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# The Religious and Philosophical Characteristics in a Consensually Nonmonogamous Sample

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Consensual nonmonogamy refers to the variety of ways people partner romantically and/or sexually with multiple others. This study examined the spiritual identities of people who self-identify as consensually and openly partnered with more than one person, as well as if and how these identities changed since childhood. Moreover, to deepen previous transpersonal research that investigated how nonmonogamous paradigms of loving contribute to spiritual development, the study also examined between group differences of whether nonmonogamous sexual behavior and spirituality are emotionally linked. Data were gathered from 484 participants; they were mostly college-educated, Caucasian, bisexual women in their 30s, who were raised in moderately conservative, Judeo-Christian households. The majority self-identified as polyamorous. Between-group differences tests revealed that participants reported lower degrees of religiosity and greater degrees of liberalism since childhood, and a change from more traditional to nonreligious but spiritual values in adulthood. Data also suggested that pagan spiritualities may provide more supportive philosophical and spiritual frameworks that normalize and validate nonmonogamous behavior, nonheterosexual interests, sexual desire, and the sacredness of sexuality. Clinical implications of these findings are discussed.

**Keywords:** *consensual nonmonogamy, polyamory, relational orientation, philosophical beliefs, pagan spirituality, LGBT*

In popular contexts, sexual relationships are often regarded as fitting into one of two categories, each infused with social attitudes and assumptions: the faithful monogamous romance or the secret activities of an adulterer or a casual one-night-stand (Ferrer, 2017; Vrangalova, Bukberg, & Rieger, 2014). This mainstream attempt to categorize human sexuality contributes to a gap within which many sexual identities and experiences of loving go unnoticed and invalidated (Ferrer, 2017). Consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) is an alternative to mainstream monogamy and binary notions of sexual relationships as either sexually exclusive or harmfully promiscuous. The central aim of the current study was to address gaps in the literature on multiply partnered people, particularly how this relational choice relates to their spiritual identities and philosophical perspectives. The research questions

addressed were as follows: a) What are the spiritual identities and philosophical belief systems of openly and consensually multiply partnered people? b) How have the spiritual or religious orientations of those in this population changed since childhood? c) Do current spiritual and/or religious beliefs differ by demographic subgroup, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, education level, and/or past spiritual or religious orientation? These questions are intended to address current gaps in research on CNM, furthering the psychological study of human sexuality and spirituality, especially around the issues where such practices conflict with social mores of what is considered ethical sexual behavior.

The population prevalence of CNM is still largely unknown, and research on the subject is still in its infancy (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017;

Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Zeigler, & Conley, 2014; Rust, 2003; Weitzman, 1999). One nationally representative study of adults in 2002 found that nearly 1 out of 5 women and 1 out of 4 men were engaged in nonmonogamy (Aral & Leichter, 2010). However, the authors of that study operationally defined nonmonogamy as having at least one sexual partner outside of the primary relationship within the past year, but did not specify whether all involved partners had explicitly agreed to this arrangement. Therefore, results could include instance of *non-consensual* nonmonogamy, invalidating the study as a true report of CNM prevalence (Rubin et al., 2014). Nevertheless, Hauptert et al. (2017) more recently surveyed two national samples of Americans (nearly 9,000 people), using measures true to the concept of CNM, and found that approximately 1 out of 5 Americans had engaged in consensual nonmonogamy at some point during their lifetime. Moreover, it is estimated that approximately 4–5% of Americans are currently involved in CNM relationships (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013). While there is no way to know whether these numbers represent an increase from prior decades, what is known is that general interest in seeking more information about CNM has been increasing in recent years. Indeed, an analysis of Google searches between 2006 and 2015 revealed that the frequency of CNM-related searches had markedly gone up during that decade (Moors, 2017).

Given the size of the population sector that practices CNM, the social stigma that continues to impact public discussion of this subject is surprising. The moral atmosphere in U.S. society is one that allows more room for the forgiveness of infidelity than for an open, honest, and emotionally committed nonmonogamy (Block, 2008). “The only widely available language that can account for nonmonogamous relationships is that of infidelity” (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 7), and cheating is more socially acceptable than CNM because it still fits within the framework of monogamy (Rabinow, 1994). People who are consensually nonmonogamous, therefore, are not only marginalized because of their involvement in what may be considered a sexually deviant practice by general U.S. standards, but perhaps also because the existence of CNM

challenges the idea that commitment, namely sexual exclusivity, is the foundation of the American family and the glue of romantic relationships (Ferrer, 2018). Thus, individuals who practice CNM hold little power in the sociopolitical discourse on sexuality, identity, and relationships (Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2005; Mint, 2004; Rust, 2003; Sheff, 2005), and more research on this population is warranted.

Although consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) has existed throughout time and across cultures (Mogilski, Memering, Welling, & Shackelford, 2017), and although social visibility and research on CNM is increasing (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Oppenheimer, 2011; Pappas, 2013; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015), religion-based and civil social stigma against nonmonogamous relationships persist (Conley et al., 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013). For example, in the United States it is currently illegal to be married to more than one person. In addition, various individuals and leaders within sects of Christianity, which is the most prevalent religious group in the United States (Pew, 2019), convey moral arguments that often conflate nonmonogamy with the sin of adultery (Bruenig, 2014; Conley et al., 2013; Stone, 2011). As a result, CNM is often framed in Christian religious narratives as a deviant behavior in contrast to monogamy, which is seen as the correct, normal, and only acceptable relational arrangement.

A number of popular works exist that serve as introductions or how-to books in which readers may begin an intellectual, if not physical, exploration of CNM (e.g., Easton & Liszt, 2009), but research on CNM relationships or individuals is rare. A growing number of empirical studies look into CNM while also acknowledging the inseparability of social politics from this topic (e.g., Klesse, 2005; Mint, 2004; Sheff, 2005). This study deepens the extant literature about those who are marginalized based on relationship orientation and sexual preferences by explicitly investigating how they have come to understand themselves as moral and ethical beings in a social climate that is often harshly critical of CNM.

Six studies have gathered data about the spiritual or religious identities of polyamorous people (Balzarini et al., 2018; Jenks, 2014; Nearing,

2001; Sheff, 2014; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007), but no studies to date have investigated how spiritual identities and philosophical perspectives inform the practices of those who are openly and consensually partnered with multiple people simultaneously. Moreover, because transpersonal theorists have discussed the relevance of nonmonogamous paradigms of loving to spiritual development and self-actualization (e.g., Ferrer, 2007; Welwood, 1985, 1996), this study also examines the degree to which nonmonogamous sexual behavior and spirituality are linked. Taken collectively, this study introduces religion as a variable in multiply partnering; it is the first empirical study to investigate the religious identities of multiply partnered people and the intrapersonal connection between sex and spirituality in the same sample.

