



Loving in Consensual Non-Monogamies: Challenging the Validity of Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale

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Abstract

In recent decades, Consensual Non-Monogamies—and polyamory, in particular—have increased in popularity, diversifying the panorama of intimacies stretching far beyond the monogamous heterosexual couple. Today, CNMs constitute an interesting subject of study, worthy of attention both theoretically and empirically. However, most of the psychometric tools developed to study the concept of love were not developed specifically for this type of relationships. One of the most commonly used of these tools is Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (STLS), which measures love as a function of three main components: Intimacy, Passion, and Decision/Commitment. Although STLS is widely used in social and psychological research and has been applied to various populations, it has never been used to measure love in CNMs. This article discusses the results of a questionnaire based on STLS administered to 558 individuals from 33 different countries. At the time of completing the questionnaire, each respondent had at least two sexual and/or romantic relationships with the consent of all of those involved. While STLS is validated in studies of people in monogamous relationships, confirmatory factor analysis suggests that it is not an appropriate tool for our sample of consensually non-monogamous individuals. This article seeks to explain this finding using qualitative data from an earlier study exploring how people who engage in forms of consensual non-monogamy define love and relationships.

Keywords Love · Intimate relationships · Consensual Non-Monogamies · Polyamory · Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale

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Introduction

Several influential sociologists (e.g. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 1999; Giddens, 1992) have identified the processes of individualization and de-traditionalization, along with increased self-reflexivity, as the elements that have played the most significant role in changes around intimacy in contemporary life. While some authors (e.g. Bauman, 2001, 2003; Hochschild, 1983, 2003; Illouz, 2007) have suggested a decline in intimacy, highlighting the weakening of solid bonds and the commercialization of feelings, others offer a more positive interpretation of these changes. For example, Giddens (1992) defines confluent love as the type of love that has entered the mainstream in late modernity. According to him, confluent love differs from romantic love primarily because it requires greater equality in gender relations (women are more autonomous, while emotional management is more equally divided). Confluent love is connected to an idea of relationship that Giddens calls “pure relationship”, which is more contingent and open to transformation—as opposed to the myth of eternal romantic love—and is based upon open communication and mutual sharing. Furthermore, this type of relationship is not necessarily sexually monogamous or exclusively heterosexual. Although Giddens’ theory has been criticized by various authors (Bauer, 2014; Carrington, 1999; Carter, 2007; Jamieson, 1999; Klesse, 2007),¹ we use the analytic concept of pure relationship here as we can still see its utility in understanding consensual non-monogamous relationships, which form the subject of this article.

Other authors have also identified a transition from universal, monolithic definitions with set boundaries—typical of modernistic thought—to pluralistic, nuanced and multifaceted definitions (e.g. Plummer, 1995). Within the realm of sexuality, this trend coincides with a greater propensity to question sexual identities in a broad sense (gender identity and expression, sexual and affective orientation, relational orientation/style) and a greater openness towards transformations. Roseneil (2000), for example, identifies “queering tendencies” as the set of trends that contribute to questioning fixed identities, both for heterosexual and homosexual people (e.g. gay men who have sex with women, lesbians who have sex with men, bisexuality and transgenderism that enter into the LGBT+ agenda, etc.), and to increasing the complexity of the concept of family, such as step-families and recomposed families, or LGBT+ parenting. Roseneil also highlights the tendency of an increasing number of people to experiment with non-conventional sexual and/or intimate relationships.

In this article we focus on one of these multiple relational forms which diverges from the monogamous couple: Consensual Non-Monogamies (CNMs). CNMs is an umbrella term used to define relationships that can be sexually and/or affectively non-exclusive, in which all persons involved are aware of this possibility and consent

¹ The criticisms of the pure relationship—and of the theories of de-traditionalization more generally—relate mainly to the risk of neglecting the still existing gender inequalities and of using a one-dimensional concept of power (based on gender), disregarding other axes of power, such as class and race. We do not enter into the merits of these criticisms here not because we do not find them of interest, but because in this context we are interested in presenting the “pure relationship” as a basis for the development of the polyamorous theory.

to it. This definition is similar to that commonly used for polyamory, but we have chosen to use a broader term in order to include people who do not feel comfortable identifying as “polyamorous” or using the term “polyamory” to describe their relationship. In addition to polyamory, CNMs can include swinging, open relationships and less well-defined forms, such as those referred to as relationship anarchy.²

