

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An Empirical Study on an International Sample

Luciano Paccagnella^a, Enrica Matta^b, Nicole Braida^a

Abstract

The transformations of intimacy represent an important field of study for contemporary sociology. Among these, consensual non-monogamies are forms of relationship in which all partners give explicit consent to engage in romantic, intimate, and/or sexual relationships with multiple people. These new forms of relationship reflect some characteristics of the contemporary world: the flexibility, the reversibility of choices, the redefinition of gender relations, the centrality of open communication among partners.

In this study, we applied the well-known Sternberg Triangular Love Scale to measure intimacy, passion and commitment in an international sample consisting of 558 people from 33 countries, who practice forms of consensual non-monogamy and who had at least two simultaneous emotional or romantic relationships at the time of the research.

Results seem partially similar to that found in previous studies applying the same scale to monogamous relationships. In particular, it is partially confirmed that the commitment dimension increases with the duration of the relationship, and that the intimacy dimension is substantially stable. Contrary to previous studies that described a progressive waning of passion as the relationship progressed, in our sample this dimension proved to be substantially stable over time. Furthermore, the three dimensions in one relationship are all positively and significantly correlated to the three dimensions in the other relationship. A possible interpretation of this finding is that there is a “virtuous” effect among multiple relationships experienced by the same person: the liveliness, the duration and depth of a relationship do not necessarily subtract resources from the other (or from the others).

Keywords: intimacy, love, consensual non-monogamy.

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1. Transformations of intimacy: consensual non-monogamies

For several years, there has been a lively public debate about what is truly “traditional” in terms of family, love and couple relationships. While it can generically be said that intimate relationships take shape both from “natural” inclinations and from social influences, it is also the case that marriage and what is legally considered “family” are social institutions regulated by rules and laws that reflect the cultural transformations of the different eras (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Saraceno, 2012).

Modernity has given us increasing amounts of freedom in decisions about our lives, while exposing us, in exchange, to a feeling of precariousness, risk and uncertainty (Beck 1986). These transformations also have a huge effect on intimate relationships. Marriage has been based for centuries on an instrumental exchange, through which men offered to women economic and social security in exchange for domestic work, sex and parental care. The current romantic idea of marriage based upon mutual, unselfish and renegotiable love between two free individuals is therefore quite a recent phenomenon (Coontz, 2006): suffice to recall that divorce is a civil right achieved in many Western countries only a few decades ago.

At the mercy of these transformations, love has been defined by some of the most influential contemporary sociologists as “chaotic” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), “liquid” (Bauman, 2003) or “confluent” (Giddens, 1992), as it is the result of a complex set of fluid and reversible individual choices; such choices have been extended even further by globalisation processes that have put us into contact with different cultures, religions, values, traditions and expectations.

Contemporary transformations of intimacy have recently found an extraordinary support tool in digital communication media and in social networks: new communicative opportunities can in fact facilitate the creation of networks between people who do not feel at ease in the romantic ideal of the monogamous heterosexual couple or in the rigid binarisms of gender or sexual and emotional orientation (Paccagnella, 2020). These “new intimacies” (Attwood et al., 2017) or, as they are termed by Roseneil (2000), “queer tendencies”, include, for example, queer relationships and cultures, non-binary gender identities (*genderfluid*, agender, bigender, etc.), sexual orientations that add numerous options to the simple hetero/homosexuality scale (not just bisexual but also pansexual, demisexual or asexual), or practices and behaviours only recently downgraded from pathologies to paraphilias (such as BDSM, various fetishes or voyeurism).

As part of the scientific reflection on some new forms of intimacy that characterise contemporary societies, in literature there are increasing references

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

to “consensual non-monogamies” (hereafter, CNM): an umbrella term used to refer to forms of relationship in which the parties involved agree on the possibility of having more than one romantic, emotional or sexual partner at the same time, in the full awareness and with the consent of all persons involved. Consensual non-monogamies are referred to in the plural as they include different forms and methods; from open couples to polyamory to swinging.

Academic literature began to deal with CNM, and polyamory in particular, with a double special issue in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Munson and Stelboum 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 was held in Hamburg, followed by a special edition of the magazine *Sexualities* on the same subject (Haritaworn et al., 2006). Countless articles ensued in magazines, with some monographs and, in 2010, there was the first curated collection on consensual non-monogamies to combine research and theory (Barker and Langdridge, 2010). The biennial conference *Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies* took place in Lisbon in 2015, ten years after the Hamburg meeting; it was held in Vienna in 2017, in Barcelona in 2019 and, after the interruption for the pandemic, in Valparaíso (Chile) in 2023. In 2021 the magazine *Archives of Sexual Behavior* also dedicated a special section to CNM (Hamilton et al., 2021), and another special issue focused on parenting practices was published for *Sexualities* (Klesse et al., 2022).

In parallel to the academic publications, interest among the general public - measured through the frequency of representation of the topic in traditional media (popular magazines, films, TV series) and the frequency of searches of correlated terms reported by tools such as *Google Trends* - also seems to have sharply increased over the last ten years (Moors 2017).

Estimates on the incidence in the overall population of persons involved in consensually non-monogamous relationships are understandably difficult to produce, but some studies referring to North America (Rubin et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2018) hypothesise that it is 4-5% of the population. Others estimate that one in five people have been involved in a CNM relationship at some point in their lives (Hauptert et al., 2017).