### **Spirituality Among Consensually Nonmonogamous People**

There is limited research on the religious and spiritual identities of people who engage in consensual nonmonogamy (Balzarini et al., 2018; Jenks, 2014; Nearing, 2001; Sheff, 2014; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007). Existing literature focuses on prevalence, behaviors, and effects of stigma (Conley et al., 2013; Hauptert et al., 2017). Some data has been gathered on demographic factors such as race, sexual orientation, gender, income bracket, and educational level of consensually nonmonogamous people, but little exists on the religious and spiritual orientations of this population (Jenks, 2014; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007). The six aforementioned studies that examined religion in multiply partnered people used specifically polyamorous samples (Balzarini et al., 2018; Jenks, 2014; Nearing, 2001; Sheff, 2014; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007); two of these studies were not peer-reviewed (Nearing, 2001; Weitzman, 2007). Polyamory differs from other forms of consensual nonmonogamy in that, going beyond an open sexual nonexclusivity, polyamorous identified individuals often make emotional, ethical, and interpersonal commitments that may result in longer-term relationships and increased involvement in each partner's life. For a more in-depth discussion on polyamory, see Rust (2003).

Jenks (2014) compared responses from differently identified consensual nonmonogamists (e.g., swingers, polyamorists) and a general population; the study found that those identifying as polyamorous were significantly more liberal, less religious, and more spiritual than the other two groups. Weitzman (2007) descriptively summarized the religious orientations of polyamorous bisexuals. Of the 2,169 respondents in Weitzman's study, the largest percentage identified as pagan/Wiccan (27%), followed by Christian (11%), Jewish (4%), Unitarian (4%), and Buddhist (2%). More than a third of the participants identified as atheist, agnostic, or having no religion.

Walston's (2001) study of 428 self-described polyamorous people found that, even though 76% of the participants in her sample were raised in a Judeo-Christian religion, a majority of participants identified with a nontraditional spirituality or had no current religious identification. When the sample was split by gender identity, about one third of men, nearly half of the women, and approximately two thirds of the transgender respondents reported paganism as their current religion—a significant departure from a Christian or Jewish upbringing. These findings were corroborated by Balzarini et al. (2018), who found that while polyamorous participants most commonly reported that their parents were Christian (70.6%), significantly fewer identified as Christian in comparison to their monogamous counterparts (monogamous, 29.4%; polyamorous, 10.8%;  $p < .001$ ). Polyamorous participants were also more likely to choose the option for "other" religion than were participants in monogamous relationships. Common open-ended responses to the *other* category for both monogamous and nonmonogamous groups included *pagan* ( $n = 230$ ), *spiritual* ( $n = 70$ ), *none* ( $n = 47$ ), *Wiccan* ( $n = 34$ ), and *secular humanist* ( $n = 3$ ).

What is clear from the above described research is that people who engage in CNM do maintain spiritual or religious affiliations even if those affiliations are different from the ones in which they were reared. Some questions that emerge from the extant research include whether paganism or similarly structured spiritual affiliations offer less stigmatizing philosophical structures than Judeo-Christian religions, while still fulfilling the spiritual

needs of those who may feel disenfranchised by mainstream religions.

In a sample of over 1,000 polyamorous-identified participants, Nearing (2001) found that a majority of the participants reported spirituality as being either very important or somewhat important in their lives. However, only about one quarter identified as Judeo-Christian. Nearly half of the sample reported some other form of spiritual practice including paganism (28%), a nondenominational spirituality (e.g., New Age, eclectic; 17%), or an Eastern religious affiliation (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism; 8%); the last quarter reported atheism or agnosticism. This is a marked divergence from national religious census figures that indicate over 75% of the U.S. population is Christian (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). While a majority of the participants in Nearing's research reported various non-Judeo-Christian spiritual orientations as part of their current lifestyles, most (83%) were raised in Judeo-Christian households. These findings, in conjunction with Walston's (2001) data, further suggest that perhaps people who engage in CNM choose to affiliate with unconventional spiritual orientations, such as paganism, even though they were raised in families with more traditional Jewish or Christian sociocultural practices. This is further confirmed by Sheff's (2014a) 15-year longitudinal study, which found that most of her polyamorous participants identified as non-religious or spiritual, and reported affiliation with both pagan traditions and Unitarian-Universalism.

Too few peer-reviewed investigations of religious/spiritual practices among persons who engage in CNM examine religious histories, current spiritual identities, and philosophical perspectives (e.g., conservatism/liberalism) in the same sample. There is limited information on how the beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies of people who engage in CNM inform sexual identity and sexual behavior. Therefore, this empirical study expands the existing literature on CNM within the field of transpersonal psychology by investigating in the same sample how religious and spiritual worldviews changed since childhood to accommodate the broader philosophical worldviews of people who engage in CNM relational orientations.

### **The Current Study**

The current study draws its data from a larger research study that was conducted as part of the lead author's doctoral dissertation (Kolesar, 2010). The aim of the current study was to address gaps in the literature on multiply partnered people. First, the authors sought to descriptively examine the spiritual identities of people who self-selected into a study of individuals who consensually and openly partnered with more than one person. Second, the authors investigated whether these spiritual identities changed since childhood. Third, the authors examined whether and what kinds of between group differences existed amongst the participants. Participants were also asked to describe how liberal or conservative their philosophical beliefs were, and also the extent to which sex and spirituality were connected for them.

The hypotheses for this study were as follows: a) Participants would report more mystical and politically liberal religious/spiritual traditions, rather than more fundamentalist or conservative religious traditions; b) In order to accommodate a current consensually nonmonogamous identity and/or nonmonogamous sexual behavior, participants were expected to report current spiritual and religious identities different than those they had in childhood; c) Participants were expected to report childhood religious affiliations similar to that of the general population; d) As an implicit hypothesis, no differences between demographic subgroups were expected because the examination of group differences was an exploratory research question.

### **Method**

Subjects in this study were eligible to participate if they 1) were 18 years of age or older, 2) were able to read and write in English, and 3) had ever been openly and consensually partnered with more than one person, simultaneously, for a minimum of one year. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling via Internet listservs, online discussion groups, and online social groups created by and/or serving the polyamorous community. In an effort to minimize sampling bias, participants were recruited both from online communities in which the lead researcher was a member, and also from online

communities in which she was not a pre-existing member, but for which she received permission from the group moderators to invite individuals to participate. To further diversify the sample as much as possible amongst this hard-to-reach and marginalized community, key stakeholders who had large personal and professional networks among persons who were engaged in consensual nonmonogamy were approached to begin the snowball sampling. Data was collected via an online survey.

