

International data on the population prevalence of CNM is limited, with most information stemming from the United States of America and Canada (for a review, see Haupt et al., 2017b). Prevalence estimates range considerably when comparing current engagement in CNM to lifetime or history of engagement in CNM, such that 3-7% of the general North American population is likely currently in a CNM relationship whereas over 20% of the North American population has ever engaged in CNM (Haupt et al., 2017b; Levine et al., 2018). This figure increases considerably among the gay population, with roughly a third of gay men reporting having ever engaged in CNM (Haupt et al., 2017a). No data on the prevalence of CNM within the South African population and among South African gay men specifically can be found, although there is some evidence that local MSM do practice CNM (for example, Essack et al., 2020; Molefi et al., 2022; Moodley & Rabie, 2020). The dearth of information on the practice of CNM within South Africa in comparison to international populations suggests that more research must be undertaken to gain a comprehensive understanding of this understudied segment of the population.

2.3.2 CNM and Diverging from Norms

The finding that sexual minorities are more likely to engage in CNM than the heterosexual majority raises the question of why this might be so. In discussing this question, two concepts emerge that require consideration: heteronormativity and mononormativity. Heteronormativity as formulated in Allen and Mendez's (2018) model for theorising families consists of diametrically opposed classifications of an identity as either normative or deviant. Identities are situated along the three axes of gender, sexuality, and family, which are understood as normative or deviant in terms of the contemporary societal norms. The normative-deviant values of these identities are similarly influenced by five spheres of power: race, class, ability, ethnicity and nationality (Allen & Mendez, 2018). In this way, heteronormativity can be understood as the pervasive prescription of (heterosexual) norms and ways of doing and being

that facilitates the classification of any divergence from a dominant construction of heterosexuality as deviant.

Within this model, homosexual identity exists on the axis of sexuality, and while homosexual identity has historically been considered deviant to heteronormativity, Allen and Mendez (2018) argue that certain sexual minorities, such as gay men and lesbians, have become normative rather than deviant sexual identities, at least in some states, societies, and communities. This can be explained through a process of consumption and assimilation to the mainstream, whereby heteronormative practices and institutions such as marriage have been adopted and transplanted to form the homonormative (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Duncan et al., 2015). Importantly, Allen and Mendez (2018) incorporate into the axis of sexuality the hegemonic privileging of monogamy, such that monogamous (and thus normatively acceptable) gay men are positioned as diametrically opposite to non-monogamous ('deviant') gay men.

A component of the abovementioned model of heteronormativity is thus the mononormativity involved in sexuality. Mononormativity can be explained as the "broad 'constellation' of practices, institutions and tacit organising principles that privilege monogamy" over other modes of relationality and which permeates the minutiae of daily life (Kean, 2015, p. 700). It can be seen in such superficially inconsequential instances as Facebook allowing a user to only acknowledge one other person in their relationship status or in the standard design of a car being for two adults and three children (Kean, 2015). The heteronormative model of sexuality, being that of a husband and wife, thus mandates and privileges mononormativity in as seemingly unrelated aspects of society as transportation.

Whereas gay men's identities can be placed at risk by deviating from mononormativity on the axis of sexuality, it can also lead to deviant identity on the axis of family. By forming functionally or structurally different families, practitioners of CNM deviate from the normative

model of the nuclear family (Allen & Mendez, 2018). For example, while it may have become acceptable and thus no longer deviant for two gay men to practice parenting, polyamorous parenting is still widely regarded negatively and faces significant structural barriers (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013). The practice of CNM may thus facilitate a deviant identity not only on the axis of sexuality but also of family. It would not, however, inherently facilitate a deviant identity on the axis of gender, and so would only deviate from heteronormativity on two of the axes set forth by Allen and Mendez (2018).

Having understood how being a sexual minority and the practice of CNM may cause deviation from heteronormativity and mononormativity, the issue of why CNM is more prevalent among sexual minorities can once more be considered. Currin et al.'s (2016) study of participants self-identifying as heterosexual found that those that endorsed having non-heterosexual impulses reported greater acceptance of non-monogamy and casual sex when compared to non-endorsing participants. Thus, while still largely adhering to heterosexual norms, these individuals experienced a (minor) departure therefrom, and the argument is made that any form of departure from a heteronormative relationship model may possibly facilitate deviation from a mononormative relationship model as well (Currin et al., 2016; Hauptert et al., 2017b). While Allen and Mendez (2018) state that a gay identity has become heteronormative from the perspective of hegemonic society, homosexual identity may therefore still remain meaningful on a subjective, personal level in the process of querying and actualising norms.

2.3.3 (Queer)ying Norms: Gay Men's Attitudes Towards Monogamy

Despite this, mononormativity can still be considered as prevalent within the gay community (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2016). For instance, in Duncan et al.'s (2015) study of gay men, nearly all participants indicated a preference for monogamy. Monogamy was idealised as the basis for a secure and trusting relationship, yet a tension existed between gay men's own monogamous ideals and their perceived ability to practically implement these in relation to the

perceived relationship ideals of other gay men. This was mirrored by Philpot et al.'s (2018) study in which biological determinism ("males have a primal urge to just procreate"; p. 919) and the availability of sex in the gay 'scene' was argued to make monogamy unsustainable.

The perceived unsustainability of monogamy within the gay community, and the perception that lasting relationships transition to CNM, presented as a salient concern that facilitated participants' consideration of alternative relationship arrangements (Philpot et al., 2018). The subjective perception that transition from monogamy to non-monogamy over time is a likely occurrence is supported by Mitchell's (2014) study. A decrease was found in the number of gay male couples that reported an initial relationship arrangement characterised by monogamy and the amount that reported a current relationship arrangement characterised by monogamy. This is reflective of the former finding that gay men's relationships are dynamic and changeable (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2016), but also provides confirmation that, at least for some gay men, monogamy may be a temporary arrangement.