Scientific research has therefore begun to provide some empirical data, particularly in relation to the question of how far consensual non-monogamies can be considered “serious”, committed, deep and meaningful forms of relationship. The results have revealed that CNM relationships are as “serious”, committed, deep and meaningful as monogamous relationships. In other words, the persons involved in consensually non-monogamous relationships demonstrate similar levels of intimacy, passion, relationship satisfaction, physical health and general happiness as those in monogamous relationships

(Conley et al., 2017; Conley et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018; Morrison et al., 2013) or, in some cases, even higher levels (Balzarini et al., 2019a; Fleckenstein and Cox, 2015).

New ways of experiencing relationships bring with them new situations to be addressed, at practical and emotional level, for which we are usually not prepared as we are socialised to the monogamous relationship model. Supporting professions in the field of relationships and sexuality (psychotherapy, counselling, sexology, psychiatry, gynaecology, andrology) are often not prepared to offer competent advice to non-monogamous people suffering relationship or sexual problems (Grunt-Mejer and Lys 2022) and this makes it even more pressing and necessary to investigate this topic also from an interdisciplinary perspective.

In online and face-to-face groups dedicated to the topic of CNM, there is intense and lively activity of reflection and mutual assistance, which sometimes even leads to the creation of specific and exclusive terminology (Ritchie and Barker 2006). The most recurring topics of discussion concern: consent; practical management of daily life; jealousy; sexuality and sexual health; affectivity; communication; conflict management; relationships with the partner(s) of the partner(s) (the “metapartner(s)"); the joy or pleasure of knowing one’s partner is happy also in other relationships (“compersion”); time and agenda management; any “hierarchies” in the different relationships and any agreed rules. These are practical problems that are also addressed with the aid of a burgeoning self-help manual (Hardy and Easton 1997; Veaux and Rickert 2014; Fern 2020).

2. Triangular theory of love

Love and intimate relationships are recurring themes in sociology classics (Biancheri 2011). This is because the topic of love can represent a bridge between micro and macro: something that arises from a natural feeling of the human being and which then takes the forms dictated and codified by a certain social structure at a certain historical time.

As pervasive and ubiquitous as it is indescribable and difficult to measure, love is a complex subject for empirical research. From the different available tools, particularly in the field of psychological and psychometric research, one of the most successful is represented by Sternberg’s triangular theory of love (1986; 1988). The theory breaks down love into three fundamental components that, together, can be viewed geometrically as the three vertices of a triangle: intimacy, passion and commitment.

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

Intimacy refers to a feeling of belonging, warmth, connection and bond in relationships, and derives from an emotional investment. Where the intimacy component is high, the desire to contribute to the well-being of the other person is foremost; mutual understanding; being able to rely upon mutual support even in difficult periods; sharing of things; deep communication.

Passion refers to physical and sexual attraction and to romantic feelings and it is closely linked to motivational drive. The passion component includes an intense desire for union with the other person. In passion, sexual needs are prevalent but there is also a desire for self-esteem, support, encouragement, domination and submission.

Commitment relates, in the short-term, to the awareness and the decision to love someone and, in the long-term, to the intention and commitment to keep the love and the relationship alive over time. Commitment therefore involves cognitive elements concerning decision making. The decision almost always precedes the commitment: for example, the institution of marriage represents the legalisation of the commitment to love someone for the rest of your life.

Sternberg describes intimacy as “warm”, passion as “hot”, and commitment as “cold”. According to the model, the combination of the three components results in eight types of love:

- i) Non-love, the absence of love: when none of the three components is present.
- ii) Liking: when the component of intimacy is present but those of passion and commitment are not. This type of love concerns, for example, deep friendships, where there is a sense of warmth, affection and closeness, without, however, the components of passion and commitment. In this type of relationship, the absence of the other person, even for long periods, is not perceived as a problem, but the sense of affection and closeness remains.
- iii) Infatuated love: love at first sight. When passion is present but the other two components are missing.
- iv) Empty love: when there is the decision and the commitment to love, but neither intimacy nor passion are present. This is the type of relationship that can be created in a longstanding marriage, when there is nothing left but the commitment to be together or, in some social contexts, in arranged marriages.
- v) Romantic love, which results from the combination of intimacy and passion, without the component of commitment, by virtue of the will of the lovers or due to external obstacles. Romeo and Juliet or Tristan and Isolde are the literary representation of this love.

- vi) Companionate love: when intimacy and commitment are present but not passion. An example of this type of love is that seen in some longstanding marriages, when sexual attraction has waned.
- vii) Fatuous love, which results from the combination of passion and commitment, without the component of intimacy. This type of love is well-represented by certain Hollywood films, in which the two leading characters meet, feel mutual attraction and decide to marry within the space of a few weeks.
- viii) Consummate love, which results from the combination of all three components.

To attempt to measure each component empirically, a questionnaire was put together: the *Sternberg Triangular Love Scale* (STLS) (Sternberg 1986; 1997), developed over the space of about a decade and now, in its most recent and most popular version, consisting of 15 items associated with each of the three dimensions, making a total of 45 items measured on a Likert scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 9 (“strongly agree”).