In recent decades, CNMs—and polyamory, in particular—have also aroused some interest in academic literature. The first groundbreaking publications were a double special issue in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Munson & Stelbourn, 1999) and two chapters in *The State of Affairs* (Duncombe et al., 2004), by Jamieson (2004) and by Heaphy et al. (2004). In 2005 the first international academic conference on polyamory took place in Hamburg, followed by a special issue of the journal *Sexualities* dedicated to the same topic (Haritaworn et al., 2006). This was followed by several postgraduate dissertations, journal articles, monographs and, in 2010, the first edited collection on consensual non-monogamies which combined research and theory (Barker & Langdrige, 2010). The biennial *Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies Conference* took place in Lisbon in 2015—ten years after the Hamburg meeting—and then in Vienna in 2017 and in Barcelona in 2019. There was also a special issue of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science* arising out of the second NMCIC (En-Griffiths et al., 2018). Lastly, in 2021 the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior* also dedicated a special section to CNMs (Hamilton et al., 2021), and another special issue focusing on parenting practices has been published for *Sexualities* (Klesse et al., 2022).

The roots of the polyamorous community can be traced back to the geeky, sci-fi/fantasy, alternative spirituality and technology community of the San Francisco Bay area in the sixties, but the term polyamory was coined in the nineties, when the community developed specific values and a specific vocabulary. Anapol (2010) speaks of “new sexual ethics” of the polyamorous community and identifies the following as its core values: honesty, commitment, agreements and decision-making, integrity, and equity. With regard to vocabulary, the polyamorous community also coined new terms to indicate new ways of experimenting with and expressing relationships (Ritchie & Barker, 2006), such as “metamour” (a partner’s partner), or “compersion” (the feeling of empathetic happiness that comes from seeing your partner happy or joyful, especially with another partner).

People who experience forms of CNM challenge various social normativities. One of these is Mononormativity (Pieper & Bauer, 2005), which identifies the set of cultural and institutional norms and beliefs which reinforce the idea that monogamy is “normal” and “natural”. Furthermore, CNMs challenge the Relationship Escalator, defined by Gahran (2017) as “the standard by which most people gauge whether an intimate relationship is significant, serious, good, healthy, committed or worthy

² Relationship anarchy can be defined as the philosophy or practice in which people are seen to be free to engage in relationships that are not bound by rules, aside from those mutually agreed by the people involved; essentially, it can be distinguished from polyamory in that it is more radically non-hierarchical and refuses to define relationships with labels such as “just friends”, “in a relationship”, and so on (Anapol, 2010). The term—coined by Nordgren (2012)—and the concept originate from and align with anarchist thought but have also spread in the polyamorous world with a depoliticized meaning.

of effort” (p. 19). This standard usually coincides with a set of steps that the relationship must go through, more or less chronologically ordered and that may have slight variations depending on the society of reference (e.g. get to know each other, start dating, define themselves as a couple, introduce the new partner to friends and family, move in together, get married, have children). Moreover, they challenge Amatonormativity, which includes “the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, (...) that it is a universally shared goal, and (...) that it *should* be aimed at in preference to other relationship types” (Brake, 2012, pp. 88–89, original emphasis).

Various studies have also highlighted that people who experience CNMs show greater tendency to identify their sexuality in non-dichotomous and non-heteronormative ways (Manley et al., 2015), greater flexibility and greater adaptability to changes within the relationship (for example, from sexual relationship to non-sexual relationship) (Sheff, 2013) or greater acceptance of the end of romantic relationships (Sheff, 2015).

As an example of transformations of intimacy in contemporary Western societies, CNM relationships are gaining increasing attention and constitute an important subject of study from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view. However, most of the tools available to researchers for studying love were not developed specifically for CNM relationships. Accordingly, one of the questions to be answered by the research concerns the usefulness and validity of the existing tools when applied to relationships that differ from the traditional monogamous couple. In this article, we will focus in particular on one of the most commonly used theories in recent decades in love studies: the Triangular Theory of Love (TTL).

The TTL was formulated by the North American psychologist and psychometrician Robert J. Sternberg (1986, 1988, 1997, 2006; Sternberg & Barnes 1989). The theory holds that different kinds of loving relationship can be understood, and differentiated, on the basis of three main components: *Intimacy*, *Passion*, and *Decision/Commitment*. These three components can be imagined metaphorically and represented visually as the vertices of a triangle. As Sternberg points out (2006), the three components correspond fairly well to people’s implicit theories of love (Aron & Westbay, 1996). Sternberg (2006, p. 185, our emphasis) defines the three components as follows:

Intimacy refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships. It thus includes those feelings that give rise, essentially, to the experience of warmth in a loving relationship (...).

Passion refers to the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships. The passion component includes those sources of motivational and other forms of arousal that lead to the experience of passion in a loving relationship (...).

