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Master's Thesis

"The Workaholics of the Heart": The Experiences and Psychological Well-Being of Polyamorous Individuals

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Abstract

Deduchova, S. (2025). *"The workaholics of the heart": The experiences and psychological well-being of polyamorous individuals.* Master's thesis, Vilnius: Vilnius University, p.66

Polyamorous individuals often face stigma, misunderstanding, and exclusion, not only in society but also within the systems designed to support their mental health. However, psychology has largely overlooked consensually non-monogamous relationships, including polyamory. The aim of the study is to explore and understand the experiences and psychological well-being of polyamorous individuals. A qualitative study design was chosen for this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six polyamorous individuals, four women and two men, their ages ranging from 21 to 49. Thematic analysis was selected for this study, and three main themes were identified: Individual Experience, Relational Experience, and Societal Experience. The findings show that the stigma held by society and mental health professionals toward polyamorous individuals is contributing to unnecessary stress and reduced well-being among participants. Nevertheless, the emotionally rewarding nature of these relationships, the freedom to shape personal dynamics, opportunities for growth, autonomy, community support, and acceptance within therapeutic contexts led participants to conclude that involvement in polyamorous relationships is a positive experience overall.

Keywords: *polyamory, consensual non-monogamy, ethical non-monogamy, minority stress theory, psychological well-being, qualitative study*

Santrauka

Deduchova, S. (2025). *„Širdies darboholikai“: Poliamoriškų asmenų patirtys ir psichologinė gerovė.* Magistro darbas, Vilnius: Vilniaus universitetas, 66 psl.

Poliamoriški asmenys dažnai susiduria su stigma ir atskirtimi ne tik visuomenėje, bet ir psichikos sveikatos priežiūros sistemoje. Vis dėlto psichologijos mokslas dažnai ignoruoja sutarimu pagrįstus nemonogaminius santykius, įskaitant poliamoriją. Šio tyrimo tikslas – išnagrinėti ir suprasti poliamoriškų asmenų patirtis bei jų psichologinę gerovę. Tyrimui pasirinktas kokybinis tyrimo dizainas. Buvo atlikti pusiau struktūruoti interviu su šešiais poliamoriškais asmenimis – keturiomis moterimis ir dviem vyrais, kurių amžius svyravo nuo 21 iki 49 metų. Šiam tyrimui pasirinkta teminė analizė, kurios metu buvo išskirtos trys pagrindinės temos: asmeninė patirtis, santykių patirtis ir visuomeninė (socialinė) patirtis. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad visuomenėje ir tarp psichikos sveikatos specialistų vyraujanti stigma poliamoriškų asmenų atžvilgiu prisideda prie papildomo streso ir mažesnės gerovės. Nepaisant to, poliamoriškų asmenų išsakomas emocinis pasitenkinimas, laisvė formuoti asmeninius ir unikalius santykių modelius, galimybė augti ir tobulėti kaip asmenybei, autonomija, bendruomenės palaikymas bei priėmimas terapiniame kontekste, leidžia tiriamiesiems vertinti savo santykius kaip teigiamą patyrimą.

Raktiniai žodžiai: *poliamorija, etinė nemonogamija, mažumų streso teorija, kokybinis tyrimas, psichologinė gerovė*

Glossary

Ambiamorous – a person who is open to engaging in both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships.

BDSM – abbreviation for bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism (or submission), and masochism. It refers to sexual activity involving practices such as the use of physical restraints, the granting and relinquishing of control, and the infliction of pain, among others.

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) – an umbrella term that encompasses various relationship types characterised by mutually agreed levels of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual openness with multiple partners, such as open, swinging, and polyamorous relationships.

LGBTQ+ – this abbreviation represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and others. It describes both a person's sexual orientation and gender identity.

Mononormativity – the idea that monogamy is the normal way of establishing relationships, highlighting the impact of the prevailing monogamous culture on our everyday assumptions and, consequently, on our perception of non-monogamous behaviour.

Open relationships – a form of CNM in which individuals in a committed romantic partnership can also date others. The couple maintains romantic exclusivity but engages in sexual non-exclusivity.

Polyamory – a type of CNM where people form multiple loving relationships.

Polycule – a network of individuals linked by romantic and/or sexual relationships.

Polygamy – a one-sided non-monogamous relationship where one partner has multiple committed partners, usually through marriage.

Relationship anarchy – the belief that romantic relationships are not inherently more important than sexual or platonic ones, and that it is essential to assess each relationship individually.

Swinging – a form of CNM in which individuals in committed romantic relationships engage in casual, recreational sex with other couples.

Queer – defines a person with a sexual orientation that is not heterosexual and/or who has a different gender identity.

1. Introduction

Practitioners of polyamory and other ethically non-monogamous relationships often face stigma, not only in broader society where such relationships are seen as harmful (Séguin, 2019), but even from mental health professionals who may encourage clients to abandon them (Grunt-Mejer & Łyś, 2019). Polyamorous relationships are viewed as less committed, with diminished trust and an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (Conley et al., 2013; Séguin, 2019). These attitudes persist despite research indicating that the levels of health and happiness reported by individuals in non-monogamous relationships are equivalent to or surpass those of individuals in monogamous relationships (Conley et al., 2013). Nevertheless, stigma hinders polyamorous individuals from receiving proper health care, potentially causing them to experience minority stress (Randal, 2021), which may be worsened by the fear of encountering negative attitudes and rejection in both social circles and the healthcare system (McCrosky, 2015). Moors et al. (2024) state, "As psychologists, we need to ensure that our profession recognises and addresses the unique needs of people engaged in CNM." Consensual non-monogamy can be an important part of identity, and it is in our interest as psychologists to promote health and well-being for all individuals, especially marginalised groups (Moors et al., 2024). This study responds directly to that call by amplifying polyamorous voices and highlighting psychological needs unique to this population.

1.1. Consensual Non-monogamy in a Monogamous World

As researchers, we often strive to define and categorise what we observe to make it easier to study and understand. However, when it comes to human behaviour, people's experiences do not always fit neatly into fixed categories, and answers are often complex or dependent on the context. Understanding human relationships is no exception. Even within the communities themselves, there is disagreement about definitions. As a result, researchers often follow conventions established in previous studies to maintain consistency with scientific methods. Nevertheless, it is important to remain open to individual perspectives and to consider broader contexts, which can enrich our understanding and improve the quality of research.

1.1.1. Universality of Monogamy

Monogamy is most frequently regarded as universal and is the foundation of our social and legal systems. This prioritisation is known as *mononormativity*, "a set of ideological beliefs that denigrates and ignores relationship structures that do not adhere to monogamy standards" (Moors,

2018). The term mononormativity can be traced back to Pieper and Bauer who coined it in a 2005 paper for the first international academic conference on polyamory (cited in Barker & Landgride, 2010). They used it to describe how the dominant monogamous culture influences our daily assumptions and thus also our understanding of non-monogamous behaviours (Randall, 2021).

A relationship outside of a monogamous framework that is not rooted in romantic or sexual exclusivity contained between two people is seen in Western culture as abnormal (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that most people and researchers view monogamy as the only way of engaging in relationships and never think to question their beliefs. However, as Hardy and Easton (2017, p. 16) write, "Lifetime monogamy as an ideal is a relatively new concept in human history and makes us unique among primates".

Moors et al. (2021) were interested in whether people in CNM relationships had internalised negative societal stigma toward their relationship style. They recruited 339 people in CNM relationships and discovered that people's discomfort with CNM and endorsement of monogamy as superior led to decreased relationship satisfaction and commitment to their primary partner. They argue that reducing the stigma and normalising non-monogamous relationships in our mononormative world would increase the quality of life of non-monogamous individuals.

Ryan and Jetha (2010, p. 2) argue that "The campaign to obscure the true nature of our species' sexuality leaves half our marriages collapsing under an unstoppable tide of swirling sexual frustration, libido-killing boredom, impulsive betrayal, dysfunction, confusion, and shame. Serial monogamy stretches before (and behind) many of us like an archipelago of failure". They beckon us to question how universal monogamy is in reality.

1.1.2. Infidelity in Monogamous Relationships

Infidelity, or non-consensual non-monogamy, is a common occurrence in what otherwise is a monogamous relationship. A representative Finnish study – FINSEX – conducted in 2015 by Kontula et al., surveyed 2150 adults aged 18 to 79. The findings indicate that 30 % of women and 39 % of men had cheated on their current or previous partner. Among married individuals, 22 % of married men and 13 % of women reported having other sexual partners. Among cohabiting people, 13 % of men and 8 % of women reported the same. Notably, 41% of men and 26% of women who had been unfaithful in previous relationships had also engaged in infidelity in their current relationships.

The reasons cited are varied – people got caught up in the moment, fell in love with a new partner, or experienced a lack of sexual desire within the current relationship, and about a quarter of respondents stated no particular reason at all. The study did not investigate relationship styles other

than monogamy, although some responses showed that 1 in 4 people accepted their partner's involvement with someone else. Similarly, a study by Mark et al. (2011) surveyed 412 women and 506 men in heterosexual relationships and found that 23 % of men and 19 % of women had cheated on their current partner.

Relationships can take many forms, and there are various ways to make them succeed. More individuals are starting to question relationship norms. They are becoming more open to exploring relationship options not limited to only two people, thus challenging the societal status quo (Bali, 2020).

1.1.3. Different Ways of Relating

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM), also referred to as ethical non-monogamy (ENM), is an umbrella term introduced by Conley et al. (2013) to describe relationship structures that involve agreed-upon emotional, romantic, and/or sexual openness with multiple partners (Moors, 2024). While definitions may vary within communities, Matsick et al. (2014) broadly define swinging as couples engaging in sexual activities with others, often through partner-swapping, while open relationships typically involve individuals independently pursuing extradyadic sexual partners. Both forms permit non-exclusive sexual activity but generally uphold romantic exclusivity (Randall, 2021).

Polyamory, a term coined by Morning Glory Zell-Ravenhart in 1990, combines the Greek poly ("many") and Latin amor ("love") and refers to the practice of engaging in multiple concurrent romantic and/or sexual relationships based on honesty and consent (Klesse, 2006; Randall, 2021). Polyamorous individuals may participate in group or parallel relationships, distinguished from swinging or open relationships by their emphasis on emotional and romantic intimacy across multiple partnerships (Moors et al., 2024; Moors et al., in press). Similarly, ambiamorous individuals may be comfortable in either monogamous or polyamorous arrangements depending on their partner's orientation (Gillig, 2024).

Another relational orientation under the CNM umbrella is relationship anarchy, which rejects prescriptive norms and hierarchies in favour of individually negotiated connections. According to Nordgren's (2006) Relationship Anarchy Manifesto, this approach emphasises autonomy and the freedom to define commitments without conforming to traditional relationship scripts.

As Berry and Barker (2013) argue, "non-monogamy is a heterogeneous category" encompassing various arrangements that differ in transparency, disclosure, mutually agreed-upon terms, and relationship structure. Laitinen (2021) further contends that these are often "more or less forced classifications of reality" and that individual experiences are shaped more by personal values and

communication styles than rigid categories. A common feature across these relationships is open communication and the intention to engage in sexual and/or romantic connections with more than one person.

1.1.4. Engagement in CNM Dynamics

A 2023 U.S. YouGov poll found that 34 % of Americans describe their ideal relationship as something other than complete monogamy. Additionally, 12 % reported engaging in sexual activity with someone else with their partner's permission, while 20 % had done so without their partner's knowledge. A 2025 YouGov poll in the United Kingdom similarly found that 9 % of respondents would consider some form of open relationship, 4 % had previously been in one, and 2 % were currently in such a relationship. Regarding polyamory specifically, 7 % expressed openness to it, and 3 % reported past experience.

Similarly, Haupert et al. (2017), using two U.S. census-matched samples (N = 3095 and N = 4813), found that one in five individuals had engaged in CNM at some point in their lives. Participants did not differ significantly by income, political affiliation, religion, race or ethnicity, age, or geographic region. However, heterosexual men (compared to heterosexual women) and individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (compared to heterosexual individuals) were more likely to have engaged in CNM.

In a study of 1128 heterosexual individuals, Thomas et al. (2023) found that 32 % of men and 5 % of women were open to polygyny (a man having multiple wives), while interest in polyandry (a woman having multiple husbands) was similar across genders—9 % of men and 10 % of women.

These findings highlight that non-monogamous relationships are more prevalent and diverse than commonly assumed. As professionals, it is crucial for us to recognise this variability and avoid imposing normative assumptions or societal biases in clinical or research contexts. Given the present study's focus on polyamorous individuals, the next chapter will examine research related specifically to polyamory.