Empirical research has identified some fundamental characteristics that distinguish the three components. Commitment depends almost exclusively on our decision and is controllable. There is a limited possibility of control over intimacy, while passion is almost impossible to control and drive. The duration of a relationship can alter, even drastically, the balance between the three components: in short-term relationships, passion tends to be the predominant component, while intimacy and commitment tend to become more important in long-term relationships. Intimacy appears to be present at a high level in every type of significant relationship: from romantic relationships to those of kinship or friendship. Commitment is present at a very high level in relationships with children. Passion, on the other hand, is mainly – albeit not exclusively – limited to specific types of relationship: romantic and sexual (Sternberg 1997; Acker and Davis 1992).

The different types of love can be represented geometrically by different triangles: depending on the intensity of the three components present in a given relationship, the triangles are more or less large by dimension and more or less balanced in proportions between the three components (more passionate love, more intimate love, and so on).

A graphical representation of the different types of love and relationships examined then lends itself to a comparison, for example, of the love of the same person towards different people (e.g. towards the husband, the friend, the children, the mother or the father), and to a comparison of the love, possibly different by quality or quantity, felt by two people in a relationship together. Even the evolution of a relationship over time can be visually observed by comparing the triangles relating to the different periods of life.

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

After 1986, new empirical research on love made reference, among the other tools, to the Sternberg model and/or scale. Each study places the emphasis on different aspects, working on different samples: for example, relationships between adults (Acker and Davis 1992), between adolescents and young people (Lemieux and Hale, 1999; Overbeek et al., 2007), between university students (Chojnacki and Walsh, 1990; Fletcher et al., 2000) and between the elderly (Sumter et al., 2013). The studies focused on both longstanding and stable relationships (Fletcher et al., 2000; Lemieux and Hale, 2000), and on relatively new relationships (Fletcher et al., 2000), in Western and Eastern cultural contexts (Gao, 2001; Ng and Cheng, 2010).

All these studies concerned romantic heterosexual and monogamous relationships. However, the Triangular Theory of Love has been demonstrated 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). In one case (Rodrigue et al., 2018) casual sex relationships were studied. It has even been used to describe the love that musicians feel for their musical instruments (Sternberg et al., 2023).

Recently, a large international group of researchers carried out a broad-scale study to verify the cross-cultural validity of the STLS, up to then applied mainly in culturally homogeneous populations of Western countries. Through the confirmatory factor analysis of the 45 items that make up the scale, the study (Sorokowski et al., 2021) appears to have confirmed the culturally universal validity of the tool.

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used, on the other hand, to confirm some variations between the three dimensions of love based upon the duration of the relationship. Sternberg's theoretical model (1986) states that, in a "typical" relationship, passion arises rapidly and then decreases over time. Commitment grows solely and tends to increase in direct proportion to the duration of the relationship. Finally, intimacy grows slowly during the initial period of a relationship, followed by a phase of decline when the relationship becomes long-term or very long-term. Those variations have been partly confirmed by empirical research (Acker and Davis 1992; Baumeister and Bratslavsky 1999; Sorokowski et al., 2021), albeit not clearly and unequivocally, and they are, in any case, often mediated by other factors such as the gender or age of the persons involved.

3. Our research

Scientific studies on consensual non-monogamies almost always deal with a general implicit question: in what way do they differ from monogamy?

In recent years, numerous studies have endeavored to address this general question. These are empirical research efforts conducted through various methodologies, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, some of which have been referenced in the introductory section of this work. Collectively, these studies portray a highly intricate picture of the world of CNM. Non-monogamous relationships often evolve through trial and error due to the lack of shared reference models. Furthermore, individuals engaging in CNM often find themselves at the intersection of marginalized groups concerning their gender identity or sexual orientation, and at times, also in relation to class, ethnicity, or other affiliations. Given the complexity and dynamism of this world, for a comprehensive introduction, reference is once again made to the literature cited in preceding pages. The specific objective of this work is not to present CNM as the subject of sociological study. Instead, it addresses a much narrower question and is based on a set of original data, which we present here.

In this work, we use the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale to measure the levels of commitment, intimacy and passion in our sample and the variations that occur throughout the duration of the relationship and with other variables. We then compare our data with those that emerged from previous research conducted on monogamous relationships.

The first research question thus concerns those differences:

RQ1: In what way do levels of intimacy, passion and commitment in CNM relationships differ, if indeed they do, from those already known in literature relating to monogamous relationships?

Secondly, consensual non-monogamies are still relatively little explored with regard to the subjective positioning of the different relationships experienced at the same time by the same person: are the different relationships functionally equivalent? Do they meet the same needs and offer the same support? Or are they complementary to each other? Do they grow or die together, or do they form a zero-sum game, in which the importance of one necessarily acts to the detriment of the other? To gather the data that can help to answer at least some of these questions, we used as a criterion of eligibility the fact of having in progress when completing the questionnaire “at least two continuous sexual and/or romantic relationships or acquaintances, which take place contemporarily with the knowledge and consent of all persons involved”. If more than two relationships were in progress, we invited the participants to choose “arbitrarily” two of them. We asked the participants to give to each of the two people relating to the two relationships the names X and Y. The participants were then asked to answer the entire first part of the questionnaire (which included the 45 items of the STLS as well as some general questions) referring to the relationship with X and the entire second part of the

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

questionnaire, identical to the first, referring to the relationship with Y. The data thus collected should allow us to answer the second research question:

RQ2: To what extent are levels of commitment, intimacy and passion of a relationship correlated to those of another relationship experienced simultaneously by the same person? To what extent are they possibly correlated also to the duration of one and/or the other?