Decision/commitment refers, in the short-term, to the decision that one loves a certain other, and in the long-term, to one’s commitment to maintain that love. These two aspects of the decision/commitment component do not necessarily go together, in that one can decide to love someone without being committed to the love in the long-term, or one can be committed to a

relationship without acknowledging that one loves the other person in the relationship.

To measure these three components, Sternberg developed a scale, known as Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (STLS), consisting of 45 items (or 36 in the short version): 15 for each of the three dimensions. Each item is a statement according to which respondents are asked to rate their agreement in relation to their own loving relationship on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). A number of studies found high levels of correlation between STLS and other measures of love (Acker & Davis, 1992; Chojnacki, 1990; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Levy & Davis, 1988; Whitley, 1993). Moreover, Sternberg himself (1997) demonstrated that both versions of the scale showed satisfactory subscale reliabilities and overall scale reliability for his data. However, several studies have obtained inconsistent outcomes with regard to the proposed factorial structure (Acker & Davis, 1992; Chojnacki, 1990; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986, 1989; Whitley, 1993).

The studies that have used the TTL and STLS thus far have focused on relationships between adults (Acker & Davis, 1992), adolescents and young people (Lemieux & Hale, 1999; Overbeek et al., 2007), university students (Chojnacki, 1990; Fletcher et al., 2000) and the elderly (Sumter et al., 2013). There have been studies on both long-lasting and stable relationships (Fletcher et al., 2000; Lemieux & Hale, 2000) and casual sexual relationships (Rodrigue et al., 2018), in Western and Eastern cultural contexts (Gao, 2001; Ng & Cheng, 2010; Sorokowski et al., 2021).

All of these studies involved heterosexual romantic relationships. However, the Triangular Theory of Love has been shown to be valid since its origins also for studying different forms of love, such as love for parents or children, for siblings, or for close friends (Sternberg, 1997). It has even been used to describe the love for God (Dhamija et al., 2018) and the love felt by musicians for their musical instrument (Sternberg et al., 2023).

All of these studies referred to the analytical aspects of the Triangular Theory of Love (in particular, the three components of intimacy, passion and commitment), but some used alternative scales to STLS. Indeed, as mentioned above, STLS has sometimes given inconsistent results with regard to the proposed factor structure.

To address the issue of the rather inconsistent body of previous psychometric research regarding STLS, Sorokowski et al. (2021) conducted a large-scale, cross-cultural study involving 7332 participants from 25 different countries, including non-Western countries. The study tested the cultural universality of STLS, appearing to confirm it. However, this study, too, focused on people in (presumably) monogamous romantic relationships.

These data led us to formulate our main research question, namely whether one of the most widely used psychometric instruments for measuring love components—Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale—demonstrated the same statistical robustness for CNMs as it did for other relationships.

Since there have, thus far, been no studies applying STLS to non-monogamous populations, our main objective is to:

Research Question 1 Verify the validity of the scale in the study of CNM relationships.

Additionally, we aim to:

RQ2 Investigate the socio-demographic characteristics of people engaged in CNM (e.g. gender, orientation, age, etc.).

Methods

The aim of the study was to collect quantitative data on the perception of love among persons experiencing forms of CNM, integrating the results with qualitative data previously collected through interviews and participant observation by one of the authors.

For the purposes of this study, we administered the full 45-item STLS scale. To recruit participants, we posted the questionnaire on 27 different Facebook groups and Facebook or Instagram pages dedicated to polyamory, CNMs or similar practices where we could find people engaging in CNMs (e.g. tantra groups, cuddle party groups,³ etc.). In some cases, we arranged to have the page or group organizers post the questionnaire on our behalf. The questionnaires translated by Sorokowski et al. (2021) into four languages were used in addition to the original English version. The language distribution of the groups/pages that hosted the questionnaire was as follows: 11 Facebook groups in English (one for the city of Berlin, one Irish group, one US group, one for the whole of Europe and seven more general groups that did not indicate a specific geographical area); eight Spanish-language Facebook groups (three in Spain and five in Latin America); two Italian-language Facebook groups; two German-language Facebook groups; two Francophone Facebook groups (both in France); one Facebook page in English and the Instagram page of an Italian activist. The inclusion criterion for respondents was that they had at least two sexual and/or affective relationships at the time of completing the questionnaire. Group administrators' permission was sought before posting the link to the questionnaire.⁴ As an incentive and a small reward for participating, respondents who completed the questionnaire received a graphic representation of their responses by email, i.e. a diagram with two triangles representing the two relationships X and Y they were asked to consider when responding. In the same email, participants received other diagrams representing "typical" loves drawn from Sternberg's work (for one's mother, father, partner, friend).

³ A cuddle party is an event where the participants are allowed (but not obliged) to exchange non-sexual physical contact. All contact must be consensual, and precise rules for initiating contact are usually established beforehand.