1.2. Polyamorous Experiences

In a monogamous relationship, sexual engagement with another person who is not your partner is prohibited, and a monogamous partner may even perceive emotional investment in another person as infidelity. In polyamorous relationships, on the other hand, it may not only be allowed but actively encouraged (Bali, 2020).

Calhoun-Shepard (2019) conducted interviews with polyamorous millennials in therapy and therapists working with polyamorous individuals. Polyamory is described as “amorphous, flexible, and heterogeneous”. Interviewees used the word polyamory to signify their lifestyle, identity, community, and relationships – polyamory described “who someone is, as well as something they do”. The researcher concludes that CNM offers an “ethical model for loving that transcends a monogamous framework”. Furthermore, considering how common infidelity and serial monogamy are, it may be that monogamy is less of a norm and more of a cultural ideal.

Tatum et al. (2024) argue that it is important to study polyamory in isolation as it would provide therapists with concrete knowledge on how to work with polyamorous clients. However, it is often grouped with other relationship types under the CNM umbrella.

1.2.1. Relationship Dynamics

Due to the diversity of polyamorous relationship structures and dynamics, partners may experience different levels of intimacy, hierarchy, and power (Man, 2023). Polyamorous relationships often form networks, commonly referred to as polycules, which encompass all partners within the system. These relationships can be hierarchical, where one primary partner is prioritised above the others, or non-hierarchical, in which all partners are treated equally and none have higher priority (Tatum et al., 2024).

Man (2023) explored these dynamics by interviewing 14 LGBT+ polyamorous individuals on their relationship experiences. The participants shared various reasons that led them to choose polyamory, such as feeling constrained by monogamy or unmet needs within their dyadic relationship. They stated that non-monogamy and polyamory provide a chance for personal liberation. Some individuals expressed feeling “distressed,” “faking,” or “trapped” while trying to fit into monogamy, and polyamory offered the opportunity to explore sexual, romantic, and platonic relationships with other individuals. Maintaining these relationships required open communication and negotiation, particularly around “relationship parameters, agreements, boundaries, coming out as polyamorous (e.g., to family members, friends, workplace, children), identifying social support and resources, and challenges arising from separation” (Man, 2023).

Similarly, Sanchez (2019) conducted four in-depth interviews with individuals engaged in polyamory. The individuals emphasised that these types of relationships are not for everyone and require a certain flexibility to adapt to new dynamics and changes. Relationship challenges were often internalised as personal learning opportunities, rather than blamed on the nature of the relationship, reinforcing the value placed on individuality and introspection. While sexual freedom

was acknowledged, participants emphasised the importance of emotional connection, countering common societal stereotypes that reduce CNM to purely physical arrangements.

Jealousy is another significant dynamic within polyamorous relationships. Laitinen (2021) notes that jealousy can arise in various contexts, such as when a new partner enters the relationship or emotional bonds deepen with another person. While monogamous norms often treat jealousy as a threat, polyamorous individuals tend to frame it as a manageable emotion, addressed through open and honest communication. Man (2023) suggests that this process may lead to a deeper understanding of oneself and others. Open communication and connection with one's partner can cultivate *compersion* – the joy one feels for a partner experiencing positive romantic or sexual interactions with another person. Compersion remains an understudied phenomenon, and Moors et al. (2024) argue that understanding it could inform better practices in relationship therapy.

Quantitative research also reflects positive relational outcomes. Conley et al. (2017) conducted a study in the U.S., comparing monogamous individuals (N = 1507) to those in polyamorous, swinging, or open relationships (N = 617), and found no inherent advantage to any one relationship model. However, polyamorous relationships were associated with more positive outcomes, and the commitment and appreciation of their partners were slightly higher than in other groups.

Despite these positive experiences, societal stigma persists. Matsick et al. (2014) used a random sample of 126 participants and found that polyamory was considered more favourably, even within the CNM community. However, outside the community, laypeople still hold negative attitudes towards polyamory, despite polyamorous relationships emphasising love, openness, and honesty (Grigoropoulos et al., 2023).

Relationship structures also shape sexual development and attraction. In polyamorous relationships, emotional intimacy can evolve across traditional boundaries, including friendships, leading to the emergence of romantic or sexual attraction regardless of gender. Manley et al. (2015) suggest that these dynamics may influence sexual trajectories more frequently in polyamorous than in monogamous contexts.

1.2.2. Identity and Identity Intersections

Identity is a dynamic, evolving construct, shaped not only by internal processes of self-discovery and commitment but also by external social contexts, and identity development can influence how much impact stressors have on one's life (Meyer, 2003). Rather than being fixed, identity is fluid, with its prominence shifting based on social contexts (Man, 2023). The individual's sense of self in non-monogamous dynamics, particularly in consensual non-monogamy, has

received limited research attention. However, these relationships can significantly contribute to the development and preservation of personal identity and lead to increased belief in oneself and personal growth (Sanchez, 2019). As Jamieson (2004) suggests, CNM relationships allow individuals to anchor their identities in connections chosen for the intrinsic value they provide rather than external societal expectations.

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), is vital to understanding identity within CNM communities. Intersectionality examines how multiple social identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, and relationship status, interact to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Rather than treating an individual's relationship status as a binary or isolated category, it should be considered alongside other social identities to uncover how power and stigma shape their lived experience (Moors et al., 2024).

Although most people practising CNM identify as heterosexual, research suggests that non-heterosexual individuals tend to hold more favourable attitudes toward it (Haupert et al., 2017; Moors & Schechinger, 2014). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals often show openness to multiple-partner relationships and display greater fluidity in their romantic and sexual attractions (Moors et al., 2017). However, bisexual individuals in CNM relationships may experience multiple layers of marginalisation, facing both heterosexism and mononormativity, which results in a unique intersectional experience (Man, 2023).

Like sexual minorities, individuals in CNM relationships often navigate "invisible" identities – stigmatised yet undisclosed. Their experiences challenge traditional norms, broaden our understanding of relational identity, and offer insight into the complex, multifaceted nature of human connection (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021).

1.2.3. Societal Attitudes

Polyamorous relationships are rarely depicted in mainstream media, where monogamy is portrayed as the ideal and romantic love is framed as exclusive. Stories involving love triangles consistently resolve with one central couple "winning," reinforcing the cultural norm of monogamy. In this context, shaped by law, media, and tradition, consensually non-monogamous relationships are often perceived negatively (Matsick et al., 2014). Polyamory is not a monolithic concept like monogamy, and therefore, it is susceptible to many subjective and social misinterpretations and discrimination (Grigoropoulos et al., 2023). Dominant cultural ideologies, such as Christianity and political conservatism, also contribute to widespread negative perceptions. CNM relationships are seen as a threat, and individuals in these relationships are often perceived as unfaithful, promiscuous, immoral, and sexually riskier (Matsick et al., 2014; Moors et al., 2023).

Empirical studies confirm how these attitudes play out in lived experiences. Ortis' (2018) study of seven polyamorous college students found that they faced misconceptions stemming from heteronormative social constructs and had to navigate repeated "coming out" processes with varying levels of support in their immediate environment. Gillig (2024) conducted a study with 323 ambiamorous and polyamorous adolescents aged 12 to 17 and found that many feared rejection if they disclosed their relationship preferences. A literature review by Moors and Ramos (2022) also found that the fear of rejection by friends and family causes psychological stress due to internalised stigma. Gillig (2024) highlights that increased visibility and community support can reduce the psychological toll of social stigma.

To understand the influence of socio-cultural contexts on people's attitudes towards polyamory, Grigoropoulos et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative study with 250 Greek people. They concluded that factors such as mononormativity, religiosity, concern for children's rights, and parental competency predict negative attitudes towards polyamory, particularly among women. Both men and women saw the violation of the monogamous ideal as deviant. The research also shows a narrow understanding of "non-typical" relationship structures and exposes the stereotypical understanding of what constitutes a proper family. Still, younger participants tended to view polyamorous people in a more positive light. Similarly, a 2023 U.S. YouGov poll shows that more than half of the respondents say that polyamory is morally wrong, while only a fifth say it is morally acceptable.

Misunderstandings about what polyamory entails are widespread. Cardoso and colleagues (2019) set out to understand laypeople's definitions of polyamory. They conducted a thematic analysis on a sample of 463 participants. The study shows that people who are not willing to engage in CNM see polyamory as sex-focused and less meaningful, ignoring its emotional and relational dimensions. Researchers argue that "This reinforces the idea that monogamous people contribute to stigma about CNM and that this is the outcome of their own intergroup experiences and of how their social identity is reinforced by considering other groups as less valuable". This limited view contributes to stigma and reflects a broader societal tendency to equate CNM with infidelity, rather than as an ethical and consensual relationship structure. The researchers conclude that increased exposure and visibility lead to a more nuanced understanding of relationships and greater acceptance.

However, there is reason for optimism. As Man (2023) writes, "The negative attitudes toward CNM, however, seem not to be static or unchangeable". Negative attitudes are reduced when familiarity with polyamory increases. The negative impact of societal stigma can also be mitigated via community support. Polyamorous support groups and role models create opportunities for both social and legal support, help reframe social values and norms and provide validation for

experiences. Sexual minority individuals have a chance to appraise themselves within a group rather than labelling themselves as deviant in comparison to an out-group and a mononormative world (Man, 2023; Meyer, 2003, 2015; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). Understanding what shapes societal attitudes toward polyamory is crucial for addressing the barriers polyamorous individuals face. By challenging mononormative assumptions and increasing visibility, society can move toward greater inclusion and recognition of diverse relationship structures.

1.3. Mental Health and Polyamory

When people think about health, they often focus on physical well-being, overlooking mental health as a vital component of overall wellness. Bali (2020) argues that mental well-being, defined by them as "the state of thriving in various areas of life, such as in relationships, at work, play, and more, despite ups and downs", is frequently neglected in discussions of health. Keller (2019) expands on this by noting that mental well-being includes how individuals think, manage emotions, and make decisions.

In the context of polyamory, research indicates that individuals engaged in CNM relationships may face unique mental health challenges. Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) found that people engaged in polyamorous relationships experience higher levels of depression and anxiety, while a study by Man (2023) provides insights suggesting that involvement in consensual non-monogamy contributes to overall mental health challenges. Although it is impossible to determine a single root cause for these differences, Moors et al. (2024) argue that rejection from family and friends, along with the lack of legal protections related to relationship structures and/or sexual orientation, may contribute to poorer health outcomes. This suggests that the issue is more structural rather than stemming from inherent pathology or individual-level factors.

1.3.1. Bias in Psychology and Therapy

Historically, the field of psychology has been established in White American and middle-class European culture and rooted in mononormative and heteronormative assumptions. Early figures like Freud sought to reframe sexual "deviance" as an illness rather than a moral failing, and that reinforced a clinical vocabulary of pathology that still echoes in therapy contexts today. Despite increasing visibility of CNM relationships, including polyamory, empirical research and therapist training remain limited (Calhoun-Shepard, 2019).

Therapists frequently begin their practice influenced by implicit biases shaped by dominant cultural narratives. Henrich and Trawinski (2016) conducted interviews with 12 polyamorous

individuals about their therapeutic experiences. The authors uncovered that “therapists frequently minimise, deny, or overlook polyamorous relationship issues and, instead, focus on CNM as the client’s core issue”. Much of this stems from inadequate knowledge and insufficient therapist preparation. Polyamorous clients share positive experiences with therapists who invest time in understanding polyamory and provide compassionate support.

Another factor affecting these experiences is therapist bias, which is rooted in compulsory monogamy. Mint (2006) defined it as a system of power that makes monogamy inevitable and the only natural way of relating. When it influences therapy, any other form of relationship may seem unhealthy and pathological in therapists’ minds. These relationships can also appear threatening to the therapist due to their own experiences. Therefore, it is crucial for therapists to recognise their biases in order to deliver quality care. The researchers conclude that there is a need “for therapists to self-educate about CNM, explore their biases toward monogamy, and examine personal relationship issues that may influence therapy” (Henrich & Trawinski, 2016).

Man (2023) similarly discusses that “most models of relationship counseling were developed on heteronormative and mononormative ideas (e.g., marriage and couples counseling), a need exists to incorporate the polyamorous relationship experiences of nonheterosexual individuals to enhance queer and poly affirmative counseling services.” Gebel et al. (2023) add that CNM practitioners are underrepresented in couples counselling research. Most education programs assume that two adults enter a lifelong relationship for the purpose of creating a family, and this kind of view does not leave space for alternative relationship styles. They argue that existing models, such as structural therapy, could be adjusted to serve CNM clients: “The systemic underpinnings of the couple and family therapy field are most appropriately aligned with conceptualising and treating issues within a multi-system configuration such as nonmonogamous relationships”.