The online call for participation included a link to the study consent form. Participants who wished to continue opted in by checking an attestation box verifying they were willing to participate, and they had not already participated at some point in the past. They also checked a box that indicated an online signature of consent. Next, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and answer a series of questions about their past and current religious affiliations, their historic and current degrees of conservatism/liberalism, and the degree to which they experience sex and spirituality as related. Degree of religiosity was a single item scored on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = not religious at all to 5 = very religious. Participant subjective assessment of the degree of liberalism or conservatism of their religious or spiritual traditions (measured separately for childhood and current spiritual/religious traditions) was an item scored on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative (3 = moderate). Degree of difference between past religious or spiritual beliefs and current religious or spiritual beliefs was a single item scored on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = no difference between past and current to 5 = very different. Degree to which sex has a spiritual quality was a single item scored on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = not at all connected to 5 = very connected.

Table 1 summarizes the sample's demographic characteristics. On some variables, demographic percentages do not add up to 100%, because participants were permitted to check all that apply. These included the prompts concerning gender identity, race, sexual orientation, and religion.

### **Participants**

A total of 484 participants completed the survey. Three participants did not provide a response

to the survey question on gender identity, and nine checked *other* to describe their gender identity, which included responses such as "androgynous," "cisgender," "queer," "refuse to answer," "still working it out," and "two-spirit." A majority of participants identified as Caucasian ( $n = 437, 90.3\%$ ), and of the 15 participants who reported another race/ethnicity, seven described their race as "Jewish," four described their race as "human," two described their race as "American," and two wrote in "refuse to answer."

Participants were asked, "How do you describe your sexual orientation?" and were invited to check all that applied from a list of 11 options plus an opportunity to write in their own responses. More than half (283, 58.5%) of participants selected a bisexual ( $n = 176, 36.4\%$ ) or pansexual ( $n = 107, 22.1\%$ ) orientation. More than a third of the overall sample ( $n = 206, 42.6\%$ ) selected that kink/BDSM (bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, sadism-masochism) was part of their sexual orientation. Some ( $n = 18, 3.7\%$ ) indicated that they are questioning their sexual orientations, and five (1.0%) reported that they identified as asexual. Of the 15 individuals who identified their sexual orientations as "other," participants used the following terms or phrases to describe their sexual orientations: "omnisexual," "sapiosexual," "heteroflexible," "I love gay men and bi men," "omnivorous," "open," "trysexual," and "zoosexual." The sample ranged across 12 countries. The majority ( $n = 436, 90.1\%$ ) resided in the United States, and among the other countries represented in the sample were Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, Pakistan, Singapore, Sweden, and Thailand ( $n = 1, 0.2\%$  each). Nine participants (1.9%) left this question blank. The majority of the U.S. residents resided in the West Coast, including California ( $n = 139, 28.7\%$  of U.S. sample), Washington ( $n = 62, 12.8\%$ ), or Oregon ( $n = 27, 5.6\%$ ). Thirty-nine (78.0%) of the 50 United States were represented in the sample.

A majority of the sample ( $n = 471, 97.3\%$ ) had at least some college education, and just over one quarter (28.5%) reported a graduate level education. Three participants left the education question blank. A majority of participants were employed either full-time ( $n = 247, 51.0\%$ ) or part-time ( $n =$

**Table 1. Demographics of sample**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>n</i>	%
<b>Age</b>					
Range 21–73	39.8	10.4	<b>Geographic Region</b>		
<b>Income</b>	\$81,665	\$66,334	USA	436	90.1%
<b>Household Size</b>			Canada	15	3.1%
Range 1–7	2.5	1.4	Australia	9	1.9%
<b>Number of Partners</b>			United Kingdom	5	1.0%
Range 0–15	3.3	3.2	Other	10	2.1%
		<i>n</i>	<b>Education</b>		
<b>Gender</b>		%	High School Diploma	10	2.1%
Woman	279	57.6%	Some College	110	22.7%
Man	180	37.2%	BA / BS Degree	186	38.4%
Gender Fluid	35	7.2%	Associate's Degree	37	7.6%
Transgender or Genderqueer	20	4.1%	MA	90	18.6%
Transsexual	16	3.3%	PhD	37	7.6%
Other	9	1.8%	<b>Employment</b>		
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			Full-Time	247	51.0%
Caucasian	437	90.3%	Part-Time	103	21.3%
First Nation / Indigenous	16	3.3%	Other	72	14.9%
Latino / Chicano	13	2.7%	<b>Relationship Structure</b>		
African American / Black	10	2.1%	Dating	2	0.4%
Asian	6	1.2%	Exploring	1	0.2%
Middle Eastern	1	0.2%	Nonsexual Lovers	112	23.1%
Mixed Race	38	7.9%	Open Relationship	189	39.0%
Other	15	3.1%	Sexual Friendship	158	32.6%
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>			Intimate Network		
Heterosexual / Straight	112	23.1%	Nonhierarchical Polyamory	142	29.3%
Mostly Heterosexual	148	30.6%	Ranked Relationships	111	22.9%
Bisexual	176	36.4%	Polyfidelity	52	10.7%
Pansexual	107	22.1%	Swinging	47	9.7%
Gay	11	2.3%	Monogamous	38	7.9%
Lesbian	13	2.7%	Group Marriage	28	5.8%
Queer	117	24.2%	Secret Sexual Relationship		
Other	15	3.1%	(e.g., Cheating)	8	1.7%

103, 21.3%). Among the  $n = 72$  who indicated their employment status as *other*, most ( $n = 61$ , 84.7%) were “self-employed,” “freelance,” or “consultant(s).” This included eight “stay at home parent(s),” two who reported receiving “social welfare,” and one who indicated that they were “semi-retired.” Five participants left the question blank.

When household incomes were divided by the number of individuals within the household, the individual income estimates ranged from \$0 to \$400,000, with an average of \$38,370 ( $SD = \$37,329$ ). For comparison, in 2010 the median household income in the United States was \$49,445 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Several

respondants ( $n = 33$ , 6.8%) left the question blank. The online Forex currency converter was used to convert income estimates from other countries to U.S. dollars when applicable. The following exchange rates were used: Australian dollar (AUD \$1 = \$0.9256), British pound (£1 = \$1.5168), Canadian dollar (CAD \$1 = \$0.9905), Euro (€ 1 = \$1.3229), and U. A. E. dirham (AED 1 = \$0.2723).

**Structure of consensually nonmonogamous relationship.** A majority of the participants were involved with two or more partners at the time of study ( $n = 381$ , 78.7%). The largest portions of participants indicated that they were involved in *open relationships* ( $n = 189$ , 39.0%), *sexual friendships* ( $n = 158$ , 32.6%), and *intimate network/nonhierarchical polyamory* ( $n = 142$ , 29.3%). Almost half of the sample ( $n = 233$ , 48.1%) checked multiple relational structures, indicating they were currently involved with different types of relationships at the time of the study. Participants reported a variety of lengths of time as their longest periods of multiple partnership, from one year ( $n = 95$ , 19.6%) to more than 15 years ( $n = 41$ , 8.5%), ( $M = 3-5$  years,  $SD = 2.4$ ) with the largest segment of the sample reporting one to two years as their longest time period. Participants were also asked if being multiply partnered was part of their sexual identities, and 340 individuals (70.2%) said yes. This subgroup was then asked to provide a description for how they usually identify. Descriptions of these identities were varied, with the most common responses included use of the word polyamory ( $n = 256$ , 52.9%) or nonmonogamy ( $n = 23$ , 4.8%).