⁴ We asked a total of 67 groups or pages for permission to post the link, but only 27 agreed.

Table 1 Language

| Language | N | % |
|----------|-----|------|
| English | 317 | 56.8 |
| Italian | 114 | 20.4 |
| French | 81 | 14.5 |
| Spanish | 27 | 4.8 |
| German | 19 | 3.4 |

Data were collected during the period from September 13, 2021 to January 22, 2022. A total of 558 questionnaires were fully completed, including 317 in English, 114 in Italian, 81 in French, 27 in Spanish and 19 in German (see Table 1).

Respondents resided in 33 countries on all seven continents: 145 in the United States, 116 in Italy, 69 in France, 42 in Germany, 31 in the United Kingdom, 30 in Canada, 14 in Australia, 12 in Argentina, 11 in the Netherlands, 11 in Switzerland, ten in Spain, eight in New Zealand, seven in Belgium, seven in Mexico, six in Sweden, five in Ireland, four in Austria, four in South Africa, three in India, three in Colombia, two in Denmark, two in the Philippines, two in Greece, two in Poland, two in Portugal, two in Peru, two in Romania, and one each in Finland, Iceland, Japan, Malaysia, Norway, and Oman.

We chose to recruit international respondents as we were interested in diversifying our sample and attempting to avoid collecting data only from the group of people identified by Henrich et al. (2010) as WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic). The imbalance between the number of respondents in the US and Italy and those in other countries can be explained by the fact that polyamory originated in the United States (and is therefore presumably more common there), while Italy is the home country of the researchers, who were already known among the polyamory community, which encouraged a larger number of people to complete the questionnaire. Our focus was not to compare different cultural contexts but to obtain a heterogeneous sample in order to check that the validity (or invalidity) of STLS was not linked to a specific national culture.

Furthermore, the studied population is difficult to reach as it is still surrounded by social stigmas (Conley et al., 2017; Hutzler et al., 2016). The decision to disseminate the questionnaire across the world was therefore also influenced by the desire to obtain a sufficient number of responses for the analysis.

The results of the questionnaire analysis will be integrated with the analysis of qualitative data (from semi-structured interviews and participant observation) collected by Braida (2020) between October 2017 and July 2018 from an Italian sample of 60 people who had or had had at least two simultaneous intimate relationships with the consent of all persons involved.

Table 2 Age

| | Mean | Median | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|-----|------|--------|------|---------|---------|
| Age | 34.4 | 32 | 9.65 | 16 | 70 |

Table 3 Respondent's Gender / Partner X's Gender / Partner Y's Gender

| Gender | Respondent (N, %) | X (N, %) | Y (N, %) |
|------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Woman | 329 (59%) | 161 (28.9%) | 193 (34.6%) |
| Man | 123 (22%) | 337 (60.4%) | 299 (53.6%) |
| Non-Binary | 106 (19%) | 60 (10.8%) | 66 (11.8%) |

Table 4 Sexual orientation

| Sexual orientation | N | % |
|--------------------|-----|------|
| Homosexual | 25 | 4.5 |
| Heterosexual | 159 | 28.5 |
| Plurisexual | 361 | 64.7 |
| Other | 13 | 2.3 |

Results

All descriptives are presented in Tables 1 thru 11. The socio-demographic data provide some useful information on the characteristics of our sample. Age ranges from 16 to 70 years, with a mean of 34.4, a median of 32 and a standard deviation of 9.65 (Table 2).

Women account for 59% of the respondents; interestingly, 19% of the respondents report a non-binary gender identity. The majority of the respondents had relationships with men (60.4% for partner X and 53.6% for partner Y), but a significant number of partners also have non-binary gender identity (10.8% for X and 11.8% per Y) (Table 3).

Another feature of our sample is that a remarkable 64.7% identified as pluri-sexual, namely they may be attracted to more than one gender (Table 4).

As regards relationship style (Table 5), respondents who define themselves as having more than one relationship that also entails emotional/affective involvement (55.4% polyamorous, 22% consensual or ethical non-monogamous, 14.5% relationship anarchists) far outnumber those whose non-exclusivity is entirely sexual (3.9% in open relationships). A further 1.4% define their style as monogamous, despite having more than one consensual relationship at the time of the survey.

In general, relationships with partner X were longer-lasting than those with partner Y (38.5% from one to five years, 26% from five to ten years, 17.6% over ten years for X; as against 34.9% less than six months, 16.2% from six months to one year, 32.7% from one to five years for Y) (Table 6).