While some progress has been made, such as the publication of the first handbook for CNM mental health practice (Vaughan & Burnes, 2022), most CNM-related mental health literature remains non-empirical. A clear gap exists in standardised, evidence-based interventions tailored to CNM populations. Future work must focus on developing inclusive, anti-oppressive therapeutic practices that validate the relational diversity of CNM individuals and address their specific emotional, relational, and mental health needs.

1.3.2. Experiences of Polyamorous Clients in Therapy

The theoretical gaps in training and research are reflected in the real-world experiences of polyamorous clients. Swindlehurst and colleagues (2024) conducted an online questionnaire-based qualitative study with 19 individuals to understand CNM clients’ experiences with the mental

healthcare system. The authors discovered that many clients reported dissatisfaction and discouraging experiences when trying to utilise mental health support resources. They identified that clients fear stigma and thus are often hesitant to open up to mental health professionals. Most report that they felt like the therapists avoided the topic of CNM altogether, or "held a judgemental, pathologizing, or dismissive attitude toward the clients' CNM". Women also reported experiencing sexist views from practitioners questioning the morality of their actions. Like Henrich and Trawinski (2016), Swindlehurst and colleagues (2024) conclude that there is a necessity for therapist education and that positive client experiences are related to an affirming and nonjudgmental stance by the practitioners. Schechinger et al. (2018) reinforce the need for therapists to not only understand CNM but also to equip clients with tools to navigate these relationships successfully.

Graham (2014) conducted a case study of a 21-year-old polyamorous woman with a history of anxiety and depression. The patient felt judged by her previous mental health provider, who attributed her mental health struggles to her polyamorous lifestyle. She became uncomfortable discussing her intimate relationships in therapy and eventually stopped treatment. As a result, she withdrew from her polyamorous community and friends, spending more time alone. Once she learned to advocate for her relationships in therapy, she rejoined the community and found a supportive third partner who also helped her cope with self-harm in creative ways. Graham (2014) concludes that a lack of understanding of non-monogamous relationships can lead to a rupture in the therapeutic alliance and adverse patient outcomes.

These accounts highlight the urgent need for change. Without inclusive, well-informed, and empathetic care, polyamorous clients face an increased risk of isolation, therapy dropout, and internalised stigma. Conversely, when therapists foster a safe space for clients to explore their relational lives without fear of judgment, therapy transforms into a powerful tool for affirmation and healing.

1.4. Polyamory Research in Lithuania

In Lithuania, there is limited research on polyamory. Two sociological studies examined attitudes towards consensual non-monogamy by analysing internet comments.

Darja Lyzenko (2014) analysed comments that people left under articles discussing non-monogamy, swinging, and polyamory on the Lrytas.lt website. The research showed that non-monogamy is represented from three different perspectives in online discourse in Lithuania:

1. There is the hegemonic (or mononormative) view, where non-monogamy is seen as a deviation from the norm.

2. The emancipated view, where a person's right to choose is discussed, yet mononormativity still colours the discourse.

3. A polemic view, where non-monogamy is seen as an alternative to monogamy.

The researcher concludes that the main element distinguishing these three social representations is the attitude toward sexuality and family (the latter being associated with love) and relationships – the more conservative the representations, the more sexuality and sexual freedom are seen as deviations and perversions.

Lyzenko further elaborates that the commenters delineate the difference between monogamy and non-monogamy by stating that the former is a natural state of being and a necessary prerequisite for healthy couples and family formation. The latter is associated with various negative aspects – the need for another partner implies a lack of love for your current one. Moreover, people engaged in non-monogamous relationships are often dehumanised by being compared to animals: dogs, monkeys, rabbits, etc. It is perceived as a Western perversion, which is a point of interest because other researchers have noted that the Western world is rooted in monogamy (Randall, 2021). The discourse ultimately separates committed relationships from sexual pleasure, thus portraying non-monogamous individuals as lacking responsibility and surrendering to base instincts while fetishising them (Lyzenko, 2014). In her dissertation study, Lyzenko aimed to create a grounded theory of constructing non-monogamous relationships in Lithuania, focusing on swinging couples. The main conclusion was that "non-monogamous relationships (in this case swinging) are used to further establish mononormativity" (Conference presentation, 2018, p. 40). This perspective suggests that swinging, while ostensibly non-monogamous, may paradoxically reinforce dominant cultural narratives that privilege monogamy.

Building on this approach, Izabelė Rainytė (2022) examined Facebook comments under Huffington Post articles and interviewed two content creators and one polyamorous individual to gain their insights on societal views in Lithuania. The researcher concludes that the negative attitudes seen on social media often conceal a sense of fear: non-monogamous relationships are perceived as a threat to their monogamous lifestyle. Monogamy is the social norm globally, while non-monogamy is merely a deviation from that norm. These negative attitudes are perpetuated by the stereotypes held by social media users, fuelled by their insecurities and even envy. There is not a single reason for such attitudes to persist. These attitudes likely stem from a complex interplay of cultural, social, and psychological factors.

Despite growing social interest, psychological research in Lithuania continues to predominantly operate within mononormative assumptions, reflecting an underexplored area in need of further academic inquiry (for example, Legkauskas & Skučaitė, 2013; Lemežytė, 2024; Žiliukaitė & Stonkuvienė, 2024). The first conference on LGBTQ+ mental health, titled "LGBTQ+

and Mental Health: What Is Important for Professionals to Know?" took place in October 2022. Organised by the Lithuanian Association of Psychologists' LGBTQIA+ psychology group in Lithuania, one of the workshops focused on polyamory, led by Jokūbas Gužas. This workshop attracted considerable attention from attending psychologists and aimed to introduce the concept of polyamory, enabling participants to reflect on their own beliefs and biases. The significant interest observed highlights a clear need for a deeper understanding of non-monogamous relationships among psychology professionals in Lithuania.

1.5. Minority Stress Theory

This research employs the minority stress theory as a theoretical framework to examine the experiences and psychological well-being of polyamorous individuals. This is one of the primary lenses through which most CNM research is focused.

Minority stress theory provides a framework for understanding the unique and persistent stressors faced by individuals with marginalised identities due to systemic stigma and social exclusion. Initially coined by Brooks (1981) to examine the stressors affecting lesbian women, the theory was later expanded by Meyer (1995, 2003) into a broader minority stress model that allows to understand mental health discrepancies due to one's identities, for example, race, gender, and sexual orientation (Man, 2023). This model outlines two primary types of stressors: distal stressors, which are external and objective (e.g., discrimination, prejudice, and violence), and proximal stressors, which are internal and subjective (e.g., expectations of rejection, identity concealment, and internalised stigma). These minority-specific stressors operate alongside general life stress and can add up to poor mental health outcomes and decreased well-being (Meyer, 2003).

Meyer's (1995) model has been widely used to understand mental health disparities among sexual and gender minorities, particularly within the LGBQ+ community, where higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychological symptoms are associated with experiences of minority stress (Meyer, 2003). The adverse effects that the marginalisation of the CNM communities leads to have been compared to the experiences of minority stress experienced by LGBQ+ individuals (Schechinger et al., 2018).

There is much evidence that polyamorous people experience marginalisation because they do not conform to the dominant culture (Randall, 2021). Like sexual minorities, members of the polyamorous community may face both distal stressors, such as discrimination or social exclusion, and proximal stressors, including concealment of identity and internalised stigma. These experiences can contribute to psychological distress and may also act as barriers to accessing affirming healthcare and mental health services (Vaughan et al., 2019; Witherspoon & Theodore,

2021). Thus, the minority stress theory provides a valuable lens through which to examine the health disparities and psychosocial challenges encountered by minority populations, including those whose relationship practices deviate from dominant cultural norms.

1.5.1. Minority Stress and Polyamory

Applying this framework to consensual non-monogamy, particularly polyamory, reveals how systemic and interpersonal forms of stigma impact these unique relational identities. Polyamory challenges both sexual and romantic monogamy, two core assumptions of Western relational norms. As such, polyamorous individuals often experience unique forms of stigma and discrimination that distinguish their experiences from other types of CNM relationships, such as open or swinging relationships, which typically only transgress sexual monogamy (Randall, 2021). This distinction is important because romantic consensual non-monogamy, as practised in polyamory, often threatens more deeply held cultural narratives about love, fidelity, and long-term commitment.

Polyamorous individuals often face external stressors, including rejection from family, friends, and professional circles if they open up about their multiple romantic partnerships (Henrich & Trawinski, 2016). The fear of rejection leads to identity concealment, echoing patterns seen in other stigmatised sexual or gender minorities. The cultural dominance of mononormativity reinforces widespread social messaging that devalues polyamorous identities and practices (Randall, 2021). This implicit bias contributes to internalised stigma, including feelings of shame, guilt, or pressure to conform to a monogamous lifestyle (Henrich & Trawinski, 2016).

Few empirical studies have sought to examine the internal and external stressors that can impact polyamorous relationship quality. For instance, CNM-related minority stress has been associated with elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021), while anti-CNM beliefs, when internalised by polyamorous individuals themselves, are linked to lower levels of relationship satisfaction and reduced commitment to partners (Moors et al., 2020). In addition, polyamorous relationships have specific stressors that require emotional labour, such as maintaining secure attachments across multiple partners and engaging in ongoing communication and negotiation about relationship boundaries (Man, 2023).

Polyamorous individuals also face structural and systemic stressors. These include the lack of legal recognition for multi-partner relationships, discriminatory laws and policies, and the persistence of social narratives that frame polyamory as immoral, promiscuous, or unstable. These broader cultural and institutional forces reinforce marginalisation and further reduce access to affirming mental health support (Moors et al., 2024). As Man (2023) writes, “Due to the experiences of additive stressors at different levels, polyamorists face more challenges in

maintaining their personal and relational well-being". Minority stress theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how the cultural stigma surrounding non-monogamous identities manifests not only in psychological distress but also in strained relationship dynamics and a compromised quality of life.

1.5.2 Resilience

While the minority stress model highlights the challenges faced by polyamorous individuals, it also opens the door to examining how these individuals build resilience in the face of difficulties. Meyer (2015) defines resilience as the ability to survive and thrive in adversity. Resilience in consensual non-monogamy and polyamorous relationships refers to the capacity to thrive amid the stigma and stress associated with non-normative relationship structures. Grounded in minority stress theory, resilience becomes meaningful only in the face of adversity, such as societal discrimination, microaggressions, and internalised stigma (Meyer, 2015). As previously discussed, polyamorous individuals experience both distal and proximal stressors, and resilience plays a key role in how they navigate these challenges.

Recent research suggests that CNM practitioners may develop unique personal and relational skills like self-reflection, emotional regulation, and open communication that serve as resilience factors (Sheff, 2016). Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) conducted a study with a sample of 1176 polyamorous American adults. They assessed four resilience factors: mindfulness, cognitive flexibility, a positive CNM identity, and connection to a supportive community.

They found that "trait mindfulness lessens psychological distress in the presence of minority stress, both directly and by weakening the relationship between minority stress and psychological distress itself". Cognitive flexibility seemed to have the opposite effect. The researchers hypothesise that it might lead to higher rumination in polyamorous individuals because of the higher complexity of relationships they are involved in.

Connection to the community did not influence psychological distress. It is possible that the sample lacked positive community interactions, thus missing the positive impact suggested by the minority stress theory. Sheff (2016) further highlights relational resilience through flexible relationship structures she derived from her research with poly-families. She mentions enduring polyaffective bonds that allow individuals to maintain meaningful connections despite evolving romantic dynamics.

Overall, resilience in CNM communities reflects both individual coping mechanisms and the adaptive strategies built into the relational culture itself.

1.6. Problem Statement

Polyamorous individuals often face stigma, misunderstanding, and exclusion, not only in society but also within the systems designed to support their mental health. The relationships they maintain are frequently pathologised or dismissed, and many report feeling misunderstood or unseen by their therapists and other mental health professionals. Despite increased visibility in public discourse, psychology has largely overlooked consensually non-monogamous relationships, including polyamory.

Invisibility in psychological research perpetuates harmful assumptions, which Moors et al. (2024) describe as the profession's failure to challenge mononormative assumptions. Thus, the clinicians' ability to provide culturally competent care is undermined. In Lithuania, this gap is even more pronounced: no psychological research to date has directly addressed the experiences or needs of polyamorous individuals, with existing studies limited to sociological perspectives. As a result, many psychology professionals remain unaware of the unique emotional and relational needs, challenges, and well-being within these communities.