### Statistical Analyses

The demographic data are represented in frequencies and means. Paired-sample *t*-tests were used to determine mean differences between past and present numeric data. An independent samples *t*-test was used to investigate whether this study sample was significantly different from the general U.S. population in their religious or spiritual affiliations. One-way, between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) models were used to test for mean differences between demographic groupings on the outcome variables of interest.

## Religion and Consensual Nonmonogamy

## Results

This next section summarizes the current descriptive trends as well as statistical examinations of any changes reported in spiritual and religious identities and the philosophical belief systems of openly and consensually multiply partnered people.

### Childhood religious affiliations

The majority of participants ( $n = 361$ , 74.6%) indicated that they were raised with a religious or spiritual affiliation; nearly one fifth of the sample ( $n = 90$ , 18.6%) indicated that they were not raised with a religious or spiritual affiliation, and  $n = 62$  (12.8%) indicated that they were raised as either atheists or agnostics. Among the participants who indicated they were not raised with a religious affiliation ( $n = 90$ ), when prompted to indicate in their own words if they had been raised with some other affiliation in childhood, approximately one third ( $n = 29$ , 32%) described their childhood affiliations as either “culturally Christian but not religious,” “exposed to many,” “culturally Jewish but not religious,” “personal choice,” or “spiritual but not religious,” “indifferent,” “mixed,” “sometimes,” or “secular humanism;” two participants did not provide an explanation.

Participants were also asked to select all that applied from a list of religions that they were raised with in their childhood home. Table 2 summarizes the various childhood religious denominations for the study sample.

### Current religious affiliations

A majority of the sample ( $n = 310$ , 64%) indicated that they currently had a religious or spiritual affiliation; approximately one third ( $n = 151$ , 31.2%) indicated that they did not currently have a religious or spiritual affiliation, and  $n = 22$  participants (4.5%) marked *other*. Table 2 summarizes the various current religious denominations for the study sample. Of the  $n = 22$  participants who marked *other*, current religious or spiritual affiliations were described as “individual” ( $n = 13$ ), “atheist” ( $n = 5$ ), “agnostic” ( $n = 3$ ), and “unsure” ( $n = 1$ ). When participants were directly asked if either atheism or agnosticism was their primary orientation,  $n = 158$  (32.6%) marked yes.

Table 3 crosstabulates the number of participants who reported any childhood affiliations (or not) with the number of participants who reported



	Childhood Affiliation		Current Affiliation			Childhood Affiliation		Current Affiliation	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Protestant	67	13.8%	17	3.5%	Muslim	1	0.2%	2	0.4%
Protestant: Anglican or Episcopalian	24	5.0%	9	1.9%	Muslim: Shia	0		0	
Protestant: Baptist	51	10.5%	4	0.8%	Muslim: Sufi	1	0.2%	6	1.2%
Protestant: Church of Christ	6	1.2%	1	0.2%	Muslim: Sunni	2	0.4%	0	
Protestant: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	25	5.2%	0		Muslim: Other	0		0	
Protestant: Lutheran	37	7.6%	5	1.0%	Hindu	1	0.2%	7	1.4%
Protestant: Methodist	34	7.0%	3	0.6%	Hindu: Shaivism	1	0.2%	5	1.0%
Protestant: Pentecostal	11	2.3%	0		Hindu: Shaktism	0		6	1.2%
Protestant: Presbyterian	32	6.6%	3	0.6%	Hindu: Vaishnavism	0		0	
Protestant: Other	15	3.1%	5	1.0%	Hindu: Other	1	0.2%	5	1.0%
Roman Catholic	113	23.3%	11	2.3%	Buddhist	11	2.3%	36	7.4%
Catholic: Other	9	1.9%	4	0.8%	Buddhist: Mahayana	1	0.2%	8	1.7%
Christian Orthodox	3	0.6%	1	0.2%	Buddhist: Theravada	1	0.2%	2	0.4%
Christian Orthodox: Eastern	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	Buddhist: Vajrayan	0		9	1.9%
Christian Orthodox: Other	2	0.4%	1	0.2%	Buddhist: Other	1	0.2%	4	0.8%
Jewish	12	2.5%	7	1.4%	Jain	1	0.2%	1	0.2%
Jewish: Orthodox	4	0.8%	0		Taoist	4	0.8%	24	5.0%
Jewish: Conservative	10	2.1%	2	0.4%	Shinto	1	0.2%	4	0.8%
Jewish: Reform	21	4.3%	8	1.7%	Confucian	0		1	0.2%
Jewish: Reconstructionist	2	0.4%	4	0.8%	Bahai	0		4	0.8%
Jewish: Renewal	0		4	0.8%	Sikh	0		0	
Jewish: Humanistic	4	0.8%	6	1.2%	Zoroastrian	0		0	
Jewish: Kabbalah	0		1	0.2%	Pagan or Wiccan	13	2.7%	144	29.8%
Jewish: Other	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	Shamanism	6	1.2%	52	10.7%
<b>Table 2. Demographic profile of survey by childhood and current religious denomination.</b>					Native American / Indigenous Traditions	8	1.7%	30	6.2%
					Unitarian Universalist	15	3.1%	51	10.5%
					Quaker / Friends	9	1.9%	14	2.9%
					Spiritual But Not Religious	23	4.8%	131	27.1%
					Other	37	7.6%	17	3.5%
					No Religious Affiliation	23	4.8%	152	31.4%

any current religious affiliations (or not). Two thirds ( $n = 250$ , 69.3%) of those who were affiliated with a religious or spiritual tradition in childhood also currently had an affiliation; less than one third ( $n = 100$ , 27.7%) of those who had a childhood affiliation currently did not have an affiliation. Of those who did not affiliate with a religion or spiritual tradition

in childhood ( $n = 90$ , 18.6%; No Childhood), nearly half ( $n = 43$ , 47.8%) were currently affiliated with a religious or spiritual tradition; the other half ( $n = 42$ , 46.7%) were still not currently affiliated.

#### Changes in spiritual/religious orientations

Protestant faiths ( $n = 302$ , 62.4%) and Catholicism ( $n = 122$ , 25.2%) were the most common

**Table 3. Crosstabulation of Any Childhood by Any Current Religious Affiliations**

Current Religious Affiliation	Childhood Religious Affiliation					
	Yes		No		Other	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	250	51.7%	43	8.9%	15	3.1%
No	100	20.7%	42	8.7%	7	1.4%
Other	10	2.1%	5	1.0%	7	1.4%

responses for childhood religious denominations. The most commonly selected spiritual or religious affiliations at the time of study participation were paganism or Wicca ( $n = 144$ , 29.8%) and eclectic spirituality ( $n = 131$ , 27.1%). Thus, overall the trend observed in this sample was a shift in religious and spiritual affiliation from more mainstream religious affiliations in childhood to more eclectic affiliations at the time of study participation.

