogamy.

Tanya Domi:

Interesting. And J. Stewart, what are your thoughts?

J Stewart:

I'm not a clinician, but I am a researcher. And I think one of the things that we did at the beginning of this study that I think would be relevant towards clinicians was we really were reflective about what any of our potential biases might be. And I think by considering them openly, it allows you to be really mindful of if, in our instance, when we're coding something, if we're coding it with these preexisting conceptions in mind, and it enabled us to better challenge them if they were to arise. And then the other thing that I would say is if a client says that they have a partner, don't make any assumptions about what that partnership looks like or doesn't look like. And I think it's really important to be aware that people have relationships in all types of shapes and sizes, so to speak.

Tanya Domi:

Exactly. Well, I wanted to ask you J., what are you working on now and what's next in your future?

J Stewart:

Yeah, so I am going to be starting a post-doctoral fellowship in the Relationship Health Research Team and-

Tanya Domi:

At Hunter. Hunter College.

J Stewart:

At Hunter, sorry. It's at Hunter and joint with Cornell as well. And what I hope to develop in my research is a line of research that's concerned with the role of personal values and how those personal values interact with relationship dynamics to shape HIV and sexual risk and prevention behavior. So that is what's next for me.

Tanya Domi:

Congratulations.

J Stewart:

Thanks.

Tanya Domi:

And you get to stay in the CUNY family.

J Stewart:

Yeah, I'm super excited about that.

Tanya Domi:

So Christopher, I happened to know, thanks to your colleague at Baruch, that you're also recruiting participants for an online study of transgender and gender non-conforming young adults right now. And I guess you have a tweet out that allows people to sign up. And we can share that, but can you tell us a little bit about that work you're doing right now?

Christopher Stults:

Sure. And thanks for sharing that tweet. We're actually conducting an online study of transgender and gender non-binary young adults. And the focus of the study is fairly broad. We're looking at a lot of different both risk factors, as well as factors that promote wellbeing among this young adult population. My primary line of research is related to intimate partner violence. So one of the things that we're asking about in the survey is related to intimate partner violence. And we're asking not only about, I think, what a lot of us might have in our minds when we think of intimate partner violence like physical violence or people being verbally abusive, but we're also asking questions that are specific to a trans or non-binary experience because it may look a little different and the type of abuse, verbal or otherwise, might be a little different for somebody that identifies as trans or non-binary.

Christopher Stults:

And then we are also asking a lot about, questions that have to do with things that promote either resilience or grit or wellbeing. So that's also included in the study because we recognize that a lot of times when we're studying sexual and gender minority populations, we ask all about the negative outcomes, mental health and otherwise, but we're not always asking those same number of questions about things that are going well for these people or ways in which being a sexual gender minority person actually enhances and strengthens their life. So that's the current study.

Tanya Domi:

That's terrific. And we will share that with the podcast when we publish the podcast next week and we'll share out your tweets so people can sign up. And this is a great way to end the Pride Month talking about sexual and mental wellbeing of the LGBTQ+ population. I want to thank both of you for being here today.

Christopher Stults:

Thank you.

J Stewart:

Thank you so much for having us.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project, and thanks to our guests, Professor Christopher Stults of Baruch College and The Graduate Center, CUNY, and Dr. J. Stewart, an affiliate of the Relationship Health Research Team at Hunter College. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.