There is an urgent need for exploratory qualitative research to illuminate how polyamorous individuals in Lithuania navigate their relationships, manage stress, and care for their mental health within a culture of monogamy. As Pallotta-Charioli (2010) notes, qualitative interviews are an excellent way to enrich our understanding through the process of participants sharing their stories. Moreover, Hallinberg et al. (2018) assert that exploratory designs can lay essential groundwork for future empirical and applied research.

This study aims to centre the voices of polyamorous individuals, thereby offering a deeper understanding of the lived experiences that large-scale surveys often overlook.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to explore and understand the experiences and psychological well-being of polyamorous individuals.

Research question:

1. How do the experiences of polyamorous people relate to their psychological well-being?

Research objectives:

1. To understand what polyamory means to different individuals.
2. To find out what the everyday experiences of polyamorous individuals are.
3. To understand what psychological well-being looks like for polyamorous individuals.

4. To offer guidelines for mental health professionals working with polyamorous individuals.
5. To lay the groundwork for future research.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Participants

As this is an exploratory study, the primary criteria for participant recruitment were as follows: participants must be over 18 years of age and identify with the term polyamorous. It is not within the scope of this project to decide who is considered polyamorous. Therefore, anyone who came forward and identified as such was taken at their word.

The participants were recruited by posting the research advertisement (see Appendix A) on the "Poliamorija Lietuvoje" Facebook group, the researcher's Instagram profile, and via referrals. Permission was gained from the Facebook group moderators to share the ad. The ad informed participants of the general research purpose, provided the researcher's contact information, outlined the interview length, and indicated that it would be conducted in English.

Seven individuals were selected for an interview. One individual's data was not included in the final study because it was collected during a pilot interview to test and refine the questionnaire. The participant was a 30-year-old bisexual female, active in the polyamory community, who has extensive experience discussing polyamory. Based on the feedback, some supporting questions were removed or altered, and the overall flow of the interview improved.

The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 49. There were four female interviewees and two male interviewees. Four people identified as bisexual, one as pansexual, and one as heterosexual (see Table 1). Of the six participants, two were non-Lithuanian nationals living in the country. Three participants were married, and one had two children. Participants were not excluded based on their nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, or the grammatical correctness of their English expression during the interview.

Table 1

Participant information, including their age, gender, and sexual orientation.

Participant	**Age**	**Gender**	**Sexual orientation**
Asta	21	Female	Bisexual
Lukas	49	Male	Heterosexual
Audrius	29	Male	Bisexual
Laura	33	Female	Pansexual
Toma	31	Female	Bisexual
Fausta	38	Female	Bisexual

Note: the names of the participants have been changed to preserve their confidentiality.

2.2. Data Collection

2.2.1. Study Paradigm

The social constructivist paradigm informs the study. As Barbosa da Silva (2008) described, social reality is constructed, meaning it is not an ontologically objective reality. Instead, it is an ontologically subjective reality that can be studied from the perspective of objective epistemology. What this means is that individuals interpret the world through a subjective lens: "As individuals live in the world of their personal reality each interprets that reality in their own way leading the researcher towards building a diverse and complex socially constructed landscape that profiles the collective experience in terms of individual knowledge, actions and beliefs, and personal experience" (Boyland, 2019). Boyland further discusses that within social constructivism, we also talk about relational reality – it evolves through interpersonal relationships. Constructivism posits that all knowledge is constructed and that this knowledge will never be perfect (Loh, 2013). In relation to the current study, this paradigm enables us to understand the subjective experiences of polyamorous individuals and their existence within a societal framework dominated by monogamy (Montali et al, 2023). It also explores how their realities evolve in the context of their relationships.

2.2.2. Choosing a Data Collection Method

Qualitative methods, such as interviews, are deemed suitable for studying ontologically subjective data (Barbosa da Silva, 2008). Thus, semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study. As Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) argue, even a researcher, especially a novice, who

attempts to let the information unfold during the interview, still brings their own subjectivity. Semi-structured interviews require more preparation, as they demand attentive and active listening skills (Girdzijauskienė, 2006, p. 24). This may present additional challenges for novice researchers, but it also encourages more profound reflection on the topic and one's role and subjectivity. The unique experiences of the subjects are crucial to the research and may vary, making semi-structured interviews suitable for improvisation and refinement of the experiences discussed. As Adams (2015) asserts, semi-structured interviews allow us to explore specific cues the subjects provide, thereby deepening their responses, especially when we are unsure about what they will disclose.

2.2.3. Developing the Questions

The questions were developed based on the research question: How do the experiences of polyamorous individuals relate to their psychological well-being? Following Girdzijauskienė's (2006, p. 25) advice, the first step was to brainstorm and note down any questions that arose. The questions were then combined, and efforts were made to identify particular themes within them. Once the main questions were established, additional questions were selected. The primary question to begin with is a broad one that encourages individuals to share their experiences with polyamorous relationships. The questions explore the overall significance of their relationships, their openness with others about these relationships, societal attitudes towards them, the impact of polyamorous relationships on their psychological health and well-being, and other relevant topics that may not have been covered during the interview (see Appendix B). The questions were based upon an initial literature review and further refined after conducting the pilot interview.

2.2.4. Interview Procedure

The interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 1 hour and 12 minutes. The average length was 53 minutes. As Jacob and Furgurson (2012) state, an hour is a suitable length for an interview, as it is more likely that people will want to participate and allows for sufficient information gathering without tiring the participant. It is common for semi-structured interviews to last from 30 minutes to over an hour (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The environment for the interviews was discussed with the participants; three were conducted in quiet, private library rooms, two in a café, and one at the participant's home (see Table 2). All the interviews were conducted in person and recorded via the Microsoft Teams platform. This ensured that sensitive personal data was stored safely in the Vilnius University cloud system, with only the

researcher having access to it. Only the audio was recorded. Before the interview, participants were informed again about the recording and given a consent form to sign (see Appendix C).

Table 2

The information in the table refers to the length of the interviews, where they took place, and the length of the interview transcripts.

Participant	**Interview length**	**Interview location**	**Transcript length in pages**
Asta	35min	Café	10 pages
Lukas	59min	Library	15 pages
Audrius	54min	Library	14 pages
Laura	60min	Library	14 pages
Toma	40min	Café	11 pages
Fausta	72min	Home	14 pages

2.3. Data Analysis

2.3.1. Choosing the Analysis Method

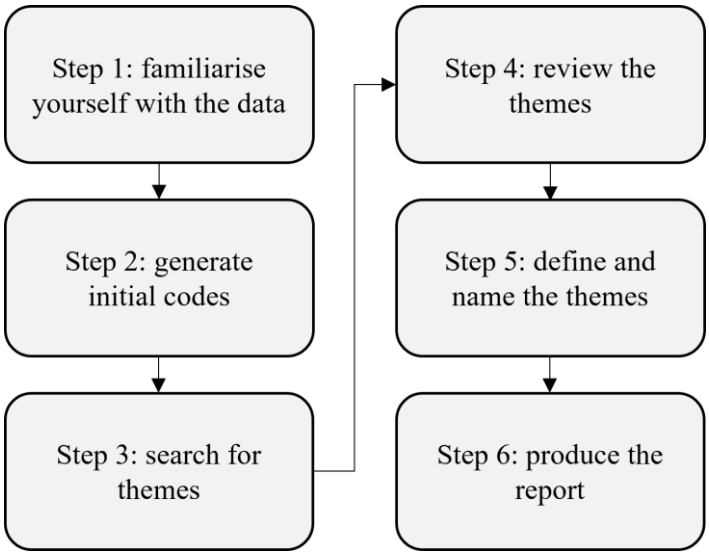
This study employed thematic analysis. As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying patterns in data, analysing them, presenting themes, and detailing the unique experiences that emerge. This tool enables the researcher to process and analyse the rich qualitative data collected by assigning codes and grouping them into themes and subthemes, thereby providing a structured view of the analysed phenomenon. Because of the subjectivity that the researcher brings to this process, this type of analysis is also referred to as *reflexive* thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Thematic analysis was specifically selected for this study because it enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of polyamory, exploring what individuals involved share and the significance of those shared experiences. The topic of non-monogamous relationships is becoming increasingly relevant and recognised in society (Sanchez, 2019). Still, in Lithuania, this area remains under-researched, making it crucial to understand what matters to this group and how their alternative relationships and experiences impact their lives and well-being. The researcher familiarised herself with thematic analysis by choosing the Qualitative Methods module as part of her study curriculum.

The thematic analysis in this study consisted of six stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are outlined in Image 1 below.

Image 1.

The steps of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006)



2.3.2. Analysis Steps

An inductive thematic analysis approach that is grounded in the data has been chosen for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Firstly, to familiarise herself with the data, the researcher transcribed all the interviews, resulting in a 78-page-long dataset (see Table 2 for the breakdown). The transcriptions were read several times while listening to the recorded audio and multiple times afterwards. Initial ideas and patterns were recorded in the researcher's journal.

Secondly, the data coding process began. Coding is an inherently subjective process, and the codes often evolve as the researcher's understanding of the data deepens (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The entire dataset was coded, and the codes were transferred onto digital Post-it notes using a Miro board. Over 180 codes were initially created.

The next step involved searching for themes. In reflexive thematic analysis, theme generation is influenced by the researcher's interaction with the data and all the knowledge they bring to the process (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The relationships between the codes were examined, and the codes were aggregated into 40 potential themes and subthemes.

Following that, specific patterns were identified, and the themes and subthemes were reviewed and merged. A thematic map was created, incorporating corresponding quotes from participants for each subtheme (see Image 2 for an illustration of the process).

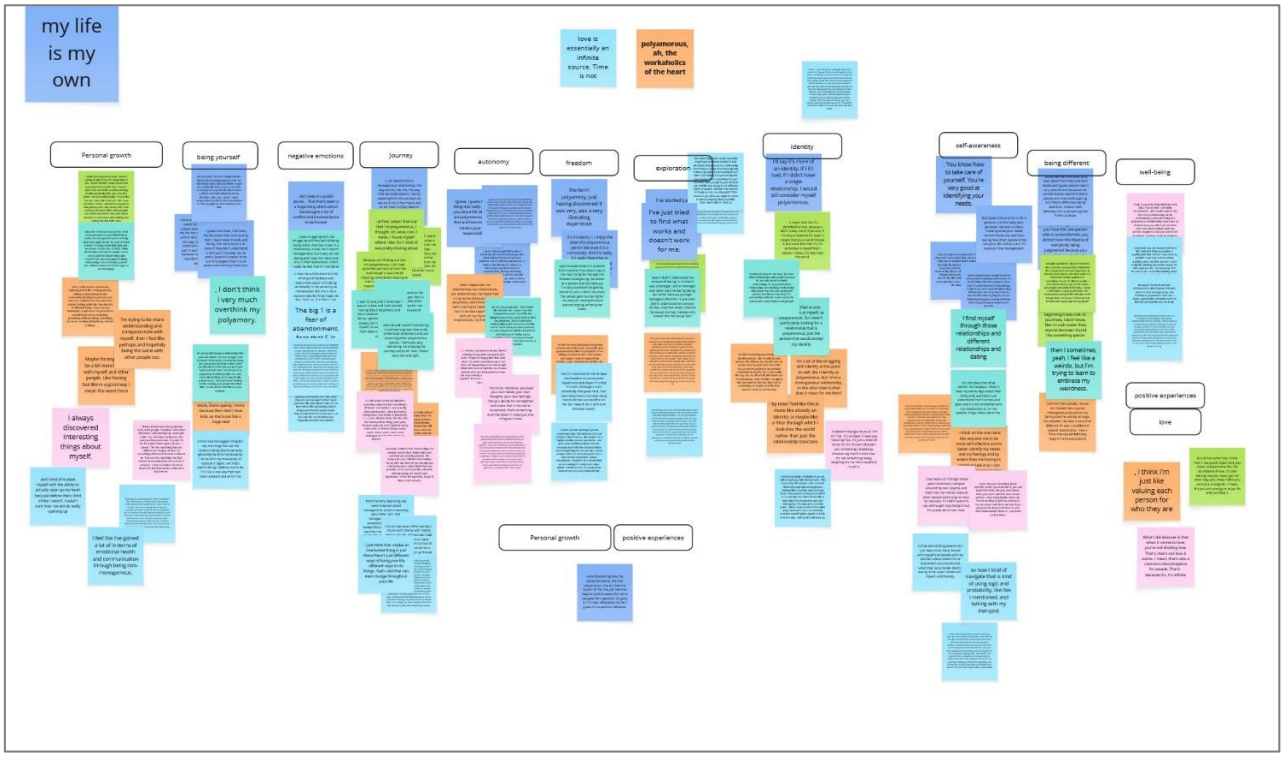
The themes and subthemes were named and defined. At this step, they were discussed with the thesis supervisor, reviewed, and refined thereafter. The themes of Individual Experience, Relational Experience, and Societal Experience were identified, encompassing subthemes such as

Personal Growth, Communication, and others. They are discussed in detail in the Results chapter (see Image 3 for a schematic breakdown).