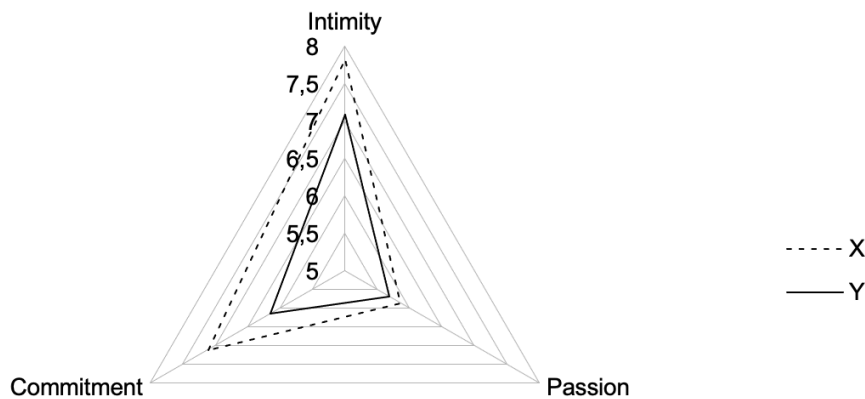
From the methodological perspective, the investigation is aimed at a population that can be difficult to reach as it is subject to social stigma which make it submerged and in some cases invisible (Conley et al., 2017; Grunt-Mejer and Lys, 2022; Hutzler et al., 2016). One of the most common prejudices is that it is impossible to “truly” love more than one person at a time, or even that engaging in CNM conceals a difficulty in committing oneself or an inability to love “authentically”. Conversely, those who engage in this style of relationship testify to the experience of several loves enjoyed and lived simultaneously, each with its own characteristics, sometimes all equally important or intense, and in other cases of different intensity and importance (Sheff, 2015).

In this sense, empirical research on CNM encounters some problems common to other minorities, such as homosexual or plurisexual minorities. It is no coincidence that many tend to consider CNM as part of the vast queer and LGBT+ universe. It is therefore very difficult to extract a probabilistic sample that allows us to generalise the resulting data with an acceptable confidence margin. Like many other studies, ours is also therefore based upon a self-selected sample through the publication of the questionnaire in various online groups.

In order to recruit persons who practise forms of CNM we posted or had others post (by way of contact with those managing the page) our questionnaire based upon the STLS in 27 different Facebook groups or Facebook or Instagram pages dedicated to polyamory, CNM or related topics where we were able to find persons who practise forms of consensual non-monogamy. We used the versions of the STLS translated by Sorokowski et al. (2021) into four languages, as well as the original English version. In particular, the groups/pages in which the questionnaire was published have the following linguistic distribution: 11 Facebook groups in English (one in the city of Berlin, one Irish, one US, one for the whole of Europe and seven more generalist, without territorial indications); eight Facebook groups in Spanish (three for Spain, five for Latin-America); two Facebook groups in Italian; two Facebook groups in German; two Facebook groups in French (both for France); then one Facebook page in English and one Instagram page in Italian. We requested consent to post the link to the questionnaire from the administrators of the respective groups. In total, 67 groups or pages were asked for consent to post the questionnaire, but only 27 of these responded affirmatively.

As an incentive for completing the questionnaire, the participants received via email after concluding the same the graphical representation of their answers, namely a graph with two triangles representing the two relationships (named X and Y in the questionnaire) which they had thought about when answering. An example is represented in Figure 1. Again by email, the graphic with the participant’s answers was accompanied by other graphics representing “typical” loves developed from Sternberg’s original research (mother, father, partner, friend).

Figure 1. The three dimensions for X and for Y.



The data were collected in the period from 13 September 2021 to 22 January 2022. In all, 558 questionnaires were completed in full, of which: 317 in English; 114 in Italian; 81 in French; 27 in Spanish and 19 in German. The respondents reside in 33 countries in seven different 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; one in Finland; one in Iceland; one in Japan; one in Malaysia; one in Norway; one in Oman.

We decided to recruit an international sample so as to attempt not to involve only that group of people identified by Henrich et al. (2010) as WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic). What interested us, however, was not in making a systematic comparison between different cultural

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

contexts but simply in having a heterogeneous sample so as to avoid the data being too linked to a specific national culture.

Secondly, given the cited difficulty in reaching a population that is not very visible and is subject to stigma, such as people involved in consensually non-monogamous relationships, the dissemination of the questionnaire in several languages and at international level was also dictated by the simple need to achieve a total number of responses sufficient for the analysis.

4. Results

The average age of the respondents is 34.4 years (median 32, minimum 16, maximum 70, SD 9.65). As already noted, CNM present many elements of overlapping with the LGBT+ universe and this is also clear from the gender identities and sexual orientations expressed by our sample. With regard to the former, 59% claimed to be “women”, 22% claimed to be “men” and the remaining 19% claimed to be “non-binary” (Table 1).

Table 1. Gender.