Table 5 Relationship style self-definition

| Relationship style | N | % |
|------------------------------------|-----|------|
| Consensual or ethical non-monogamy | 123 | 22 |
| Polyamory | 309 | 55.4 |
| Relationship anarchy | 81 | 14.5 |
| Open relationship | 22 | 3.9 |
| Monogamy | 8 | 1.4 |
| Other | 15 | 2.7 |

Table 6 Relationship Duration with X/with Y

| Duration | X (N, %) | Y (N, %) |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Less than 6 months | 50 (9%) | 194 (34.9%) |
| 6 months-1 year | 50 (9%) | 90 (16.2%) |
| 1–5 years | 215 (38.5%) | 182 (32.7%) |
| 5–10 years | 145 (26%) | 53 (9.5%) |
| More than 10 years | 98 (17.6%) | 37 (6.7%) |

Table 7 X/Y as primary?

| Defined as primary? | X (N, %) | Y (N, %) |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Yes | 301 (53.9%) | 83 (15%) |
| No | 257 (46.1%) | 472 (85%) |

Table 8 How often do you see X/Y?

| Frequencies | X (N, %) | Y (N, %) |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Every day or almost | 269 (48.2%) | 74 (13.3%) |
| 3–4 times a week | 74 (13.3%) | 65 (11.6%) |
| 1–2 times a week | 101 (18.1%) | 174 (31.2%) |
| 1–2 times a month | 51 (9.1%) | 122 (21.9%) |
| Less than once a month | 24 (4.3%) | 77 (13.8%) |
| Other | 39 (7%) | 46 (8.2%) |

Partner X is more frequently defined as the “primary” (Balzarini et al., 2019b) partner (53.9% versus 15% for Y) (Table 7) and is more often seen on a daily or almost daily basis (48.2% as opposed to 13.3% for Y) (Table 8).

Turning to the STLS scores (Tables 9, 10), those that come closest to the ones reported by Sorokowski et al. (2021) are the Intimacy scores (especially for partner X), while the Passion and Decision/Commitment scores are around one point lower (5.77–7.01 for Passion; 6.63–7.75 for Decision/Commitment).

We checked all analyses for gender, sexual orientation, and age and found no statistically significant differences. Our data were subjected to confirmatory factor

Table 9 Three dimensions X/Y

| Dimensions | X (M, SD) | Y (M, SD) |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Intimacy | 7.83 (1.54) | 7.09 (1.72) |
| Passion | 5.86 (1.72) | 5.69 (1.79) |
| Decision/Commitment | 7.11 (1.75) | 6.15 (2.06) |

Table 10 Mean scores three dimensions: comparison with Sorokowski et al.

| Dimensions | Our study (M, SD) | Sorokowski et al. (M, SD) |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Intimacy | 7.46 (1.63) | 7.78 (1.17) |
| Passion | 5.77 (1.75) | 7.01 (1.5) |
| Decision/Commitment | 6.63 (1.9) | 7.75 (1.4) |

Table 11 Summary of measurement confirmatory factor analysis

| Measures | X | Y |
|----------|------|------|
| CFI | .776 | .762 |
| TLI | .764 | .750 |
| SRMR | .087 | .085 |
| RMSEA | .105 | .107 |

analysis (CFA) to determine whether the questionnaire effectively measured the dimensions of amorous feeling in our sample. More specifically, we sought to determine whether the three-factor structure (corresponding to the three components of love) used by Sternberg and validated by many other studies also provided a good fit for a sample of people with multiple consensual intimate relationships at the same time. For configural invariance, the fit of the three-factor model in multi-group confirmatory factor analysis must be above certain criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999): a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) over 0.90 are indicative of acceptable fit, while a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) below 0.08, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) below 0.06 indicate no misfit. As can be seen from Table 11, both the CFI and the TLI are below 0.90 (0.76 and 0.75, respectively), while the RMSEA exceeds 0.08 (0.10) and the SRMR is above 0.06 (0.08). We can thus conclude that Sternberg's three-factor model is not appropriate for our sample.

To identify a more suitable factorial division, we also applied factor analysis to several different alternative models. We did this in the awareness that some items contrasted with a non-exclusive view of relationships, and attempted to find a model that was a better fit. With the first alternative, we tested the three-factor scale, but without the items we labeled *Exclusivity*, or, in other words, the items referring to a concept of the relationship that is closer to the paradigm of monogamy (e.g. "Because of my commitment to X/Y, I would not let other people come between us"). The second alternative is a four-factor model, where the *Passion* component