Lastly, the results were written up. This was a back-and-forth process rather than a linear one, as the researcher revisited previous steps until she felt confident in the analysis. Since English is not the researcher's native language, grammatical accuracy and clarity were reviewed using Grammarly Premium (Grammarly, n.d.), an AI-based writing assistant that provides real-time suggestions for grammar and punctuation.

Image 2

The map of initial subthemes for the theme of Individual Experience.



2.4. Trustworthiness of the Study

The criteria used to evaluate the chosen research methodology are reliability, validity, objectivity, and generalisability, and they are widely employed in quantitative research. Quantitative studies are often regarded as the cornerstone of scientific research – this type of research collects quantifiable data that can be analysed using statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques. However, they are frequently criticised for oversimplifying complex social phenomena and reducing people's experiences to supposedly objective numeric expressions (Sapkota, 2024). The construct of validity does just that – it explains whether the tools chosen accurately measure what they claim to measure. Reliability, on the other hand, explains the

consistency of the data collected (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Therefore, reliability is a criterion that can also be applied to qualitative studies and is often referred to as *trustworthiness* – "Can the findings be trusted?" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Based on the criteria described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Korstjens and Moser (2018) describe trustworthiness via these five dimensions:

1) Credibility refers to whether the interpretation of the data is accurate and derived from the original data.

2) Transferability examines if the research results can be applied to other contexts and different participants.

3) Dependability indicates how stable the findings are over time.

4) Confirmability assesses whether other researchers can corroborate the findings based on the data.

5) Reflexivity involves the researcher providing critical self-reflection regarding their influence on the research.

The criteria outlined above were adhered to in this study when documenting the design and execution of the interviews, verbatim transcripts of those interviews, identifying codes and themes, reviewing and discussing with the research supervisor based on the original research data, collecting and presenting illustrative quotes from the original data, and describing the research procedures and methods used in a detailed and transparent manner.

2.4.1. Sample Size

The sample size has been selected based on several criteria. Firstly, the researcher's lack of prior experience with qualitative research made a smaller sample more manageable, allowing for a more focused and in-depth analysis. This approach facilitates a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. It is not the sample size that may threaten the trustworthiness of the study, but the analysis and interpretation of the data (Rupšienė, 2007, pp. 21-38).

Secondly, there are no universally agreed-upon rules regarding the sample size for qualitative studies, particularly in interview-based studies. This has led to an ongoing debate and various approaches for justifying sample size (Bekele & Yohannes, 2022). One commonly cited criterion is data saturation. For example, Braun and Clarke (2021c) argue that data saturation is not a particularly useful concept in reflexive thematic analysis. Even when it is used, researchers are often required to determine the sample size in advance, before saturation can be empirically assessed. In this study, the participants come from a small, marginalised, and understudied

community, making access more limited but also increasing the value of each participant's perspective.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidelines for thematic analysis on small projects involving between six and ten participants, a minimum of six interviews was deemed sufficient. Even a small number of well-conducted interviews can provide "a new and richly textured understanding of experience" (Sandelowski, 1995).

2.4.2. Reflexivity Statement

In qualitative research, researchers are the tools for analysis. As Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) write: "Qualitative studies rely on nuanced judgments that require researcher reflexivity." Throughout the research process – from creating the interview to conducting it and later analysing the data – it is essential for researchers to understand how their subjective experiences influence and shape their inquiries. Researcher subjectivity is a fundamental part of this process. Their role can also have both positive and negative impacts on participants (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Therefore, being aware of and reflecting on this can help avoid many pitfalls. The researcher in this study does not use reflexivity to neutralise her subjectivity. On the contrary, she chose to capitalise on it as "an integral part of data generation" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This means that neither her knowledge nor her identity can be explained away or merely acknowledged.

The researcher identifies as queer and has been involved in polyamorous relationships, including dating other polyamorous individuals. She actively participates in the LGBTQ+ community, having volunteered for Vilnius Pride events for two consecutive years as well as the queer community festival "Sapfo Fest". Additionally, she has partnered with the Lithuanian Psychology Association's LGBTQIA+ group and has participated in or volunteered at three LGBTQ+ and Mental Health conferences.

Before deciding to conduct this study, she attended a meeting for polyamorous individuals organised by "Poliamorija Lietuvoje." She is familiar with a few members of the Lithuanian polyamory community. This connection fosters trust, enabling her to conduct research in an open, respectful, ethical, and honest manner. Researchers studying marginalised groups often do so out of basic curiosity, without considering the impact their study might have on participants. As Parson (2019) writes, "research procedures and reporting have often served to reinforce and exacerbate the marginalisation of research participants and members of marginalised groups, even when the research was conducted with the intent of "helping" them."

As someone with personal experience related to the studied phenomenon, the researcher aimed to create a warm and trusting environment. Referrals from community members helped her

establish credibility with the participants, assuring them that they would be treated with respect, not merely as a novelty. This fostered a greater openness among the participants regarding their experiences. Familiar with many of the resources mentioned by the participants and as an avid podcast listener and reader, she remained mindful not to let her own experience influence their narratives.

The researcher has her own understanding of consensually non-monogamous relationships, and the definitions she uses may differ from those of the participants. Throughout the interviews, she ensured that participants clarified the meanings they assigned to different terms while also refraining from sharing her own experiences, even when participants referenced the potential knowledge of the researcher. Because this is a relatively understudied group of people, the interviews also had a somewhat therapeutic effect – for both the participants and the researcher – as they allowed them to discuss things that mattered to them.

Debriefing after the interviews proved to be essential. The researcher allowed the participants to share their feelings and thoughts, and promised to share the research data once it was published. She also discussed the research in more detail, answering any additional questions that may have come up.

The researcher employed a structured coding approach to ensure analytical distance is maintained as much as possible during the data analysis. The codes, themes, and subthemes included clear data extracts, and a detailed record was kept with a step-by-step approach to coding that involved peer debriefing with the supervisor. Additionally, an extensive literature review enabled her to evaluate the plausibility of the interpretations instead of confirming the researcher's own beliefs and experiences. Theoretical frameworks supported a more critical, structured interpretation beyond personal experience.

The researcher wrote down her reflections, thoughts, and feelings throughout the research process. In one journal entry, she reflected*: "I started to feel very protective towards my research participants, wanting to make sure they are understood correctly and treated with empathy and respect."* This quote shows that the researcher recognises her personal feelings and the stakes involved for her research participants. She also hopes that her work will benefit mental health practitioners who are currently working with, or may in the future work with, polyamorous or other consensually non-monogamous individuals.

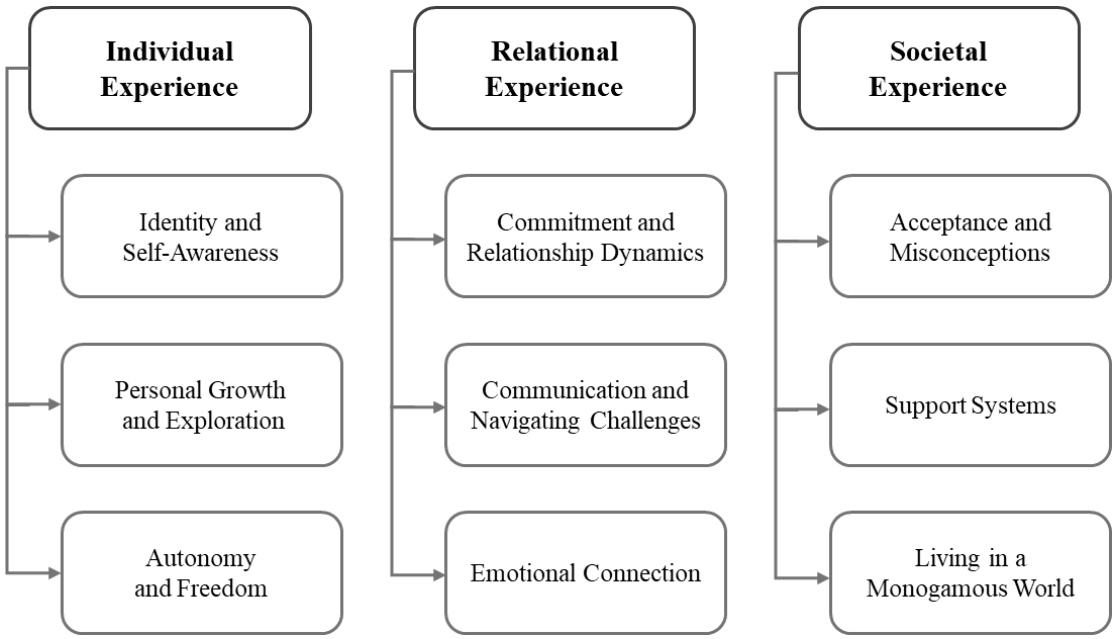
In conclusion, reflexivity allowed the researcher to acknowledge personal influence rather than ignore it.

3. Results

The aim of the current study was to understand and explore the experiences and psychological well-being of polyamorous individuals. Minority stress theory served as the guiding framework, and the semi-structured interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. The data analysis included interviews with six participants (names changed, see Table 1), which resulted in three main themes and nine subthemes: Individual Experience, Relational Experience, and Societal Experience. The themes and corresponding subthemes are illustrated in Image 3 below.

Image 3.

The themes and subthemes that were defined using thematic analysis



3.1. Individual Experience: *"I am my own person" – Toma, Audrius*

The first theme, Individual Experience, focuses on how people view themselves in the context of polyamory. It includes self-understanding, the evolution and adaptability of their polyamorous journey, and the key aspects that allow them to thrive as complete individuals.

3.1.1. Identity and Self-Awareness

This subtheme echoed throughout all six interviews. Identity and self-awareness interconnect significantly and shape how a person feels and acts within a relationship context, and show how much polyamory is at the core of who they are:

Asta: *It's the way I perceive other relationships with people, because it's not only about romantic relationships, it's in general about relationships and building relationships with people, and also not owning the person. And this is more kind of a personality trait that I don't want to be owned, and I don't want to own people.*

Toma: *<...> my, you know, partner is an amazing companion in my life, but I don't really like say, oh, my other half, like, thank you, I'm full already. I don't feel like I'm split in half and then we find my other half or something. So maybe a bit like that when it comes to self-identity.*

Lukas: *Since discovering how my attraction works, like, that polyamory is, like, an inherent aspect of me. I've just become happier, and it's easier for me to navigate life in general. <...> it is a positive influence.*

Understanding oneself enables self-care and self-control. While it is a widely shared view to become adept at recognising one's needs, this process isn't always straightforward.

Toma: *This requires me to be more self-reflective and to better identify my needs and my feelings.*

Lukas: *If you discover something about yourself, even if you don't like it, you can ignore it's there, but you don't know, then you don't control it. And I'm not perfect. I have nasty habits, I have, uh, I'm not an all-good person, nobody is. You also have dark sides and but if you just pretend they're not there or you don't acknowledge them or – you don't control them.*

3.1.2. Personal Growth and Exploration

This subtheme, which was identified for all six participants, discusses the journey of being a polyamorous person. Many of the respondents felt different during their teenage years, and for two participants, this journey began with cheating:

Laura: *I started basically exploring this part in a cheating way, but that's, kind of, people start doing the same way. So maybe it's just circumstances that are judged very much. Yeah, that <...> sometimes I even doubt myself if I'm polyamorous.*

However, after taking that path and trying to understand what was happening, a fuller understanding and engagement in polyamorous relationships began, even reshaping their perceptions of themselves and their other relationships:

Toma: *After I really started consciously exploring it and like, reading about it, talking to other people in the community, listening to podcasts, you name it, I realised how my world view started shifting a little bit. Like all sorts of different things – how I see my friendships, maybe how I in general see commitment versus exclusivity, prioritising different things, identifying my needs, dealing with jealousy, all sorts of things.*

Sometimes the journey into polyamory and self-discovery starts late in life, when you are already married:

Lukas: *Suddenly, I realised that I had feelings for another person that I talked with a lot, and that was actually genuine. The funny part was I still also had feelings for my wife, and that for me actually was a shock because I didn't think that was possible. So, for me, it was like, what the hell was going on? And it's not ingenuine, I'm not the type that, to put it blunt, fucks around.*

Engaging in polyamory is a constant process of exploration, growth, and finding what feels right:

Asta: *Now I found it and I'm exploring it and learning how, how to do consensual polyamory and just exploring other polyamorous people. That's also very interesting. So, enjoying the journey and as for now, it feels very nice and right.*

Fausta: *I kind of trusted myself with the ability to actually open up my heart because before then, I kind of like I wasn't, I wasn't sure how I would do really opening up. <...> I feel like I've gained a lot of in terms of emotional health and communication through being non-monogamous.*

3.1.3. Autonomy and Freedom

The subtheme was found consistently among all participants. When discussing the meaning of polyamory to them, one of the main aspects they mention is the sense of freedom it provides, allowing individuals to pursue their impulses while maintaining a distinct identity independent of the relationship.

