

Need Fulfillment in Polyamorous Relationships

Project Summary Report

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Overview of Project

In February 2012, we conducted a study on need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment in polyamorous relationships. Polyamory is a relationship form in which individuals have consensual, romantic relationships with multiple partners. Individuals may identify as polyamorous without being involved in a polyamorous relationship. This project was inspired by our interest in alternative forms of romantic relationships, particularly how multiple relationships might be related to each other. To address this topic, we used an online survey to obtain information from over 1000 polyamorous individuals who were currently in two or more romantic relationships.

The goal of this study was to examine how need fulfillment in multiple relationships was related to relationship satisfaction and commitment with each partner. Although polyamorous relationships may involve more than three people, we assessed individuals' experiences with two relationship partners because the majority of polyamorous individuals have two partners¹. In addition, limiting the number of partners allowed us to make meaningful comparisons across partners. This report focuses on two questions regarding polyamorous relationships:

- 1. How does need fulfillment in two romantic relationships relate to relationship satisfaction with each partner?*
- 2. How does need fulfillment in two romantic relationships relate to commitment with each partner?*

Characteristics of Polyamorous Participants

Participants were recruited from 320 online polyamory mailing lists and forums. We received 1093 complete responses to the survey between February 1st and 21st, 2012.

The sample included 623 women (57.0%) and 412 men (37.7%), who averaged 37.32 years of age. Generally, the participants were highly educated; 94.5% had completed at least some college. Nearly 90% of the participants identified as Caucasian, and 44% had children. As shown in Table 1, the majority of women (68%) identified as bisexual or pansexual, whereas the majority of men (61%) identified as heterosexual.

¹ Wosick-Correa, K. (2010). Agreements, rules and agentic fidelity in polyamorous relationships. *Psychology and Sexuality, 1*, 44-61.

Relationship Characteristics and Comparisons

To make meaningful comparisons across partners, participants who had more than two partners (36% of the sample) were asked to report on the two partners with whom they felt closest. About two-thirds of participants reported that one of their two partners was their primary partner; the identified primary partner was designated *Significant Other* (SO), and the non-primary partner was designated *Other Significant Other* (OSO). If participants did not identify one partner as a primary partner, exclusive marital partners ($n = 114$) or cohabiting partners ($n = 55$) were designated SOs. For the remaining participants, SOs were designated based on relationship length ($n = 183$), frequency of contact ($n = 18$), or the order in which participants entered the names of their partners into the survey ($n = 8$).

Participants had an average relationship length of about 9 years with their SO and 2 1/2 years with their OSO. Participants spent more time in person, communicated more frequently, and had more frequent sexual contact with their SO than with their OSO. Approximately half of participants (47%) were married to their SO and 70% lived with their SO, whereas 2% were married to their OSO and 16% lived with their OSO. Of participants who were parents, 77% reported that their SO took on a parenting role with their children, and 26% reported that their OSO took on a parenting role. Close to two-thirds of women (61%) were in relationships with two men, and 21% had a male SO and a female OSO. The majority of men (86%) were in relationships with two women.

Participants completed a measure of need fulfillment for both of their two partners. This measure assessed seven relationship needs: Autonomy, Closeness, Emotional Support, Security, Self-Esteem, Self-Expansion, and Sexual Fulfillment (see Table 2 for a description of each need). Each need item was presented twice with the name of the specific partner in the question stem. Then, participants completed the relationship satisfaction and commitment measures for their two partners, again with each item presented twice.

Need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment were high across both partners. The largest difference between SO and OSO was on commitment, with participants reporting higher commitment to their SO than to their OSO. On average, participants also reported higher relationship satisfaction with their SO than with their OSO. Participants reported that their SO fulfilled their needs for closeness, emotional support, and security to a greater extent than their OSO did. Finally, participants reported that they were slightly more sexually fulfilled with their OSO than their SO.

Associations Between Need Fulfillment, Relationship Satisfaction, and Commitment

We used *correlation coefficients* to examine how need fulfillment relates to satisfaction and commitment in two relationships. Correlations indicate how strongly two variables are associated; but they do not take other potentially relevant information into account when assessing the strength of an association. Correlations showed that the more participants reported that a partner fulfilled their needs, the greater their satisfaction with and commitment to that partner and to their other partner. For example, need fulfillment with SO was associated with higher relationship satisfaction with SO and OSO.