More than half of the respondents ( $n = 267$ , 55.2%) indicated they were raised a *little bit religious* ( $n = 156$ , 32.2%) or *moderately religious* ( $n = 111$ , 22.9%). In contrast, the majority of participants ( $n = 295$ , 61.0%) indicated they were currently either *not at all religious* ( $n = 197$ , 40.7%) or a *little bit religious* ( $n = 98$ , 20.2%).

When asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale how different the participants believed their childhood spiritual or religious beliefs were from their and current beliefs, the mean Likert scale rating was  $M = 3.55$  (where 3 = *moderately different*),  $SD = 1.39$ . More than a third of participants ( $n = 170$ , 35.1%) indicated that the difference between childhood and current religious or spiritual beliefs was *very different*. Approximately one fifth ( $n = 104$ , 21.5%) reported that the difference was *considerably different*,  $n = 73$  (15.1%) reported that the difference was *moderately different*,  $n = 81$  (16.7%) reported the difference was *a little different*, and  $n = 50$  (10.3%) indicated that there was *no difference between past and current* religious or spiritual beliefs.

Paired-samples *t*-tests were used to investigate whether there were statistically significant mean differences between participants' childhood and current religiosity. Participants' mean score for childhood religiosity was  $M = 2.68$  (where 2 = *a little bit religious* and 3 = *moderately religious*,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

In contrast, participants' mean scores for current religiosity was ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ),  $t(472) = 5.75$ ,  $p < .001$  (two-tailed). In other words, although the difference is small in magnitude, participants rated themselves as significantly less spiritual or religious at the time of study than during their childhood.

A one-way, between-subjects ANOVA test for mean differences in current religiosity across current religious denominations revealed a significant difference,  $F(14, 457) = 24.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , and Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons indicated that those who currently identified as atheist, agnostic, or as having no religion reported a significantly lower current religiosity than all of their counterparts, except those who identified as Taoist or Muslim. Those who currently identified with an eclectic spirituality reported a significantly lower religiosity than those who identified as Protestant, pagan/Wicca, mixed pagan/shamanism/indigenous traditions, and those of mixed religious denominations. Those affiliated with a mix of pagan/shamanism/indigenous traditions reported significantly higher religiosity than Unitarian Universalists (Table 4).

### Sex and spirituality

A majority of participants ( $n = 307$ , 63.4%) indicated that sex had a spiritual quality for them. Approximately one fifth of the sample ( $n = 98$ , 20.2%) indicated that sex and spirituality were *very connected*, another fifth ( $n = 106$ , 21.9%) indicated that sex and spirituality were *considerably connected*,  $n = 76$  (15.7%) indicated *moderately connected*,  $n = 112$  (23.1%) indicated *a little bit connected*, and  $n = 85$  (17.6%) individuals reported sex and spirituality were *not at all connected*. On a 5-point likert rating scale question, the mean score for the sample was  $M = 3.04$  (where 3 = *moderately connected*),  $SD = 1.41$ .

A one-way, between-subjects ANOVA that tested for mean differences in the spiritual quality of sex across current religious denomination revealed a significant difference,  $F(14, 459) = 12.18$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that those who identified as Jewish, atheists, agnostics, or those having no religion reported significantly less spiritual quality of sex than pagans, mixed pagan, shamanism, and indigenous traditions, those with mixed religious denominations, and those with an eclectic spirituality (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Means and standard deviations for Childhood and Current Religiosity, Liberalism/Conservatism, and Spiritual Quality of Sex by religious denomination

Denomination	Childhood Religiosity		Childhood Liberalism / Conservatism		Current Religiosity		Childhood Liberalism / Conservatism		Spiritual Quality of Sex	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Protestant	3.68	1.16	3.79	1.44	3.09	0.97	2.09	0.92	2.79	1.27
Catholic	3.00	0.71	3.40	1.82	2.67	1.21	2.67	1.37	2.60	1.14
Jewish	2.17	1.27	1.82	0.87	2.21	1.05	1.21	0.43	1.92	0.67
Unitarian Universalist	2.79	1.48	2.79	1.89	2.23	1.42	1.21	0.58	2.71	1.33
Eclectic	2.63	1.30	3.15	1.40	1.93	1.05	1.10	0.30	3.55	1.25
Buddhist	2.36	1.57	3.30	1.42	2.60	1.43	1.27	0.65	3.36	1.57
Taoist	2.00	1.55	2.50	1.76	2.29	1.70	1.00	0.00	2.17	1.84
Muslim	3.00	1.41	3.50	0.70	2.50	0.70	1.50	0.71	3.00	2.83
Pagan	2.82	1.21	3.14	1.48	3.29	1.16	1.27	0.60	3.70	1.03
Earth-Based Mix	2.87	1.06	3.27	1.49	3.69	1.14	1.13	0.50	4.13	0.91
Indigenous	3.50	2.12	4.00	1.42	4.00	1.00	1.30	0.00	2.50	0.71
Mixed	2.78	1.18	3.13	1.40	2.88	1.24	1.32	0.70	3.75	1.16
Atheistic/Agnostic	2.51	1.22	2.88	1.38	1.17	0.46	1.24	0.62	2.17	1.29

#### Comparisons of the religious/spiritual affiliation between the sample and the U.S. population

An independent samples *t*-test was used to investigate whether this study sample was significantly different from the general U.S. population in their religious or spiritual affiliations. The sample mean was calculated by assigning a value of 1 to the presence of religious or spiritual denomination and a 0 to the absence of religious or spiritual denomination ( $M = .64$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). The statistic used for the national sample ( $M = .83$ ) was obtained from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008). The test indicated a significant difference between the two means,  $t(482) = -8.62$ ,  $p < .001$  (two-tailed), indicating that fewer people in the current study sample population have a religious affiliation than among the general U.S. population.

#### Liberalism/Conservatism of religious or spiritual traditions

Participants' reports of the the degree of liberalism or conservatism of the religious or spiritual traditions in which they were raised was fairly evenly distributed with approximately 39% ( $n = 187$ ) of the sample indicating a more conservative spiritual or religious bent and approximately 39%

( $n = 187$ ) of the sample indicating a more liberal bent (with  $n = 100$ , 21% reporting in the moderate range). Thus, it is no surprise that the overall mean rating of liberalism or conservatism in childhood religious or spiritual traditions for the sample was  $M = 3.00$  (moderate),  $SD = 1.49$ . In contrast, over three quarters of participants ( $n = 371$ , 76.7%) reported the degree of liberalism or conservatism of their current religious or spiritual traditions as *very liberal*, and an additional 11% ( $n = 52$ ) reported as *a little bit liberal*. The

overall mean rating of current liberal/conservatism of current religion/spiritual traditions was ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ).