Table 12 Details of confirmatory factor analysis results for the reduced model (partner X)

| Factors | Indicators | Estimate | SE | Z | P |
|------------|--|----------|-------|-------|--------|
| Intimacy | I have a warm relationship with X | 1.444 | 0.057 | 25.10 | <.0001 |
| | I receive considerable emotional support from X | 1.702 | 0.068 | 24.90 | <.0001 |
| | I give considerable emotional support to X | 1.597 | 0.064 | 24.90 | <.0001 |
| | I feel close to X | 1.583 | 0.057 | 27.83 | <.0001 |
| Passion | I find X to be very personally attractive | 1.478 | 0.069 | 21.31 | <.0001 |
| | My relationship with X is passionate | 1.946 | 0.098 | 19.85 | <.0001 |
| | I especially like physical contact with X | 1.697 | 0.084 | 20.06 | <.0001 |
| | Just seeing X excites me | 1.681 | 0.071 | 23.62 | <.0001 |
| | I find myself thinking about X frequently during the day | 1.663 | 0.072 | 23.04 | <.0001 |
| | There is something almost magical about my relationship with X | 1.679 | 0.103 | 16.34 | <.0001 |
| Commitment | I have confidence in the stability of my relationship with X | 1.851 | 0.078 | 23.62 | <.0001 |
| | I will always have a strong responsibility for X | 1.804 | 0.101 | 17.88 | <.0001 |
| | I view my commitment to X as a solid one | 2.001 | 0.075 | 26.68 | <.0001 |
| | I view my relationship with X as permanent | 2.002 | 0.102 | 19.61 | <.0001 |

was divided into two subcomponents: one consisting of the items identifying passion in the erotic sense (e.g. “My relationship with X/Y is very passionate”), and one we called *Romance*, which our knowledge of the target population (based on qualitative empirical data and clinical experience) leads us to believe reflects a more romantic vision of love (e.g. “I adore X/Y”). The third alternative model used this division into four components but also regrouped some other items. The fourth alternative model combined the first and second models (i.e. it did not use the *Exclusivity* items and it followed the four-component division). However, none of the alternative models seems to fit our sample. The only model that shows a slightly better fit is a considerably reduced model with fewer items for each chosen component inasmuch as our prior knowledge of our sample suggested that they could be representative of the component in question (Tables 12, 13, 14).

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was also performed, but the results did not produce any clearly interpretable factor structures. In addition, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was carried out to compare the data for relationship X and those for relationship Y. However, this analysis will not be specifically discussed here.

Discussion

Postmodern Identities

As noted at the beginning of the previous section, the percentage of people in our sample who identify as non-binary (or who have an intimate relationship with a

Table 13 Details of confirmatory factor analysis results for the reduced model (partner Y)

| Factors | Indicators | Estimate | SE | Z | P |
|------------|--|----------|-------|-------|--------|
| Intimacy | I have a warm relationship with Y | 1.541 | 0.069 | 22.40 | <.0001 |
| | I receive considerable emotional support from Y | 1.985 | 0.080 | 24.84 | <.0001 |
| | I give considerable emotional support to Y | 1.892 | 0.079 | 23.94 | <.0001 |
| | I feel close to Y | 1.868 | 0.070 | 26.70 | <.0001 |
| Passion | I find Y to be very personally attractive | 1.638 | 0.072 | 22.74 | <.0001 |
| | My relationship with Y is passionate | 1.862 | 0.095 | 19.67 | <.0001 |
| | I especially like physical contact with Y | 1.581 | 0.079 | 20.06 | <.0001 |
| | Just seeing Y excites me | 1.867 | 0.070 | 26.43 | <.0001 |
| | I find myself thinking about Y frequently during the day | 1.973 | 0.086 | 22.94 | <.0001 |
| | There is something almost magical about my relationship with Y | 1.781 | 0.106 | 16.80 | <.0001 |
| Commitment | I have confidence in the stability of my relationship with Y | 2.128 | 0.092 | 23.12 | <.0001 |
| | I will always have a strong responsibility for Y | 2.020 | 0.106 | 18.98 | <.0001 |
| | I view my commitment to Y as a solid one | 2.473 | 0.088 | 27.92 | <.0001 |
| | I view my relationship with Y as permanent | 2.347 | 0.106 | 22.18 | <.0001 |

Table 14 Summary of measurement confirmatory factor analysis for the reduced model

| Measures | X | Y |
|----------|------|------|
| CFI | .932 | .933 |
| TLI | .917 | .917 |
| SRMR | .046 | .050 |
| RMSEA | .097 | .098 |

non-binary person) is much higher than that estimated for the general population.⁵ As regards sexual orientation, almost 65% of the sample is attracted by two or more genders. This would seem to confirm the findings for an Italian sample (N=60) surveyed by Braida (2020, 2021). Although the latter sample was much smaller, given that its analysis was qualitative, there was a similar tendency to reject binarisms, such as woman/man or homosexual/heterosexual (15% non-binary gender identity, 51% plurisexual orientation). Similar results were also found by Balzarini et al. (2019a) who compared the socio-demographic characteristics of a sample of monogamous and non-monogamous people residing in the United States, noting in the latter a significantly greater presence of women, non-binary and plurisexual

⁵ The most recent studies estimate that between 0.1 and 2% of the general population self-identify as transgender and gender nonconforming (Goodman et al., 2019) and, among these, 35% identify with a gender other than male or female (James et al., 2016). However, this estimate is very likely to be low, as not all non-binary people identify as transgender.

people. The great overlap between plurisexual orientations and CNMs has also been emphasized by several other authors (Klesse, 2007; Page, 2004; Robinson, 2013).