Woman	59% (n=329)
Man	22% (n=123)
Non-binary	19% (n=106)

The rejection of gender binarism also brings with it elements of political criticism of a society that is perceived to be based upon the rigid distinction between men and women, where the monogamous heterosexual couple represents not only the statistical normality but also a moral requirement (Monro 2019).

As regards, on the other hand, sexual orientations (Table 2), we find 29% heterosexual persons, 5% homosexual persons and a good 65% plurisexual persons, a label that includes all those orientations defined in different ways (bisexual, pansexual, etc.) characterised by the attraction to more than one gender.

Table 2. Sexual orientation.

Plurisexual	65% (n=361)
Heterosexual	29% (n=159)
Homosexual	5% (n=25)
Other	2% (n=13)

Both the data on gender identity and on sexual orientation found in our sample confirms the results of previous studies, particularly that of Balzarini et

al. (2019b), which compared between them the sociodemographic characteristics of a sample of monogamous and non-monogamous persons resident in the United States, identifying in the latter a significantly greater presence of women, non-binary persons and plurisexuals. With regard to the Italian context, these data confirm the trends already identified by Braida (2021).

We note that the criterion of eligibility to participate in the research was that of having, at the time of the compilation, “at least two continuous sexual and/or romantic relationships or acquaintances, which take place contemporarily with the knowledge and consent of all persons involved”. The questionnaire applies the STLS separately to these two relationships (or to two relationships chosen by the respondent, for those who have more than two). Before analysing the results of the STLS, it is worthwhile, therefore, presenting some data relating to the two relationships taken into consideration, indicated in the questionnaire as X and Y.

The duration of the two relationships is shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Duration of the two relationships.

	Relationship with X	Relationship with Y
Less than six months	9% (n=50)	35% (n= 194)
From six months to one year	9% (n=50)	16% (n=90)
From one to five years	39% (n=215)	33% (n=182)
From five to ten years	26% (n=145)	10% (n=53)
Over ten years	18% (n=98)	7% (n=37)

Although no indication was provided in relation to a hypothetical order of importance or priority between X and Y, it seems clear that Y systematically indicates the younger relationship.

The frequency of seeing each other also displays significant differences, shown in Table 4, with X representing the assiduous relationship at least in terms of time.

Table 4. How often do you see X/Y.

	Relationship with X	Relationship with Y
Every day or almost	48% (n=269)	13% (n=74)
3-4 times a week	13% (n=74)	12% (n=65)
1-2 times a week	18% (n=101)	31% (n=174)
1-2 times a month	9% (n=51)	22% (n=122)
Less than once a month	4% (n=24)	14% (n=77)
Other	7% (n=39)	8% (n=46)

Table 5 lists the average values (and, in brackets, the standard deviation) relating to the three dimensions of the STLS in the relationship with X and in that with Y, compared with the values that emerged from the studies by Acker

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

and Davis (1992), Sternberg (1997) and Sorokowski et al. (2021), conducted with the same measuring instrument but with reference to monogamous relationships. The values are positioned on a theoretical scale ranging between 1 (minimum) to 9 (maximum):

Table 5. The three dimensions of love compared.

	X	Y	Acker and Davis 1992	Sternberg 1997	Sorokowski et al. 2021
Intimacy	7.83 (1.54)	7.09 (1.72)	7.23 (1.50)	7.55 (1.49)	7.78 (1.17)
Passion	5.86 (1.72)	5.69 (1.79)	6.10 (1.77)	6.91 (1.65)	7.01 (1.50)
Commitment	7.11 (1.75)	6.15 (2.06)	6.80 (1.89)	7.06 (1.47)	7.75 (1.40)

Overall, the relationship with Y has lower values than that with X, particularly in relation to commitment which has, however, a significantly higher variance. Y appears to represent a more recent relationship than X, with lower frequency of seeing each other in terms of time and with a significantly lower commitment (and also intimacy). Perhaps unexpectedly, however, all this is not “compensated” by greater passion, which, conversely, is also lower than that with X. In our sample, Y does not appear to be at all representable with the stereotypical role of the “lover”, namely someone with whom to be swept away by the passion that has by now disappeared with the “official” partner.

In Table 5 the overall values of our sample are compared with those of other studies conducted on a monogamous population; the main fact that emerges is the relatively low incidence of passion. This is also perhaps an unexpected fact, given that some stereotypes frequently associate non-monogamies with libertinage, promiscuity or even sex addiction (Hutzler et al., 2016). On the contrary, the sexual component does not appear to be of primary importance in the decision to share part of one’s life with more than one person on a longstanding basis.

The intensity of the three dimensions presents significant differences as the duration of the relationship to which they refer changes. As was noted in the above paragraphs, Sternberg’s theoretical model (1986) predicts a constant increase over time of the dimension of commitment, a reduction of passion and a non-linear trend of intimacy, with an increase in the initial period followed by a stabilisation or a reduction in long-term relationships. That theoretical prediction has been partly confirmed by empirical research (Acker and Davis 1992; Sorokowski et al., 2021).

Our data can put this prediction even further to the test, adding an important element consisting of the interaction between the three dimensions of love in one relationship and the duration of the other relationship. In other words: in what way does the duration of the relationship with X influence, if

indeed it does, the three dimensions of love for Y, and vice versa? One hypothesis, in fact, may be that one relationship tends to “replace” the other over time, at least in some dimensions.