Paired-sample *t*-tests were used to investigate whether there were significant differences between participants' childhood and current spiritual/religious liberalism or conservatism. A two-tailed *t*-test for mean differences in participants' scores for past and current spiritual/religious liberalism/conservatism was significant,  $t(451) = 24.36$ ,  $p < .001$ . In other words, overall, participants reported lower conservatism (higher liberalism) at the time of study participation than for their childhood years.

A one-way, between-subjects ANOVA that tested for mean differences on childhood spiritual/religious liberalism or conservatism—whether participants were affiliated with a spiritual/religious group in childhood or not—revealed a significant difference,  $F(1, 472) = 52.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants who were affiliated with a spiritual/religious group in childhood reported greater conservatism (less liberalism) ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) than participants who were not affiliated with any spiritual/religious group in childhood ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ).

A one-way, between-subjects ANOVA that tested for mean differences on current spiritual/religious liberalism/conservatism across participants' specific current religious denominations also revealed a significant difference,  $F(14, 441) = 5.53, p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that those who currently identified as Protestant or Catholic reported significantly higher conservatism (lower degree of liberalism) than all of their counterparts except those identifying as Muslim, Jewish Orthodox, or those who practiced Native American/indigenous traditions (Table 4).

### **Sexual orientation**

A one-way, between-subjects ANOVA that tested for mean differences on current liberalism/conservatism by sexual orientation group was also significant,  $F(2, 455) = 10.57, p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the mean score for heterosexual and mostly heterosexual individuals ( $M = 1.44, SD = .81$ ) was significantly higher than the mean score for gay, lesbian, and mostly homosexual individuals ( $M = 1.13, SD = .43$ ) and bi/pansexual individuals ( $M = 1.17, SD = .47$ ), indicating that the heterosexual participants reported higher conservatism (lower liberalism) than the nonheterosexual participants in the sample. Similarly, heterosexual and mostly heterosexual individuals ( $M = 3.36, SD = 1.42$ ) reported less difference on average between their childhood and current conservative/liberal beliefs than bi/pansexual individuals ( $M = 3.69, SD = 1.35$ ) at the  $p < .05$  level,  $F(2, 474) = 3.75, p = .02$ .

### **Age**

A one-way, between-subjects ANOVA test on the spiritual quality of sex by age group revealed a significant difference,  $F(5, 406) = 3.88, p < .001$  (see Table 1 for the categorical age groupings). Post hoc comparisons indicated that the mean association score for the 21- to 30-year-old participants ( $M = 2.57, SD = 1.31$ ) was significantly lower than both the mean score for the 51- to 60-year-old participants ( $M = 3.52, SD = 1.38$ ) and the mean score for the 61- to 70-year-old participants ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.53$ ). In other words, the youngest subgroup of the sample revealed a significantly lower spiritual quality of sex than their counterparts over age 50.

## **Religion and Consensual Nonmonogamy**

## **Discussion**

The modal survey participant was a college-educated, white, bisexual or pansexual woman in her 30s, who was raised Christian (Protestant or Catholic) but is pagan and resides in the Pacific Time Zone of the United States at the time of the survey. The sample reported a decrease in religiosity and a strong increase in liberalism since childhood; the majority reported a polyamorous identity and that they experience sex and spirituality as moderately connected.

### **Sample similarities to prior research**

The data presented here are similar to those presented in prior studies (Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010; Fernandes, 2008; Klesse, 2006; Nearing, 2001; Sheff, 2005). Participants in these prior studies were found to exist among mostly middle-class to upper-middle-class socioeconomic groups. The current study's sample was primarily employed with an above-average household income. However, after accounting for the number of partners supported by this income, the average household income dropped considerably from \$81,665 annually to \$38,370.

The childhood religious patterns in these data are similar to the childhood religious denominations found in Nearing's (2001) and Walston's (2001) studies. Moreover, the childhood religious orientations of the sample were congruent with the U.S. census statistics on national trends for religion (e.g., mostly Christian/Catholic; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In addition, as in this study, census reports indicate a similar proportion of the population (16%) is unaffiliated with any religion (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

In contrast with national data trends, but consistent with some of the existing research among polyamorous identified persons (Jenks, 2014; Nearing, 2001; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007), significantly fewer participants in this study were affiliated with a current religious denomination compared to the general U.S. population (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Furthermore, the religions

with which the sample affiliated are different from those in which they were raised, with the majority moving from their childhood Judeo-Christian traditions to paganism and eclectic spiritual views. Similar to Walston's (2001) and Weitzman's (2007) findings, Protestant and Catholic make up less than 15% of the sample's current religious denominations in the current study, but interestingly, the patterns here are quite different from Nearing's (2001) sample, in which she found that both paganism and Judeo-Christian denominations were equally as popular among her polyamorous participants.

### **Changes in religious affiliations and religiosity**

While conservative pagans may exist, the spiritual beliefs and philosophical structures that make up the bulk of neo-pagan doctrine allow much room for self-expression and individual interpretation of spiritual codes. In her 2001 study on polyamorous identified people, Walston found that about one third of men, nearly half of women, and a majority of transgender respondents reported paganism as their chosen religion. In another study, more than half of those who reported their current religion as earth-spirited came out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender while still identified with the Judeo-Christian faiths in which they were raised (Smith & Horne, 2007). Finally, Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, and Quick (2010) found that almost a third of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender participants converted from a non-affirming childhood religion to a more affirming philosophical or spiritual affiliation in their adulthood, and approximately 11% of those raised within a religious denomination ultimately rejected God altogether. Collectively, this finding supports the patterns found in this study and further suggests that some people leave the religions in which they were raised with intentions to seek out spiritual affiliations that are more supportive of their sexual and/or relational orientations (Davidson, 2000).

Also similar to Walston's (2001) study, this sample demonstrated a decrease in religiosity between childhood and study participation, as well as a shift from moderate to more liberal views. These findings also mirror the trends found in Franceschi's (2006) interviews with polyamorous women:

If the women were to have more traditionally conservative religious belief systems, they may have experienced much more conflict about their actions and feelings. It is also possible that there are women who entertain nonmonogamous feelings, but do not act on them because of their religious beliefs. (pp. 121–122)

Religious group, sexual orientation, and age predicted differences in several of the outcome variables of interest in this study. For example, people raised Protestant, Catholic, or Christian Orthodox reported greater differences in current religious beliefs than people of other religions and those who reported atheist, agnostic, or no religion. One may expect that multiply partnered people raised Christian would convert to other beliefs as monogamy is typically presented by Christian clergy as the only moral path (Johnson & Jordan, 2006). Atheists, agnostics, and those raised Jewish reported less difference between their childhood and current beliefs when compared to pagans, those practicing mixed religions, and those with an eclectic spirituality. As most of the multiply partnered sample was raised in a Judeo-Christian faith and later converted to a pagan or eclectic spirituality, the above findings are not surprising.