Audrius: <…> *at the end of the day, I know that I am my own responsibility* <…> *I think it's very, very paradoxical that you're dating more people, but like you're, you have a better sense of self in this sense in this, in this thing.*

Asta: *It's very autonomic. That's what I like about it. Well 'cause I love the independence and I don't like the clinginess, and it very much doesn't have any clinginess.*

Lukas: <…> *people think that if you're together, you should just become one homogeneous mass and stop existing as an individual. You two together become one, fucking bullshit in my opinion.* <…> *You're an individual, you have your own needs, your own thoughts, your own feelings, that you decide to live together and share that in the same household, that's something else that doesn't make you one thing, you know.*

The freedom for yourself also entails the freedom for your partners, which can bring about different emotional experiences:

Fausta: *So non-monogamy is both the most incredible and freeing thing for me and also can be a major source of stress in my life. But I, that doesn't mean that I would discontinue, I handle it.*

3.2. Relational Experience: *"It gave me a richer life" – Lukas*

The second theme, Relational Experience, concentrates on being part of a relationship system and how it manifests for individuals. It addresses discovering what works best for each person, navigating challenges that arise, and the emotional impact these relationships have.

3.2.1. Commitment and Relationship Dynamics

Each person defines the relationships and dynamics uniquely, but regardless of that, the relationships involve commitment and responsibility for their partners. Sometimes, the relationships are difficult to define:

Laura: *I don't see this kind of model in life a lot. <…> And my relationships, they are not going to escalate the same way. So sometimes I kind of doubt what kind of definition to put on that.*

For some, a polyamorous relationship involves having a primary partner and the freedom to explore connections with others:

Toma: *In my previous relationship, like me and my partner, we lived together, we shared finances, like planning, I don't know, Christmas together. Like, I would see these, like, typical markers that would also apply in a monogamous relationship, too. But then, I really like honouring each other's freedom to do what we want outside of that primary relationship. So, like other relationships or dating or sleeping with other people or, I don't know, you name it. Like, I say we didn't have any, like, rigid rules about that. I know some couples have a veto-like agreement. We didn't have that.*

It is important for the person to find what works for them:

Fausta: *I practice non-monogamy. I think that probably my happiest, a happy place for me, would also be something like monogamish. So, the emphasis on one person, but I'm also, you know, thriving right now, too.*

There is a great deal of conscious effort involved in building commitments and taking responsibility for your partners:

Audrius: *It's not a societal prerogative that we stay together because because we have commitments. We have commitments because we trust each other.*

Lukas: *For me, being in a relationship is also a huge responsibility to care for the person that you are with. It's also suddenly doubled! [laughing]*

3.2.2. Communication and Navigating Challenges

All the participants emphasised that communication is crucial for navigating relationships and is one of the main challenges, along with time management.

Fausta: *I just say like Google Calendar, like Google Calendar, and also like being honest about the time, like love is essentially an infinite source. Time is not.*

Sometimes fears can hinder communication, but there is always a willingness to learn:

Asta: *<…> he does amazing and excellent communication. And so, it's a bit on me. <...> But maybe because I'm scared of losing the relationship, because it's like fully polyamorous, and I appreciate it a lot.*

Time management and communication challenges become more apparent when managing multiple relationships:

Lukas: *What is often also overlooked is that things become exponentially more difficult, at least if you care. If you don't care, things are easy.*

Audrius: *<…> there's this one person that I've known for over 5 years, I guess, and there's this other person that both of us have not been, have known for less than a year. It doesn't mean that, it doesn't mean that we care any less about the well-being of this person. It means that I'm much better at understanding and being next to the person that I've spent more time with, but it doesn't mean that I don't want both of them to be part of my life.*

Most importantly, participants emphasise the importance of bringing things forward, communicating honestly, avoiding unilateral decision-making or keeping things to oneself, and collaboratively overcoming challenges.

Lukas: *The navigation is mostly about talking, talking, talking, talking. If there is an issue, don't walk away from this or you feel some, some, some, some, some struggle <…> And when I notice something is wrong, I actually go after it and it's trying to figure out, sit down with the person, "what, what is wrong?" Tell me, because then we can figure it out. And sometimes it's something I do, sometimes it's something the other does.*

Laura: *If you're unsafe or like something changes to bring this topic to the table and discuss what should be done, really changing or without, I don't know, without making a decision on your own just, yeah, that's important.*

Some challenges that need discussion are perceived as unique to non-monogamous dynamics:

Toma: *You do need to talk more and to solve more things that maybe wouldn't come up otherwise if you were in a just like a regular monogamous relationship? Because again, like, things that maybe would be I'm quoting this "common sense" maybe aren't common sense in a non-standard relationship anymore. But that does require yeah, more time, more effort, being more vulnerable, maybe having more conflicts that wouldn't have arose otherwise to deal with.*

Having partners who communicate proactively and establishing a structured communication approach is also important.

Fausta: *She [the girlfriend] had to be honest with me right away to be, to communicate with me right away and be like, this is what I have availability for. <…> With my husband we manage to have a relationship check-in once a week, but it doesn't always happen once a week. <…>. But they are very important.*

3.2.3. Emotional Connection

This subtheme was common for all the participants. It discusses the emotional aspects of the relationship. What comes across from most participants is that love is an infinite resource and an important part of connection:

Toma: *Polyamorous, ah, the workaholics of the heart.*

Lukas: *What I did discover is that when it comes to love, you're not dividing love. That's not how it works. I mean, that's also a common misconception for people. That's – because it's, it's infinite.*

Laura: *I think that it has good impact and, you know, to experience the, the abundance of love, it's also feeling that you never get the other way, you know, fulfils you, with your energy for, I mean, fills you with energy to enjoy life.*

Lukas: *What is often, I think, overlooked is the understanding that polyamory is about having an actual investment, it can be romantic, it can be, or whatever, but an actual deep relationship with more than one person, and that distinction often is forgotten about.*

The deep bonds formed can be redefined, and the people continue to be a part of life.

Asta: *I just like that I can keep in contact with people that I or either dated or just had a fling or something. People become my friends or just keep in touch.*

The genuine connection is the glue that holds people together:

Audrius: *With polyamorous relationships you're, you're not together because you're not married, you're not together because you look good together. You're not together because you own property together. You, you are together because, because you're good for each other. And that's, that's, that's very genuine.*

For some individuals, it may be the deep connections with others that they seek, while for others, it's the novelty and sexual freedom.

Fausta: *It's somehow both the novelty of it tips the scales, but also the emotional connection and intimacy as well.*

Toma: <...> *that's also the, I suppose like a bit more like casual attitude towards sex. Like it's not like, oh, it's a sacred thing that is between the sacred bond of the couple or the marriage, whatever.*

There's also a feeling of joy for your partner:

Asta: *For me, there's I think a name for this when you're very happy for your partner, being happy for other people this feeling is very nice. I like this feeling a lot.*

3.3. Societal Experience: *"Considered as a normal thing" – Laura*

The theme of Societal Experience explores how the external world impacts individuals. The subthemes delve into the need for acceptance and where it can be found, the biases that individuals encounter, how they navigate coming out to others, where they receive support, and their experiences with both professional and community-based resources, as well as the internalised difficulties they may face due to being socialised in a largely monogamous world.

3.3.1. Acceptance and Misconceptions

This subtheme came up for all the participants. A couple of the participants mentioned being sexualised by either the broader society or the people they are dating:

Audrius: *Yeah, it's it's that once once you once you mention that you're like, your day-to-day life is dating multiple people at once, living with multiple partners at once, a lot of people tend to sexualise that.*

Close friends and family often express concern or worry, and sometimes even make outright negative assumptions or show curiosity:

Lukas: *What I usually get is concern. With the [redacted] community, it's usually concern like, huh, I hope nobody gets hurt like that, you know, it sounds complicated and not gonna lie, it is. In the Lithuanian community, it usually, it ranges from disgust to hm, interesting.*

The general feeling among participants is that polyamory is not accepted in the broader society, and this belief influences who they are open with about their relationships and whether they choose to come out at all.

Asta: *No family for sure, it's pretty conservative. <…> it would just upset them. They wouldn't understand that I would get upset.*

Toma: *I'm a bit cautious sharing it because I still feel like in the general society, it's still not that well understood. And I feel like some people have maybe misconceptions or maybe can be a little judgy. And I really, ugh, double ask myself how much I want to share because maybe I don't want to deal with their maybe a bit intrusive questions or some sort of like stereotypes.*

Audrius: *Individual people tend to be, tend to be more accepting, in my opinion. That is because when it's one-on-one, people, like, people tend to lie less. And when people are in bigger groups and are encountering a topic which is not societally accepted, they might avoid supporting specifically because they wouldn't want to become a minority as well by association.*

The relationships can be seen as less committed or immoral:

Audrius: *I've discussed this fact with people who are against polyamory, and I've had people tell me that it is more ethical to cheat on your partner as long as they don't know than to do a throuple situation. <…> I guess that's the that's the peculiar thing about polyamory – you're you're you're acting immoral by not lying.*

Toma: *That's, like, then you can't commit, or you don't respect your partner, or you don't really actually love your partner, or if you're still pushed in that relationship, and therefore you're trying something out with someone else.*

The main thing polyamorous people seek is acceptance as valid individuals so that they can live their lives.

Laura: *I think it's not necessary for everyone to know many details about how a polyamorous relationship works, but to have the concept that people who can love more than one person exist and are valid.*

Four participants also expressed that it is often easier to talk about their sexual orientation rather than the relationships, or how the relationships allowed them to explore their sexuality more.

Toma: *I feel like there's way more understanding about, like, the sexual orientation spectrum. <…> I feel like with polyamory, it's maybe that's thinking that oh, but it's clearly your choice.*

Societal views can feel like rejection and lead to an overall negative experience:

Laura: *<…> they feel a bit excluded from the society and always kind of goes into the communication with people expecting that they will be somehow rejected. So, I think I have this <…> sometimes difficult to find people to relate in some way. So negative <…> for the moment. [Laura started crying when talking about this]*

3.3.2. Support Systems

Community, according to most respondents, is seen as a crucial part of feeling accepted and understood, and as one of the main sources of support.

Audrius: *You're not alone in this and we're here with you and like you are part of a society and like, some things are difficult, some aren't, but but you're not the only one navigating this.*

Toma: *I'm not alone in this <…> other people deal with that, still people are experimenting and figuring things out. And it's like the resources online are a huge help, but also the fact that it's like people in real life in the flesh and blood that I talk to that I relate to that I see regularly are also going through these same things. That is such a huge help for me.*

Asta: *Communities, like some people who go through similar experiences. So, like the, the polyamorous community, my queer community, BDSM community too, it has polyamorous people and, and just acceptance in general.*

Sometimes the relationship with the community can be complicated, or the experiences largely negative:

Fausta: *Sometimes I notice that I don't want to talk with my non-monogamous friends about things like this because I can feel kind of embarrassed or ashamed, like I'm not like I'm not poly enough or non-monogamous enough, which I know is a total load of crap by the way. <…> But sometimes I do notice that I feel some amount of embarrassment.*

Lukas: *Support systems? There's very little. There's really very little. You would think that for example, there are Facebook groups about polyamory, etcetera <…> Those are no help. The amount of stupidity that you read just boggles the mind. That's one part. What I know just is that people there are usually mostly just busy with themselves and it's egocentrical up to an insane level.*

The experiences with professional support have been quite mixed. Some individuals, either themselves or their partners, faced outright bias and attempts to convert them to monogamy:

Laura: *I recently was diagnosed with ADHD and somehow, I also touched the topic about relationships with the psychiatrist. So yeah, I mean, when you're at a psychiatrist, you're kind of, I don't know, a little bit vulnerable. And it was really shocking for me because I expressed how I work in relationships and how I, how I run my relationships, and it works fine. And she was like, literally half of my consultation, tried to prove me that I'm like, you know, kind of, I should go back to monogamy and I'm polyamorous just because I mean, I don't know how to handle my ADHD or something.*

Lukas: *One of my partners also sought help with the situation because, for her, yeah, well, she's monogamous as hell, of course, but she is now basically in a polyamorous situation for me. So, she needed help with that, too. And her first psychiatrist, or psychologist that she actually talked to, was very biased on that. So, she actually had to say, OK, stop. She went to another psychologist that actually was quite neutral with that and also acknowledged, OK, I have my own issues about this. I would not want this for myself, but I'm here for you, not me.*

Some participants have had very supportive therapists who prioritise their clients' well-being, which can be a crucial element influencing their psychological well-being.