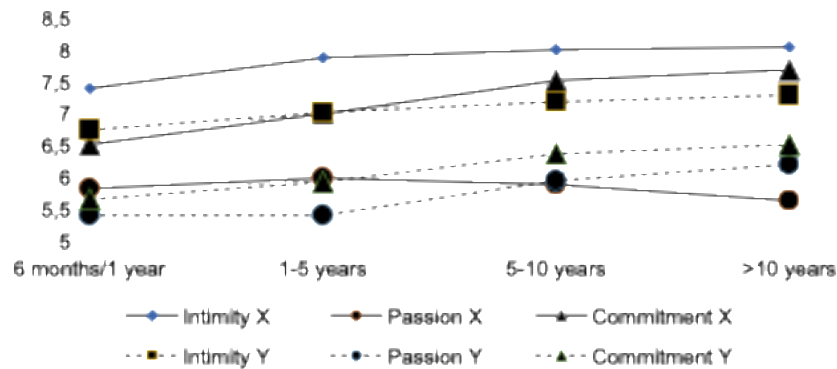
Table 6 illustrates the data on intimacy, passion and commitment for the two relationships X and Y, relative to the duration of the relationship with X.

Table 6. Duration of the relationship with X.

	6 months/1 year	1-5 years	5-10 years	>10 years
Intimacy X	7.41	7.88	8.01	8.05
Passion X	5.83	5.99	5.9	5.63
Commitment X	6.52	7	7.52	7.69
Intimacy Y	6.75	7.03	7.2	7.3
Passion Y	5.4	5.41	5.96	6.21
Commitment Y	5.67	5.93	6.37	6.52

The same data are represented in a more immediately legible manner in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Duration of the relationship with X.



To assess the statistical significance of these variations, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was carried out with the Welch test for non-homogeneous variances. The result (Table 7) indicates that the duration of the relationship significantly and positively affects commitment, but not intimacy and passion. In particular, the latter does not decrease over time. These data are partially compatible with what was found by Sorokowski et al. (2021) in a monogamous population. The duration of the relationship with X also positively influences commitment and passion with the *other* relationship.

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

Table 7. ANOVA Duration of the relationship with X.

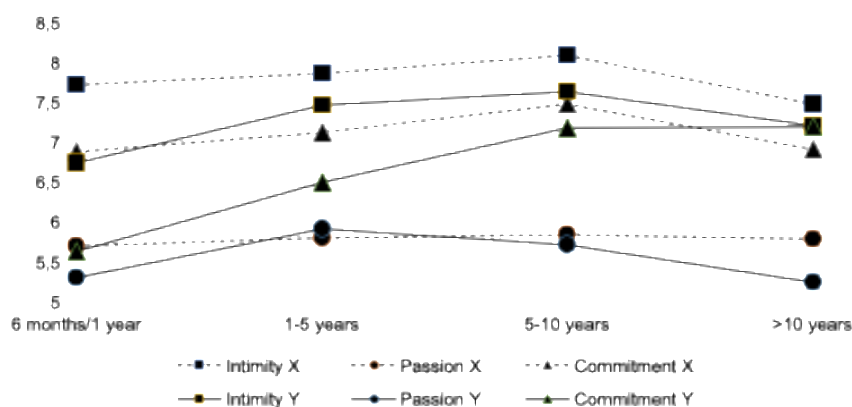
	F	df1	df2	p
Intimacy X	1.48	3	168	0.22
Passion X	0.96	3	172	0.41
Commitment X	7.95	3	172	<0.001
Intimacy Y	1.32	3	172	0.27
Passion Y	6.47	3	177	<0.001
Commitment Y	3.36	3	174	0.02

Tables 8 and 9 and Figure 3 represent the same data concerning the duration of the relationship with Y.

Table 8. Duration of the relationship with Y.

	6 months/1 year	1-5 years	5-10 years	>10 years
Intimacy X	7.73	7.87	8.1	7.48
Passion X	5.7	5.8	5.85	5.79
Commitment X	6.89	7.13	7.48	6.91
Intimacy Y	6.74	7.47	7.64	7.21
Passion Y	5.31	5.91	5.72	5.25
Commitment Y	5.63	6.5	7.18	7.2

Figure 3. Duration of the relationship with Y.



The duration of the relationship with Y significantly affects intimacy (with an initial increase followed by a decrease) and commitment with Y, while it appears not to have statistically significant effects on passion. Furthermore, it does not present effects on the three dimensions of the relationship with X. These data are also partially compatible with the theoretical model and with previous empirical findings.

Table 9. ANOVA Duration of the relationship with Y.

	F	df1	df2	p
Intimacy X	1.21	3	109	0.31
Passion X	0.09	3	112	0.97
Commitment X	1.39	3	110	0.251
Intimacy Y	4.41	3	109	0.01
Passion Y	2.61	3	108	0.056
Commitment Y	9.18	3	113	<0.001

Finally, the correlation index between the three dimensions of love referring to X and the three referring to Y was calculated. After verifying from the scatter plot that all variables had a positive monotonic relationship, Kendall's tau-b index was used. The respective correlation matrix is reported in Table 10.

Table 10. Correlation matrix between the six dimensions.