The results from this study suggest that although the atheist and agnostic groups reported lower religiosity than most of the other religious groups, those that practiced earth-based religions, such as Wicca or paganism, reported being more religious than many of their counterparts. Given that pagan religiosity looks very different from Judeo-Christian religiosity, one can surmise that paganism is more supportive of both moderate religiosity and a multiply partnered relational orientation. While sexual orgies and sacred prostitution may be obsolete in most contemporary sects of Wicca and paganism, sex is still regarded as a sacred act and is sometimes ritualized to induce altered states of consciousness (Adler, 1986). While bi/pansexuality and partnering with multiple people is not prescribed in paganism, these practices are accepted both within the doctrine and the spiritual community (Adler, 1986; Berger, Leach, & Shaffer, 2003; Smith & Horne, 2007).

**Liberalism/Conservatism.** A majority of the sample was spiritually or religiously liberal, but those identifying as heterosexual or mostly heterosexual reported less liberalism (more conservative) than their bi/pansexual or lesbian, gay, and mostly homosexual counterparts. Konik and Stewart (2004) suggested that nonheterosexuality (bisexual or homosexual identity) is “linked with more advanced global, political, religious, and occupational identity development” (p. 815). In addition, it was interesting to observe that swingers reported greater spiritual or religious conservatism than participants in other relational structures (e.g., open relationships, intimate networks, sexual friendships, etc.). However, existing research suggests that swinging is “primarily heterosexual” in culture (Rust, 2003, p. 487), and that “swinging remains a conservative practice in relation to beliefs about gender and sexuality” (Frank, 2008, p. 443; see also Jenks, 2014). Thus, it follows that in this study, heterosexual participants reported more spiritual or religious conservatism than the bi/pansexual participants, and that the swingers group, populated mostly by heterosexuals, was also more conservative than other relational structures.

Bradford’s (2004) qualitative study of 20 self-identified bisexual men and women produced similar results to Konik and Stewart’s (2004) research. Many participants reported feeling more compassionate, tolerant, and empathetic since they began living with a nonheterosexual identity. While prior research does not list religious or spiritual liberalism as a quality that gay, lesbian, or bi/pansexual people possess in greater abundance than heterosexuals, qualities such as psychological strength, self-acceptance, independence, openness, compassion, and tolerance may influence non-heterosexuals in being more spiritually or religiously liberal (Sherry et al., 2010).

Protestants and Catholics reported higher conservatism than all of the other religious groups except Muslims, Jewish Orthodox, and those practicing Native American/indigenous traditions. Further research could investigate if these trends are true among denominations within the general U.S. population and not just found among the multiply partnered people in this study.

**Spiritual quality of sex.** It is interesting to note that although older participants reported a higher spiritual quality of sex than younger participants, age group did not predict current degree of religiosity. This may imply that participants were not considering spirituality when reporting on their degree of religiosity, or perhaps they were not considering religiosity when deciding whether or not sex has a spiritual quality. When examined across religious affiliation, those practicing eclectic and earth-based spiritualities reported greater spiritual quality of sex than all other denominations, but significant differences emerged only for atheists, agnostics, and Jews, who all also trended towards lower religiosity ratings. Thus, perhaps participants who reported lower degree of religiosity are less likely to confer sexuality with spiritual meaning. Alternatively, the spiritual quality of sex may be influenced by the acceptance of consensual nonmonogamy in contemporary pagan life (Kaldera, 2005; Zell, 1990).

### **Conclusion**

This study introduced religion as a variable in multiply partnering, and it is the first empirical study to investigate the religious identities of multiply partnered people and the perceived association between sex and spirituality. Like the work conducted by Balzarini et al. (2018), the current study found that perceptions of religious affiliation and philosophical values are different from childhood beliefs and practices. The majority of multiply partnered people were raised in moderately conservative, Judeo-Christian households, not dissimilar from national census statistics, and they converted to more liberal, earth-based, and eclectic spiritual worldviews. Eclectic belief systems, such as Wicca or paganism, may be more conducive to living a nonmonogamous lifestyle in that such belief systems provide practitioners with a philosophical framework that normalizes nonheterosexual interests while advocating the sacredness of sexuality. Therefore, a pagan and/or spiritually eclectic philosophical worldview may be more supportive of a consensually nonmonogamous lifestyle, polyamorous identity, and multi-amorous behavior than many other religious denominations.

Further research on the relationship between paganism and consensual nonmonogamy may unearth unknown philosophical benefits of pagan or spiritually eclectic denominations that could be applicable to multiply partnered people of other religions. Additional research could also inform how to cope better when individuals come out about nonheterosexual sexualities or nonmonogamous relational orientations in a way that accommodates current or past spiritual or religious beliefs. Future transpersonal research could expand the work of Ogden (2006) and Wade (2004) by investigating the transcendent sexual experiences of multiply partnered people and evaluating the application of a Wiccan/pagan worldview in facilitating transcendent sex.

Multiply partnered people are a marginalized population within a predominantly Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, and monogamy-normative social climate in the United States. Perhaps in part because the prevalence of consensual nonmonogamy is still largely unknown, and that research on polyamory and multiamorous people is still rare or difficult to conduct (Haupt et al., 2017), there exists a stigma against poly-relational orientations (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Rust, 2003; Weitzman, 1999). Future research is necessary to examine how consensually nonmonogamous relationships affect a person's overall wellbeing, self-esteem, attachment, and other aspects of identity and behavior, including religious or spiritual practices.

Bergstrand and Sinski (2010) suggested that conversions from Judeo-Christianity faiths to other or more liberal faiths can be expected in a U.S.-born sample of consensually nonmonogamous people because "the social construction of sexuality as shame-based and evil can be traced directly to the negative views of sex promoted by early Judeo-Christian worldviews" (p. 89), and "sex within the monogamous marriage was seen as a necessary evil for the purposes of procreation, but also as a safeguard against sexual expression of other kinds" (p. 87), such as homosexuality and sexual promiscuity. This is evident in the research conducted by Balzarini et al. (2018), in which polyamorous participants identified as Christian far less often than their monogamous counterparts: "This finding is not

surprising in light of strong Christian prohibitions against nonheterosexuality and the high rate of nonheterosexuality we observed among persons in polyamorous relationships" (pp. 10–11). Considering this, and that most of the multiply partnered people in the current study also reported nonheterosexual orientations, a move away from their Judeo-Christian upbringing may be expected in replications of this work. Future research is encouraged to explore psychosocial predictors of changes in religious affiliations. For instance, is it that the new religious affiliations are more liberal or accepting of other forms of sexual and relational orientations? Or are there other reasons why a contemporary polyamorous or consensually nonmonogamous sample might change their religious affiliations and spiritual beliefs?