These results seem to reflect what Roseneil (2000) calls “queer tendencies” and what other scholars refer to as “postmodern identities” (e.g. Plummer, 1995).

For some respondents, the CNM experience itself is what led them to question every aspect of their sexual identity (gender identity, gender performance, sexual/affective orientation, but also sexual practices), or their explorations of sexual identity proceeded in parallel with explorations of new relationship practices. In some cases, even if sexual self-identification did not change, the CNM experience nevertheless influenced how the respondents saw and approached relationships. An emblematic example is provided by Filippo (48, gay cisgender man), who reports that his experience of polyamory was so intense that he found himself thinking that he could have an intimate relationship with a woman, while still identifying as homosexual (see Braida, 2021).

Love and Relationships in Consensual Non-Monogamies

According to the findings of our study, Sternberg’s Triangular Love Scale, although used extensively and validated in cross-cultural contexts, does not seem to describe love accurately in consensual non-monogamies. The explanation for this may be found in the specific ideas about love and intimate relationships that circulate in CNMs communities, particularly those surrounding polyamory and relationship anarchy.

Re-conceptualizing Love

Many of the people interviewed by Braida (2020) claimed the discovery of CNMs was a turning point in their lives and in their way of conceptualizing and experiencing love. For some, their idea of love prior to encountering CNM theories and practices was more “desperate” and correlated with power dynamics (Manuel,⁶ 32, bisexual transgender man), obsessive (Alessandra, 43, queer; Marta, 42, pansexual cisgender woman), “something that burns you” (Alessandra, 43, queer), “Sturm und Drang” (Sonia, 55, heterosexual cisgender woman), hurtful (Attilio, 42, pansexual cisgender man), painful (Amedeo, 35, heteroflexible/sapiosexual cisgender man), conflictual (Rachele, 26, lesbian cisgender woman) and/or entailing a relentless search for “true love” (Carlo, 48, heterosexual cisgender man). In contrast, after transitioning to the CNM paradigm, a more multifaceted idea of love came to the fore: the interviewees now recognized “many different types of love” and rejected the love/non-love dichotomy and the vision of love as being synonymous with madness (Manuel, 32, bisexual transgender man), or rejected (or attempted to reject) romantic love in its entirety (Sam, 37, bisexual genderqueer person; Elena, 28, heterosexual transgender woman; Alberto, 34, heterosexual cisgender man), precisely

⁶ All names are pseudonyms.

due to the emotional ups and downs, conflicts, and suffering. In general, “love” now seems to be an “umbrella term” covering “very complex feelings, with many different nuances, of many different colors” (Attilio, 42, pansexual cisgender man).

For some interviewees, this new way of perceiving love leads to a sort of impasse in defining feelings of love. In this regard, for example, Serena (28, heteroflexible/bisexual cisgender woman) noted:

I said, at some point: “But what is love?” We identify it because it is made up of a range of behaviors, usually, a range of... of commitments (“You have to do this, you have to do that”, if before the holidays I have to agree with her or with him, I don’t have sex with that one or the other one) or with feelings – I mean... butterflies in the stomach and things like that – but, if we cut out all these things, what the fuck remains? What’s left? I don’t know!

The interviewee remarked on the disorientation that can be caused by the loss of fixed references: for her, the definition of love was previously one of these fixed reference that she was now questioning. This disorientation is also a symptom of the destabilizing impact that encountering CNM theories and practices can have on people’s ideas of love.

To some extent, this re-conceptualization can also be seen from the scores for the individual items of STLS. The scores were particularly low (<6) for the items that come closest to a romantic vision of love (idealization, fusion, as well as exclusivity), e.g. “I would rather be with X/Y than with anyone else” (X=4.26, Y=3.49).