	Intimacy X	Passion X	Commitment X	Intimacy Y	Passion Y	Commitment Y
Intimacy X						
Passion X	0.391					
	p <.001					
Commitment X	0.520	0.457				
	p <.001	p <.001				
Intimacy Y	0.288	0.173	0.252			
	p <.001	p <.001	p <.001			
Passion Y	0.247	0.266	0.341	0.437		
	p <.001	p <.001	p <.001	p <.001		
Commitment Y	0.244	0.198	0.362	0.638	0.500	
	p <.001	p <.001	p <.001	p <.001	p <.001	

As can be seen from the table, the six variables are all correlated positively and statistically significantly between them. This means that as one dimension increases, the others also increase, both referring to the same relationship and referring to the other relationship. In other words, the two relationships do not appear to be in competition between them and do not appear to replace each other.

All data shown have been checked in order to ascertain any variations linked to the gender, sexual orientation or age classes of the interviewees, but none of these variables revealed statistically significant differences.

5. Discussion

Our research presents some original empirical data on the nature of love in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships, the latter being relationship configurations that are still relatively little studied, but numerically increasing in contemporary societies.

The data on the sociodemographic characteristics of our sample confirm that persons who experience emotionally and/or sexually non-exclusive relationships tend to identify as invisible or stigmatised gender identities (non-binarism) or sexual orientations (bisexuality and plurisexuality), to which the stigma associated with non-monogamy is added (Gusmano, 2018; Braida, 2021). Future studies on forms of atypical intimacies such as CNM should therefore take this fact into consideration and draw upon the increasing literature on intersectionality and queer and LGBT+ studies (for a review, see Parent et al., 2013).

In this work, we applied the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale (STLS) to two emotional and/or sexual relationships experienced simultaneously and consensually by those who took part in the research. This methodological tool is widely reflected in the literature and is based upon a theory of love split into three dimensions: intimacy, passion and commitment. To our knowledge, this is the first time this scale has been applied to consensually non-monogamous relationships.

The results indicate that the two relationships taken into consideration do not compensate each other and do not replace each other. The trend of the three dimensions based upon the duration of the relationship appears partially similar to that ascertained in previous studies which applied the same scale to monogamous relationships. In particular, our results partially confirmed the increase in the dimension of commitment and the substantial stability of intimacy as the duration of the relationship increases. Contrary to previous studies which described a progressive decrease in passion as the relationship progresses, in our sample, that dimension was instead found to be substantially stable over time.

In this work we limit ourselves to presenting these original data, while their in-depth interpretation would require much more space. The questionnaire administration phase was however preceded and followed by a long period of ethnography and participant observation within some Italian groups both online and offline, to which some in-depth interviews were added. This therefore allows us to add some preliminary considerations based on qualitative data, on the meaning that the three components of intimacy, passion and commitment have for people who, in addition to being engaged in non-

monogamous relationships, are often also part of the LGBT+ universe. In any case, these considerations will need to be explored further in future work.

From the interviews it emerged first of all how CNM relationships constitute an overall challenge to the concept of traditional love for those who experience them. For example, Serena¹ (28, heteroflexible/bisexual cisgender woman) noted:

I said, at some point: “But what is love?”, that is, 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 would like to say... 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 the loss of fixed references can cause: for her, the definition of love had been one of these fixed reference that she is 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 the STLS. 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).

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.

A unique way in which intimacy manifests itself in CNM relationships involves sharing experiences and feelings towards one’s other relationships. Regarding this last aspect, Attilio (42, pansexual cisgender man) said:

[W]e often happened to tell each other the experiences up to the minute details... surely, up to the minute details we tell ourselves how we feel about other people, that is, it is one thing... that we feel we owe to the other, but, apart from owing, that is... I don’t... I don’t feel obligated to do it, I simply... spontaneously do it, as I share other thoughts that concern my life, it’s a thing... of mine, they are [part of] my deep thoughts, they are [part of] my

¹ All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

deep feelings, and I normally share them with people I think are close to me. I mean, it's not a rule, let's say it's a... a very spontaneous thing.

In Attilio's words, sharing details about feelings for other people is a spontaneous things that happen just because of the emotional closeness to the partner. Other people specified that sharing should not become a device to control the other person. This delicate balance between the need to share and the need to avoid control, as well as the mediation between different needs in this regard, is a recurrent theme within the polyamorous communities.

The commitment component has more blurred outlines. Many interviewees questioned what they call "the Relationship Escalator": 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).

Manuel (32, bisexual non-binary transgender man) highlighted how important it is for him to think that relationships last forever, transforming themselves. Unless trust is lost for serious reasons, he normally continues to have feelings for the people he has had a relationship with:

Maybe I believe in relationships that last forever more than a monogamous who get married. That is, not... eeh... I believe that the relationship can change constantly, but that relationship when it 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 starting from feelings and from... from what I've said before, the relationship takes on different forms, but... it can't end. Unless you betray loyalty, sincerity, or... those things the relationship is based on: I don't listen to you anymore, I don't give a shit about you anymore. But, as long as there is that, for me the relationship continues.

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. Moreover, the respondents are often critical of the centrality of romantic love and its links to suffering and fusion between partners. Sam (37, bisexual genderfluid person):

I realise that all the romantic entanglements take away so much energy... so much energy that they take away energy for everything else —I mean the rest of the other non-romantic relationships —and so... mmh... I prefer not to stir them up [laughs], somehow, from that point of view. This does not mean not taking care of those relationships or not living moments of romance, but not... eeh... maybe not coding them in precise codes like: “Ok, I need to hear from you every day” / “Ok, I need of... eeh... tell you all these things” or... things like this, otherwise it becomes very heavy for me.