Clinical implications for working with this population include adherence to a selection of recommended ethical standards (e.g., Franceschi, 2006; Keener, 2004; Rust, 2003; Schechinger, Sakaluk, & Moors, 2018; Sheff, 2005; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 1999, 2007), similar to working with individuals affiliated with any sexual minority group or identity. However, it is important for providers to remember that, unless clients choose to reveal their multiply partnered status, psychotherapists will not know which individuals are monogamous and which ones are not, so familiarity with the subject of multiply partnered people is as relevant to all clinicians' work as is knowledge of any other group. Further, Schechinger and colleagues (2018) found that consensually nonmonogamous clients report finding psychotherapy most helpful when their therapists are educated about CNM and also hold open, affirming, and nonjudgmental attitudes towards their clients' relationship structures. Data from the current study highlights that competence in working with consensually nonmonogamous people is relevant in the treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender patients because more than half of the current sample reported nonheterosexual orientations and varied gender histories.

In addition, while transpersonal theorists have discussed the relevance of polyamory and nonmonogamous paradigms of loving to spiritual development and self-actualization (e.g., Ferrer,

2007; Welwood, 1985, 1996), it is clear from the dearth of literature on this topic overall that researchers in clinical or general psychology, LGBT psychology, and the field of transpersonal psychology have not yet dedicated adequate attention to the lives of multiply partnered people. The transpersonal implications of scholarship in polyamory in particular may be far-reaching because at the core of the nonmonogamous lifestyle is an aspiration to truly love many. As noted by Francoeur and colleagues (1999), "God and Eros are inseparable. God and Eros can come together through many varied incarnations. And they must come together, if we are to nourish and fulfill the spark of divinity that lies at the core of our being" (p. xvii).

### **Limitations**

A variety of limitations may influence the generalizability of the data produced by the proposed research. Many of these limitations are related to doing Internet research with a snowball sampling method of recruitment. Because consensually nonmonogamous people are marginalized, and previous research shows that multiply partnered people already participate in online community networking (Fernandes, 2008), an online survey may have been the ideal medium for survey data collection. There is "evidence that participants engage in less socially desirable responding and survey satisfying when responding to a web questionnaire than to a paper-and-pencil questionnaire or a telephone interview" (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004, p. 101). Participants may more readily disclose personal information such as sexual identities and beliefs in an online survey; therefore accurate data reporting should increase as anonymity increases. However, there is little data on what distinguishes between those who responded to the call for participation and those who did not. Moreover, since some researchers of consensual nonmonogamy and polyamory are also participants in the community, there may exist selection bias in research samples. That is, samples may be skewed towards those communities to whom researchers have greater access. In an effort to minimize sampling bias, participants were recruited both from online communities in which the lead researcher was a

member, and also from online communities in which she was not a pre-existing member, but for which she received permission from the group moderators to invite individuals to participate. It is unknown how many people saw the study invitation but chose not to participate. In addition, although the internet is a popular medium for hard-to-reach sample recruitment (Fernandes, 2008; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Robins, 2005; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007), when compared to other studies on multiply partnered people (e.g., Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010; Fernandes, 2008; Nearing, 2001; Robins, 2005; Sheff, 2005, 2014a; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007), the participants in this study were slightly younger, which may be an artifact of the Internet networking sites, online groups, and listserves of access to the lead author. Therefore, participant age may have affected the outcomes revealed among this sample.

Another set of limitations included the reliance on self-report measures of data collection and the use of measures created for the purpose of this study. Future research may consider more recently validated measures such as the Embodied Spirituality Scale (Hom, Piedmont, Fialkowski, Wicks, & Hunt, 2015), or any number of pre-existing validated scales of religious commitment and involvement (Hill & Hood, 1999).

The lack of triangulation in this research design created a problem of social desirability because participants may have chosen to report in ways that are more congruent with their self-image and spiritual and sexual ideals than their current realities.

There was also the possibility that participants responded to the survey multiple times. However, with no incentive offered, participants had no added benefit from responding to this survey multiple times, and therefore there are unlikely to be repeat responders. Although a proxy method for identifying participants was not used in this study, participants were only allowed to move forward in the survey if they checked the box on the informed consent page that indicated that they had not taken the survey before, raising the likelihood that they were not repeat responders.

Moreover, while the survey included questions about religious affiliation, the survey



may not have adequately distinguished religious affiliation from spirituality in general, regardless of religious affiliation. Therefore, although about two thirds of the study sample reported being currently affiliated with a religious denomination, a greater percentage (perhaps a pattern closer to Nearing (2001) may have reported spirituality as important, regardless of religious affiliation.

Although the racial demographics of this study mirrored representations found in previous quantitative (e.g., Nearing, 2001; Robins, 2005; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007) and qualitative (e.g., Fernandes, 2008; Franceschi, 2006; Klesse, 2006; Sheff, 2005) studies of multiply partnered people, a majority of this sample was White. According to Diamond (2008), "Ethnic-minority communities tend to stigmatize same-sex sexuality more stringently than mainstream Anglo society" (p. 48). The fact that many studies on multiply partnered people feature samples that have strong same-sex interests and/or behaviors (e.g., Fernandes, 2008; Franceschi, 2006; Frank, 2008; Klesse, 2006; Nearing, 2001; Robins, 2005; Sheff, 2005; Walston, 2001; Weber, 2002; Weitzman, 2007) may suggest why research on this population includes participants who are mostly White. While people of color may be just as likely as White people to be interested in partnering with multiple people, it is possible that race-based biases and/or social stigma may have prevented people of color from either acting on their interests or from getting involved with online forums that expose participants to research opportunities such as this one. In addition, "the low participation of people of racial or ethnic minority or working-class background [may be] an undeniable effect of [the researchers'] own privileged positioning as. . .white European middle-class academic[s]" (Klesse, 2005, p. 446). Thus, the lead researchers' own racial identity as White, and life experience may have limited her outreach to an even broader spectrum of potential participants, and working without a multiracial and/or multicultural team was a limitation in this study.

Similar to prior research (e.g., Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010; Fernandes, 2008; Klesse, 2006; Nearing, 2001; Sheff, 2005; Walston, 2001; Weber, 2002; Weitzman, 2007), the sample in this study was almost entirely college-educated. Also, similar

to prior samples (Nearing, 2001), while the study was open to any qualified English-speaking person, the majority of respondents resided in the United States and specifically in the Western states. This finding is not surprising given that California is the researcher's place of residence. There are likely other consensually nonmonogamous social groups that are local within each state from which this study failed to sample. Thus, similar to prior studies, this study is among those that focus "on a particular type of person in American culture, namely an individual who is of European stock, middle-class, [and] college educated" (Noël, 2006, p. 606). There is limited generalizability to both national and global populations. This should be considered when interpreting and generalizing the findings presented here. Future research is needed among more diverse samples to replicate the results found here and to better understand the lives of multiply partnered people.

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