We used a statistical procedure called *multiple regression* to examine how need fulfillment with one partner relates to relationship satisfaction and commitment with another partner. This procedure allowed us to take other factors into account when we predicted SO and OSO relationship satisfaction and commitment – including need fulfillment, relationship length, and the participant’s tendency toward anxiety. We considered four potential patterns of results: 1) enhancement: the more needs are met with one partner, the higher an individual’s satisfaction with and commitment to another partner; 2) detraction: the more needs are met with one partner, the lower an individual’s satisfaction with and commitment to another partner; 3) compensation: if particular needs are not met by one partner, getting these needs met by another partner compensates for any negative effects of low need fulfillment on relationship satisfaction and commitment, 4) no association: getting needs met with one partner is not related to relationship satisfaction with or commitment to another partner.

In general, our results indicate that there is little association between getting needs met with one partner and satisfaction and commitment with another partner. There was minimal evidence of enhancement, detraction, or compensation. That is, getting relationship needs met by SO was not generally related to relationship satisfaction or commitment with OSO once we took OSO’s need fulfillment into account. Similarly, getting needs met with OSO had little association with satisfaction or commitment with SO once we took SO’s need fulfillment into account.

Implications and Conclusions

Overall, our results suggest that polyamorous individuals’ relationships with one partner tend to operate quite independently of their relationship with another partner. Thus, having multiple partners does not appear to have a substantial positive or negative effect on dyadic (or couple) relationships. These results can help to de-stigmatize polyamory because they suggest that individuals can have fulfilling, satisfying, and committed relationships with multiple partners without those relationships having a notable negative influence on one another. In addition, there was no evidence that polyamorous individuals were compensating for low need fulfillment in one relationship by having another partner fulfill their needs. Thus, contrary to stereotypes about polyamory, people do not become polyamorous because they are unfulfilled with their primary partner. Rather, participants were moderately more fulfilled with their primary or longer-term partner on several relationship needs, although need fulfillment was high with both partners.

Findings from this study suggest that the assumption that monogamy is the only valid relationship form is flawed. Individuals in this sample reported high levels of relationship satisfaction and need fulfillment in both of their intimate relationships. This study provides initial evidence that, despite cultural norms that demand and privilege monogamy, polyamory may be a viable and fulfilling alternative relationship form.

Thank you so much to the individuals who participated in our study and supported our research. We could not have done it without you!

Table 1

Sample Characteristics by Gender

	<u>Women</u>		<u>Men</u>	
	Average		Average	
Age	34.98		41.65	
Number of Partners	2.57		2.63	
	Women		Men	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Sexual Preference				
Heterosexual	122	19.6%	253	61.4%
Bisexual or Pansexual	421	67.6%	114	27.7%
Gay or Lesbian	16	3.9%	12	2.9%
Heteroflexible	19	3.0%	20	4.9%
Homoflexible	1	0.2%	1	0.2%
Queer	32	5.1%	6	1.5%
Uncategorized	6	1.0%	3	0.7%
Highest Education Level				
Graduate school	162	26.0%	116	28.2%
College graduate	272	43.7%	167	40.5%
Some college	153	24.6%	112	27.2%
High school graduate	33	5.3%	14	3.4%
Some high school	1	0.2%	3	0.7%
Less than high school	1	0.2%	-	
Children				
No	366	58.7%	196	47.6%
Yes	255	40.9%	214	51.9%

Note. Total number of participants = 1093. Number of women = 623. Number of men = 412.

Table 2

Description of Need Subscales

Need Subscale	Description	Example Item
Autonomy	The extent to which a romantic partner encourages and respects his or her partner's independence.	My partner supports that I do things on my own.
Closeness	The extent to which an individual is emotionally intimate and enjoys being with their partner.	I feel closeness and intimacy with my partner.
Emotional Support	The extent to which a partner provides emotional support during hard times.	My partner is there for me when I need comfort.
Self-Expansion	The extent to which a relationship provides excitement and opportunities to learn and do new things.	I have a variety of new experiences with my partner.
Self-Esteem	The extent to which a partner or relationship increases positive feelings about the self.	I feel good about myself with my partner.
Security	The extent to which a relationship is secure and stable.	I feel secure in my relationship with my partner.
Sexual	The extent to which a relationship fulfills sexual needs and desires.	My partner understands my sexual needs.