Lastly, we observed that the three dimensions of one relationship are positively and significantly correlated to the three dimensions of the other relationship.

One possible interpretation of these data, coherent with the results of qualitative studies on the subjective experience of people who practise CNM (Sheff 2015), is to consider a “virtuous” effect between the different relationships: the vivacity, duration and profoundness of one relationship do not necessarily detract resources from the other (or others) but, conversely, renew and strengthen it.

6. Conclusions

The results emerging from this work offer a contribution to understanding some possible new social configurations of love in contemporary societies. This understanding is necessary both at macro level, to design and manage inclusive social policies (Grande and Pes, 2018), and at micro level, to support psychotherapists and sexual therapists when working with people involved in forms of consensual non-monogamies (Kauppi, 2021; Orion, 2018). Offering qualified professional help in the field of interpersonal, sentimental, sexual and emotional relationships must, in fact, achieve an understanding that is as objective and free from prejudices as possible.

Finally, empirical research on unconventional forms of intimacy is still insufficient to support the theoretical hypotheses. With this contribution, we hope to offer a new concrete element useful to the sociology of love and intimacy, often debated on the results of the excess of possibility typical of modernity (Condorelli, 2021; Piazzesi, 2022). On one side, in fact, some authors denounce the fragility of contemporary bonds (Bauman, 2003), the commercialisation of intimate life (Hochschild, 2012) or the growing influences of the economy on the emotional sphere (Illouz, 2007). On the other side, the pluralisation of choices in modern society favours forms of post-romantic love based upon authentic communication (Giddens, 1992) and new relationship

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment in Consensual Non-monogamies. An
Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

configurations loaded with uncertainty but also opportunity (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

We conclude by recognising some of the limitations of this research: firstly, the use of a convenient sample, not particularly numerous albeit extended across all continents. The reference universe (individuals practicing CNM forms) is unknown, as it is not enumerated and is also subject to social stigmas. Therefore, it is technically unfeasible to construct a statistically representative probabilistic sample. We have done our best to recruit a sample that was as representative as possible, based on our knowledge of the distribution of the phenomenon, previously acquired through a preliminary phase of qualitative exploration.

Secondly, the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale is a tool used widely for several years in the social sciences, which has undergone, over time, multiple statistical and methodological verifications. It can therefore now be considered a “standard” tool. However, some of the items of which the scale consists, clearly designed to be applied to monogamous relationships, become somewhat ambiguous when applied to openly non-exclusive relationships. Furthermore, the three measured dimensions (intimacy, passion, commitment) refer more to a theoretical model and to ease of interpretation than to actual factors underlying the 45 statistically verified items. From this point of view, the confirmatory factor analysis produced uncertain results, sometimes confirming (Sorokowski et al., 2021) and other times not fully confirming (Chojnacki and Walsh, 1990) the statistical adequacy of a three-dimensional factor solution in explaining the overall variance. More specifically, the data relating to our sample *do not support* that factor solution, as illustrated in more detail elsewhere (Braida, Paccagnella and Matta, 2023). However, all considerations illustrated in this work are valid as they refer to comparisons of the responses given to the same groups of items, conveniently labelled as “intimacy”, “passion” and “commitment”.

Nevertheless, it remains problematic that the STLS scale has been developed and used for many years in various contexts, implicitly adhering to an ideal of monogamous, romantic, and heterosexual love. The application of this scale to CNM relationships allows for comparison with previous studies but also highlights the limitations of the tool. This, in turn, can serve as a stimulus for reflection on an assumed ‘neutrality’ of measurement instruments often taken for granted, as well as for the development of more universal and inclusive tools.

Thirdly, the part of the analysis referring to variations of love based upon the duration of the relationship is affected by the fact that this is not a longitudinal study. Understanding how love evolves over time would naturally require the repeated application of the STLS over several years on the *same*

relationship. What we achieved in this research is, on the other hand, the application of the STLS to *different* relationships in different phases of development. This entails well-known methodological problems, which could only be resolved with the availability of time and resources necessary to implement a fully-fledged longitudinal study.

A fourth limitation is given by the reference to only two relationships in the answers to the questionnaire. The two reports were analyzed separately. This prevents us from investigating the relational configuration of those people who have more than two partners and above all neglects the fact that sometimes these two (or more) partners are in turn in relationship with each other. Triads, or in any case the various relational configurations in which each subject is in a direct emotional relationship with each of the others, represent specific cases among CNMs, relatively uncommon in a stable form. A specific study on these cases, aimed at highlighting their peculiarities, would certainly be interesting. However, given the small number within an already submerged population, a study of this type would have to be conducted exclusively with qualitative techniques and would therefore constitute a completely different project.

Finally, in this work, we made constant reference to the umbrella term “consensual non-monogamies”, overlooking the differences, sometimes significant, between the different specific relationship configurations (for example, swinging, polyamory or open couples) (Conley et al., 2018; Rubinsky and Cook, 2023; Wolkomir, 2020).

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Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

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Empirical Study on an International Sample
Luciano Paccagnella, Enrica Matta, Nicole Braida

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