Fausta: *Both my therapist and my psychiatrist are super non-judgmental Lithuanian women. They're awesome. <…> They are incredibly helpful, just pillars of my mental health and community beyond other non-monogamous people, beyond my partners, beyond friends of mine who are monogamous and are just super supportive.*

Those who have not been in therapy would be vetting professionals and seeking polyamory-friendly therapists if they ever decided to seek psychological support, or might choose not even to mention their relationships.

Lukas: *Let's face it, we are in Lithuania. Trying to find a psychologist that doesn't have their own opinion set in that, not allowing it to bleed out into our conversation.*

Audrius: *If I would seek general psychological support, I most probably would not bring up the fact that I'm polyamorous because it would just be more problematic for me to deal with the fact that the psychologist might not be understanding.*

Feeling comfortable with other healthcare professionals can be daunting when it comes to accessing sexual health services as well.

Asta: *All the gynaecologists just, I mean <…> it is possible to test, but you just feel so uncomfortable. You feel like the pressure that you're doing something wrong. And I don't like lying. So, when like they ask about partners and then then they judge you and stuff. So that doesn't feel nice in general.*

3.3.3. Living in a Monogamous World

This subtheme was common for all participants and describes the internalised or external challenges that polyamorous individuals face due to living in a mononormative world. One of the challenges that can arise is dating monogamous people:

Fausta: *I think that there's also an education curve in the beginning that you have to kind of be willing to like to set yourself up and into teacher mode a bit.<…> the biggest thing is keeping your expectations in check because unless they are somebody that genuinely wants to be with a non-monogamous person is OK with a non-monogamous person dating other people, it will end.*

Toma: *So, I'm a bit of like struggling with identity at this point as well, like I identify as polyamorous, but I'm in a monogamous relationship, so like what does it what does it mean for me then?*

As members of a minoritised group, the participants feel they might be perceived as ambassadors of their lifestyle:

Toma: *And then I feel like, oh, I suddenly become the ambassador of polyamory and have to go and educate and explain everything to them. And I'm like, I don't have the energy for that.*

Internalised mononormativity and the necessity to separate themselves from that mindset make relationships more challenging:

Fausta: *I think that even as a non-monogamous person, I struggle sometimes. I struggle sometimes with getting out of like a mononormative mindset, specifically as it relates to my marriage. <…> there's something about with him specifically being married to him, there's like a little like tiny little alarms that that go off whenever he goes on a date. So strange. It's, it really is just like my societal conditioning just fighting back, kicking, trying to like kick all of this away.*

Lukas: *Because you're living in a monogamous based society that actually collides with this whole setup, that whole mindset. And then you just have to, you know, figure things out. Is this, first of all, am I making this shit up or is it really what I'm feeling?*

Some choose to ignore what society may think of their relationship and continue with their lives:

Lukas: *Yeah, quite frankly, I don't give a shit. Society has no effect on me whatsoever. Me, what I do, I do behind my own front door. And I still firmly believe that society nor your government has any say what goes on between behind your front door.*

There may also be concerns about legal rights and the fear of facing consequences or creating a life when the legal system is designed for monogamy:

Audrius: *Privilege is a big consideration because, like when it comes to societal privileges and legal privileges, some things are just essential and you don't want to risk them to begin with <…> Like, I really wish it would be more fair and easier to navigate that in general.*

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to explore and understand the experiences of polyamorous individuals and how those experiences relate to their psychological well-being. This group is understudied in Lithuania, making it important to give them a voice to share their stories. Three main themes were identified using a thematic analysis: Individual Experience, Relational Experience, and Societal Experience. These themes highlight that the sense of autonomy and freedom, the personal growth individuals experience, and the tools gained through communication and tackling challenges result in an overall positive experience. Despite the challenges, people experience an abundance of love in their relationships. Societal stigma influences how open they are about their relationships, whom they confide in, and how they navigate their connections. The interviewees hope for acceptance from wider society and mental health professionals. The main supports mentioned include community, online resources, and adequate mental health support for those fortunate enough. However, some individuals, through their own experiences or second-hand encounters, have experienced mental health professionals attempting to convert them to monogamy or displaying outright bias. While there are internal and external stressors that can be analysed using minority stress theory, many strengths exhibited by the participants also illuminate polyamorous relationships from a perspective of abundance rather than lack.

4.1. Individual Experience

There are many reasons why individuals engage in polyamorous relationships. The participants in the current research shared a lot about the feeling of autonomy and freedom they experience in their relationships, as well as the personal growth that the relationships bring. In alignment with this finding, a review by Moors and colleagues (2017) and research by Sanchez (2019) found that autonomy and personal growth are important reasons for people to be engaged in non-monogamous relationships. The participants in the latter research expressed how much being in non-monogamous relationships enabled them to grow, how they learnt to multiply and merge their love for multiple people rather than divide.

The self-awareness that participants in the current study stated they need to demonstrate to maintain healthy and fulfilling relationships emphasises individual responsibility in relationships. There is a significant focus on owning their needs and expressing them, as well as addressing any challenges they might face with their partners. It is not an easy task, and as the participants themselves say, no one is perfect; they feel they must delve deeper, acknowledge the feelings and

thoughts that arise for them, and communicate that to their partners. As Calhoun-Shepard (2019) uncovered, the participants in their study felt like they had to confront their own shadows more.

4.2. Relational Experience

The participants in this study had varying experiences with polyamory, and their relationships exhibit unique configurations. However, the beginnings of their polyamorous journeys have not been easy, involving much trial and error. They share that once they became involved in polyamorous relationships, everything became exponentially harder. The interviewees note that commitment and communication are at the heart of developing and maintaining good relationships. As Sanchez (2019) discusses in their research, individuals understand that nobody is perfect, and the overall experience, despite the challenges, is a positive one – a sentiment echoed in this research as well. Loving, open communication, and deep commitment are important in a relationship system (Séguin, 2019). Even when challenges arise, as the participants discuss, there is no feeling quite like the abundance of love they receive from multiple romantic relationships. The emotional bonds are essential in encouraging them to continue their polyamorous relationships, even in tough times.

The potential for human connection, a liberatory mindset, and the relationship values of communication and freedom can fuel exploration (Man, 2023). The current study emphasises the decision to engage in such relationships, not influenced by societal or relationship scripts, but rather because it feels good and right for those involved. The exploration of relationships occurs either from a young age or later in life; individuals may either recognise that they have fallen in love or attempt to conform to monogamous norms, eventually realising they are not suited for them. This can lead to infidelity, prompting questions about how they wish to engage in relationships. The constraints of monogamy often motivate a different approach (Man, 2023). Tatum et al. (2023) state that falling in love with someone outside of your partner compels a reconsideration of current schemas, a reassessment of relationships, and an exploration of the possibility of loving multiple people, as also indicated by the participants in the current study.

4.3. Self-Determination Theory and Well-Being in Relationships

The need for autonomy and authentic existence, forming deep bonds with others, and the mastery over one's internal life can be discussed via the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT suggests that motivation, social functioning, and well-being improve when basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Relationships motivation theory, one of the mini theories under SDT, posits that high-quality relationships fulfil

not just the need for relatedness, but also for autonomy and, to a lesser degree, competence (Deci & Ryan, 2014). In the current study, participants have extensively discussed their need for individuality, autonomy, and freedom, alongside their desire to build deep emotional connections with both their partners and the broader community. They have also emphasised that personal growth, particularly in areas like relationships, communication strategies, and relationship management, is essential for sustaining healthy relationships. Their genuine interest in cultivating such relationships and their sense of agency in making the best choices for themselves connect to their need for relatedness. Together, these aspects meet the primary criteria for improved well-being according to Self-Determination Theory.

Research conducted by Tatum and colleagues (2023) indicates that polyamorous individuals often describe their motivations as stemming from a more authentic way of connecting with others; they no longer suppress their attractions, leading to more fulfilling and enjoyable relationships. Similarly, Sanchez (2019) emphasises the significance of independence in relationships. The findings from the current study suggest that participants prioritise individual factors over non-monogamy's role when facing challenges. They also appreciated the emotional dimensions of their relationships, which facilitated deeper bonding and communication with others. The current research argues that the effort put into self-understanding, as well as into effectively communicating and comprehending others, instils a sense of competency in study participants, enabling them to identify their needs and emotions, articulate them clearly, and resolve conflicts as they emerge. The capacity to choose how to interact with others and to redefine relationships is a shared experience, blurring the distinctions between friendships, partnerships, or maintaining connections with past partners (Klesse et al., 2022), showcasing a particular strength.

4.4. Minority Stress Theory and Societal Experience

Examining the current research through a Minority Stress lens (Meyer, 2003) reveals that both internalised societal stigma and blatant societal bias have detrimental effects. Participants exercise caution when revealing their identities to family, friends, or coworkers. Various factors affect their decision to disclose their identity, such as the perceived effort involved, safety concerns, expectations, and the desire to avoid unnecessary stress. As noted by Sheff (2011), polyamorous individuals often feel excluded when sharing their relationships with family, friends, or colleagues, leading to considerable distress for some. Additionally, the internalised mononormative mindset that participants recognise they must decondition contributes to their stress levels, further adding to the emotional and mental load within their relationships.

Outness can vary for different identities, and as the interviewees discussed, it may be easier to be open about their sexual orientation rather than their relationship style. They felt that, at this time, sexuality is more understood and accepted compared to relationships, leading some individuals to conceal their relationship identity. In some cases, they can pass as monogamous straight people to outsiders. As research discusses (Meyer, 2015), concealing identity can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and depression as posited by Minority Stress Theory. Often, the decision to conceal identity is driven by perceived biases (Man, 2023), and several participants in the current study anticipate misconceptions or feel the need to educate others, leading them to choose not to open up about it. The mononormative mindset, while engaged in relationships with monogamous people, also prompts participants to question their identity, as adapting to a monogamous dynamic can be challenging. Integrating identities and accessing community support, such as BDSM or queer communities mentioned in this research, can foster resilience and enhance self-acceptance (Meyer, 2015; Meyer, 2003). As Meyer (2003) notes, one's minority status can serve as both a source of stress and a modifier of stress effects. Most interviewees emphasised the importance of community for their well-being in this study, which aligns with findings from other research (e.g., Man, 2023; Sheff, 2016). Conversely, Whitherspoon and Theodore (2021) found that community does not influence distress levels, and at least one participant in the current study reported predominantly negative experiences with these communities. Hence, the effect and experiences depend on both the individuals and the immediate community they can engage with.

4.4.1. Support From Mental Health Professionals

The participants in the current study demonstrate distrust toward therapists or have had very negative experiences. Some participants, or their partners, reported attempts by mental health professionals to convert them to monogamy. Participants emphasise that therapists must not allow their unexplored biases to overshadow the needs of the client or patient. For individuals facing mental health concerns, it is inappropriate to suggest that they are experiencing issues due to their non-monogamous relationships. Those who vetted their therapists found more adequate support. A successful therapeutic relationship was developed when participants felt accepted and prioritised, even if the therapist admitted to their lack of knowledge regarding non-monogamous relationships. This approach enables mental health professionals to serve as pillars of support for polyamorous individuals, in addition to other support systems.