Re-conceptualizing Intimate Relationships

As was the case for their definitions of love, the way people in consensual non-monogamies define their relationships is somewhat blurred. For example, many respondents clearly stated that they found it hard to draw a clear line between love and friendship. One of the interviewees, Amedeo (33, heteroflexible/sapiosexual cisgender man) thinks of love and friendship more as a continuum than a dichotomy: he admitted that he uses labels to identify relationships in everyday life, but he did not think that this taxonomy can be true on an ontological level. Similarly, Rachele (26) said:

I think I’ve always been... involved in relationships that I call friendships but that look very much like those that I call loves, right? There are some points of contact: there’s jealousy, there’s that wonderful sense of fusion, of intellectual correspondence, of... of empathy, right? That you feel in... when you feel in love (...). And this is one aspect. Another is that... sometimes I’ve had friends who were lovers, and I absolutely did not know how to distinguish. Why distinguish, above all? And, above all, I don’t like to think of my relationship with a lover as if friendship were not a part of this relationship, right? So, yes, actually distinguishing between love and friendship is a bit hard, for me.

In general, people who identify as relationship anarchists put even more stress on deconstructing the aspects linked to romantic love and the couple. Sam (37), for example, explained:

I realize that all the romantic entanglements take so much energy... so much energy that they take away the energy needed for everything else – I mean the rest of the other non-romantic relationships – and so... um... I prefer not to stir them up [laughs], somehow, from that point of view. This doesn't mean not working on those relationships or not having moments of romance, but not... maybe not codifying them in precise codes like: “Ok, I need to hear from you every day” / “Ok, I need to... eh... tell you all these things” or... things like this, otherwise it becomes very heavy going for me.

Sam tries to avoid codifying new relationships “romantically” because this “take[s] away the energy needed for everything else”. Interestingly, an attempt to rationalize feelings of love can be seen at work here, where starting out on a particular footing, avoiding certain “codes”, is thought to prevent a certain type of feeling from developing. Such attempts—as can be seen later in the interview—are not always successful, but they reflect a theoretical approach to relationships that is worthy of note in this context.

Another tendency found among consensually non-monogamous people is that of questioning what Gahran (2017) calls the Relationship Escalator, presented in the Introduction. Many interviewees questioned the idea that a relationship is not legitimate if it does not follow the steps of the Relationship Escalator. They said that after discovering CNM they are, in general, more open to nonlinear changes in their relationships. Carlo (48), for example, explained how the theory of polyamory helped him overcome the idea that sexuality is central to his intimate relationships, accepting that passion fades with time. Once this is accepted, the relationship often continues even after the stage of passionate love has come to an end. In this regard, Manuel (32, bisexual transgender man) stated:

Maybe I believe in relationships that last forever more than a monogamous person who gets married. I believe that the relationship can change constantly, but when this relationship is based on listening to each other, respect and all the things that come from listening to each other, from communication, from loving each other, when it starts from feelings and from... from what I've said before, the relationship takes on different forms, but... it can't end.

For many of the interviewees, moreover, their former partners continue to be important in their lives.

At the same time, as Gusmano (2018, 2019) has pointed out, the fact that the respondents question the hierarchy of intimacy (Budgeon, 2006) helps them to develop and to value non-romantic relationships as well. Thus, for example, they challenge the hierarchies that see romantic monogamous relationships as being more important than friendships and networks that go beyond the nuclear family.

As regards Sternberg's three components of love, the interviewees' accounts center chiefly on Intimacy. In fact, several respondents emphasize the importance

of a strong emotional connection, care and mutual understanding. All these aspects come close to what Giddens (1992) called the “pure relationship”, based on egalitarian communication, sharing and companionship. The Decision/Commitment component has more blurred outlines, since, as we have seen, many interviewees questioned the Relationship Escalator. In any case, many respondents stressed relationship continuity, although they saw it as hinging on accepting nonlinearity and changes in relationships. As regards Passion, accepting change often means that this component of love is ultimately sidelined, as we have seen. Moreover, the respondents are often critical of the centrality of romantic love and its links to suffering and fusion between partners.

Conclusions

Although the Triangular Theory of Love can offer useful starting points for understanding the peculiar characteristics of CNM relationships and their differences with respect to more traditional forms of relationships, the scale proposed to measure the three components of love seems unsatisfactory.

In our sample, the various items that make up STLS are not associated with three well-defined factors. Rather, they seem to mix together the many ingredients of love in a new way. The data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews tell us that passion can exist without romantic longing, that commitment does not necessarily require the accumulation of ever greater promises, and that intimacy can be sustained by openness and sharing, rather than exclusivity.

We are confident that our findings will encourage psychometric research to develop more inclusive, less normative scales that acknowledge all the different ways of loving, including those that are formalized in relationship subcultures (such as CNMs) but that are a reality for many other people, and will fuel further considerations about relationship transformation, the hierarchies of love, and how consent is communicated and negotiated in intimate relationships.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews.

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