Due to negative experiences or second-hand knowledge, at least one participant felt they would actively try to hide their relationship identity if they needed to find a therapist to address non-relationship issues. Research (Swindlehurst et al., 2024) indicates that therapists viewing

relationship issues through a monogamous lens cause polyamorous clients to feel misunderstood, inadequately supported, and isolated. Therapists who do not grasp the significance and validity of polyamorous clients' relationships create feelings of shame and jeopardise emotional safety (Calhoun-Shepard, 2019). As Schechinger and colleagues (2018) write, counsellors who demonstrate supportive behaviours, possess expertise in consensual non-monogamy, maintain a nonjudgmental stance, and offer effective techniques for navigating and enhancing relationships are deemed helpful. Crucially, the client's fear of stigma has been recognised as an obstacle to being open in mental health care. In the context of minority stress, it is theorised that external stigma and an internal consciousness of violating social norms heighten feelings of fear in clients, even before starting treatment, leading to hesitation in their therapeutic relationships (Swindlehurst et al., 2024).

The current research shows that mental health professionals must be willing to educate themselves, engage in self-reflection regarding their biases, and actively and openly acknowledge that they work with non-monogamous individuals to provide a secure environment for their clients. Given the main challenges expressed by the participants, particularly in communication, it is essential for any mental health worker to recognise the complexities of communication and support their clients while using a strength-based approach (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020).

To sum up, the findings from this research indicate that the stigma held by society and mental health professionals toward consensually non-monogamous relationships is contributing to unnecessary stress and reduced well-being among participants (Moors et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the emotionally rewarding nature of these relationships, the freedom to shape personal dynamics, opportunities for growth, autonomy, community support, and acceptance within therapeutic contexts led participants to assert that being involved in polyamorous relationships is largely a positive experience.

4.5. Limitations

Like any qualitative study, this research has several limitations to consider when interpreting the findings.

Firstly, the limited sample size of six participants, along with the snowball recruitment method, restricts the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of polyamorous individuals. Although the study provides rich depth and detail, it cannot fully represent the diverse experiences found within polyamorous communities in Lithuania. Still, the research offers valuable insights into the commonalities and differences in how polyamorous individuals perceive, navigate, and articulate their relationships.

Secondly, the interview language could be a potential limitation. English was selected as the primary language for data collection because it is often the default in the local polyamorous community, particularly during meetups and discussions. While most participants felt at ease discussing their relationships in English, there is still a possibility that linguistic barriers might have subtly limited the expression or nuance in their responses.

Thirdly, the researcher had minimal prior experience conducting semi-structured interviews and conducting thematic analysis. Although she completed a course in qualitative research methods and engaged in discussions with her supervisor during the coding and thematic definition phases, her limited experience in applying this method practically may have influenced the interpretive process.

Finally, as is characteristic of qualitative inquiry, the researcher's subjective position inevitably shapes the data analysis. Efforts were made to enhance trustworthiness. These included regular consultations with the research supervisor, critical self-reflection, and transparency regarding the researcher's positionality. However, the researcher's identity may have also positively contributed to creating a safe and open space for participants, enabling more authentic and in-depth sharing.

4.6. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can benefit from moving beyond deficit-oriented frameworks as the foundation for studying consensual non-monogamy. Although examining the negative impacts on marginalised groups is essential for a comprehensive cultural awareness of the obstacles these individuals encounter, it is equally insightful to emphasise resilience, emotional development, relationship fulfilment, and distinctive experiences like compersion.

Researchers should critically assess their own epistemological and methodological assumptions when designing studies related to relationships, especially regarding the implicit framing of heterosexual monogamous relationships as the standard or default model. When adopting a comparative approach, it is essential to proceed with conceptual care, ensuring that non-monogamous relationships are not seen as inferior but as a valid alternative way of relating.

A particularly promising avenue for research may involve studying complete polyamorous relationship systems, such as polycules, triads, quads, and others, instead of relying only on individual experiences. This approach would enable an exploration of relationship dynamics, shared perceptions, and emotional interdependence. Such insights could prove particularly beneficial for relationship counselling practices.

These future directions would not only fill significant gaps in the literature but also foster the creation of more inclusive theoretical frameworks and clinical practices that reflect the realities of relational diversity.

4.7. Practical Recommendations for Mental Health Professionals

This study highlights the significance of developing competence, curiosity, and cultural humility for professionals engaging with clients in consensually non-monogamous relationships, such as polyamory.

Firstly, professionals should avoid placing the responsibility of education on clients. While some clients may remain unaffected, the additional emotional strain from encountering a practitioner's lack of knowledge or biased views can harm the therapeutic relationship. Therefore, mental health professionals must actively pursue training or continuing education on CNM relationships and related identities.

Secondly, it is crucial to acknowledge and confront your own biases. Practitioners should critically reflect on how their personal experiences, values, or commitment to mononormative frameworks may shape their perceptions, assumptions, or interpretations of clients' relationship choices. Ethical practice requires that the client's well-being takes precedence over the clinician's discomfort or unfamiliarity.

Thirdly, it is essential for professionals to cultivate a clinically affirming environment. This involves using inclusive language, demonstrating awareness of diverse relationships and acknowledging polyamorous structures as valid and potentially enriching. Study participants noted that affirming therapeutic relationships, characterised by acceptance and prioritisation, significantly improved their psychological well-being.

Finally, practitioners need to make a deliberate effort to grasp the intersectionality of their clients' identities. Numerous participants in the study identified with multiple marginalised communities (e.g., LGBTQ+, BDSM, neurodivergent), and the interaction of these identities can exacerbate stress and elevate vulnerability to stigma.

In summary, supporting polyamorous or non-monogamous clients calls for more than just neutrality – it requires active involvement, ethical accountability, and a dedication to inclusive, affirming practices.

5. Conclusions

1. Three main themes were identified when examining the experiences and psychological well-being of polyamorous individuals: Individual Experience, Relational Experience, and Societal Experience.

2. The participants' sense of autonomy and freedom, along with personal growth and self-awareness, enhance their well-being and highlight the importance of individual responsibility in maintaining healthy and fulfilling relationships.

3. The effort dedicated to self-understanding and effective communication with others instils a sense of competency in study participants, enabling them to identify their needs and emotions, articulate them clearly, and resolve conflicts as they emerge.

4. The stigma held by society and mental health professionals toward polyamorous individuals is contributing to unnecessary stress and reduced well-being among participants.

5. The study highlights the diversity and richness of experiences in an under-researched and marginalised community, demonstrating that the members ultimately view their participation in consensually non-monogamous relationships as a fulfilling experience abundant with love.

6. Mental health professionals must be willing to educate themselves, self-reflect on their biases, and actively and openly acknowledge that they work with non-monogamous individuals to provide a secure environment for their clients.

7. Future research would benefit from a strength-based approach to explore more empowering narratives instead of primarily focusing on the stressors that polyamorous individuals experience.

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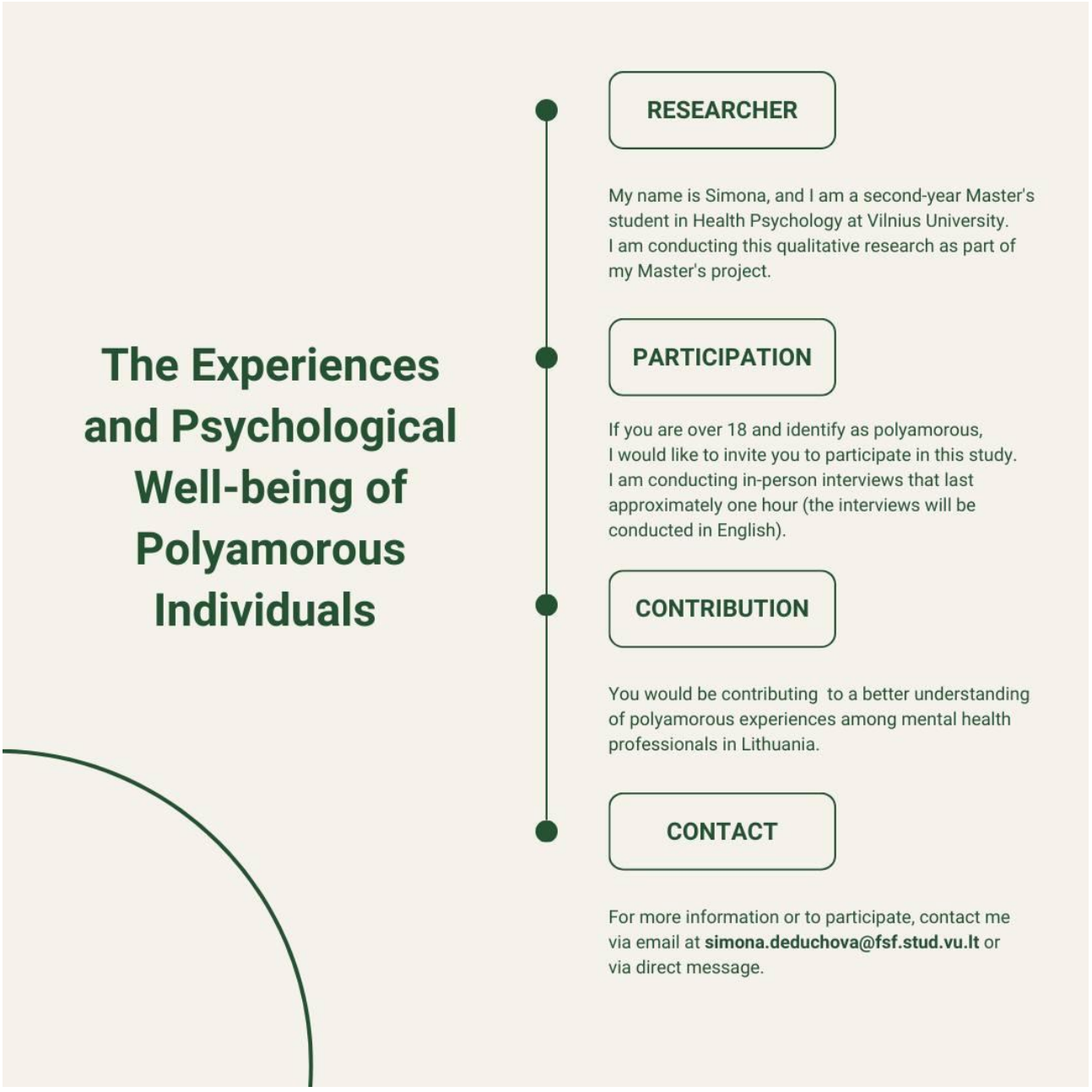
7. Appendices

Appendix A

The invitation to participate in the study.



Appendix B

The semi-structured interview questions that were used in the study.

1. Can you describe your experience of identifying as polyamorous?

1.1. What does being polyamorous mean to you personally?

1.2. How do you navigate relationships within the context of polyamory? What dynamics do you find most significant?

1.3. How has your understanding of polyamory changed over time, if at all?

2. What kinds of reactions have you encountered when sharing your polyamorous identity with others (e.g., family, friends, coworkers)?

2.1. How do societal views influence your experience as a polyamorous person?

2.2. What are the barriers, if any, preventing you from expressing your identity openly?

3. How do you manage or maintain your psychological well-being in relation to your polyamorous identity?

3.1. What specific stressors or challenges, if any, do you encounter due to being polyamorous? How do you cope with them?

3.2. What kinds of support systems, if any, have you found helpful in navigating your relationships and identity?

3.3. Do you feel that being polyamorous impacts your mental health in any specific way? How?

3.4. Have you ever sought professional mental health support, like psychological counselling or psychotherapy? If yes, what has been your experience with that as a polyamorous person? If not, what have been the reasons for not seeking that kind of support?

3.5. What resources do you rely upon the most when you have questions, want to learn more, face challenges, etc?

4. Is there anything about your experience as a polyamorous person that you think is important for people to understand but is often overlooked?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences that we have not touched on?

Appendix C

The informed consent form that was given to the participants to sign before the interview.

Informed consent form

_____

Date

The project: The Experiences and Psychological Well-being of Polyamorous Individuals

Researcher: Simona Deduchova, master's student in Health Psychology, Vilnius University

Project supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Joshua Moreton, Vilnius University

Purpose of the study: I am conducting a qualitative master's research project to explore the experiences and psychological well-being of polyamorous individuals.

Data collection: Data will be collected by conducting in-person interviews that will last about 1-1.5h. The interviews will be recorded (audio only). The audio will be recorded via the Microsoft Teams program and stored safely in the cloud. The audio files will be transcribed, and the persons participating will be kept anonymous during the write-up of the project. This data may also be used for follow-up scientific papers.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You reserve the right to stop your involvement at any stage. If you choose to withdraw, you may request the deletion of all associated data.

Data retention: All collected data will be securely stored and will be retained for a period of one year following the conclusion of the study. After this time, all data will be permanently deleted.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact Simona anytime at simona.deduchova@gmail.com.

I consent to participate in the study and that the interview will be recorded:

_____

Signature