Research has also pointed to some gay men considering non-monogamy to be a rite of passage for gay men (Duncan et al., 2015; Philpot et al., 2018). Non-monogamy and casual sex become viewed as a necessary catharsis of youthful sexual energy that heterosexuals achieve during their teenage years, and thus approach CNM as a temporary relationship ideal to be replaced later on by monogamy as they age. Others, however, perceive CNM as a more pragmatic approach to envisioning relationships generally and for the long-term (Philpot et al., 2018). CNM may thus become positioned by some gay men as more enlightened and progressive than monogamy, which is characterised as narrow, naive and "traditional" (Duncan et al., 2015, p. 809; Philpot et al., 2018). This characterisation of monogamy results in those favouring it within relationships to have less bargaining power. Partners may acquiesce to engaging in alternative relationship configurations in order to maintain their relationship with their partner that does desire CNM (Philpot et al., 2018).

In contrast, for other gay men, thinking about relationships on a dichotomy of monogamous or CNM does not provide a useful conceptual framework for their dynamic rather than static relationships (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2016). For instance, a dyad may consider itself to be CNM but may not engage in extradyadic sex for years at a time (Philpot et al., 2018). For these men, a more important factor than a defined structure is the commitment, trust and willingness to compromise that exists within the relationship. A diversity of frameworks therefore exists among gay men on how monogamy and CNM are practiced and considered within their relationships, though all acknowledge the particular needs of the dyad in the determination of their approach.

While monogamy thus exists for many as a desired form of relationships, mononormativity itself is not necessarily a given within the gay community as it is in hegemonic heteronormative society. Consider a participant in Philpot et al.'s (2018, p. 919) study who stated, "I wanted a heterosexual version of relationships, and monogamy was important." Here, a direct link can be made to heteronormativity as a consumable, a transplantable product imposed on that which may exist beyond its bounds. In formulating the homonormative, gay men are drawn to consider the unique differences their relationships may have, whether it be associating masculinity with hypersexuality or their exposure to the gay scene and alternative, queer frameworks of thought. Even though divergence from a socialised expectation of what constitutes a viable relationship may cause them distress (Philpot et al., 2018), dissatisfaction arises for many gay men with the heteronormative and thus exclusively mononormative formulation of relationships.

2.4 Consensual Non-Monogamy and Stigma

The origin of stigma within social science research can be attributed to Erving Goffman's (1963) book *Stigma: Notes on the management of a spoiled identity*. Goffman (1963) presented stigma as an attribute that an individual possesses which causes them to be discredited,

reducing them to a tainted individual with a ‘sullied’, that is, relatively devalued, social identity. While inherent in this definition of stigma is the notion that it is caused by a condition within the stigmatised person, Goffman (1963) also indicated stigma is socially assigned in that an attribute might be stigmatised in one but regarded as usual in another (Major et al., 2018). Whereas Goffman thus partially acknowledges the social construction of stigma, contemporary social science researchers have progressed toward a conceptualisation of stigma as inherently social and relational, with a focus on the social mechanisms such as power and context that contribute to the occurrence and manifestation thereof (Bos et al., 2013; Major et al., 2018). In acknowledging the context of heteronormativity and mononormativity that grounds and yields the opportunity for this particular study’s occurrence, a definition of stigma that acknowledges and accounts for the dimension of power imbalances within the occurrence of stigma may be most appropriate. Consequently, stigma is explained in terms of Link and Phelan’s (2001) definition, which delineates four components to the process of stigma, being labelling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss and discrimination, which occur in a particular context of power differences.

The occurrence of stigma is entirely dependent on differences or asymmetries in (social, cultural, political, and economic) power between groups¹, as a group lacking power cannot stigmatise (Link & Phelan, 2001). As practitioners of CNM are a minority (Hauptert et al., 2017b) that diverge from the hegemonic construction of mononormativity (Allen & Mendez, 2018), which has in turn facilitated the development of structures and institutions that privilege

¹Link and Phelan (2001) explain the importance of power through the example of patients within a psychiatric setting. While the patients (or the ‘stigmatized group’) may engage in similar thinking and behavioural processes emulating stigma towards the medical staff (the ‘non-stigmatized group’), they lack sufficient social, cultural, and political power to imbue their thoughts and behaviours with serious discriminatory consequences. For example, they may tag some clinicians as ‘pill pushers’ (labelling), characterising them as cold and arrogant (stereotyping), and may avoid them or exchange derogatory remarks with other patients (separation and status loss). However, given the power imbalances of this setting, these elements in the process of stigma cannot result in stigma as the patients do not have the power to ensure that the broader culture recognizes and accepts the stereotypes that they connect to the label, nor do they control access to major life domains like educational or medical institution to cause discriminatory consequences.

monogamy (Kean, 2015), practitioners of CNM can be argued to lack social power in contrast to the monogamous majority. This power imbalance yields the necessary conditions in which the components of stigma may occur, and which may subsequently be explored.

The first component in Link and Phelan's (2001) definition is labelling, which involves the social selection of what is considered a salient difference between the individual and the norm and then affixing this label (which may be suspect in its accuracy) onto the individual to denote their difference. For this study, the label of CNM, once identified or disclosed publicly, may act as the label of difference. To illustrate this point, participants in Sandbakken et al.'s (2022, p. 1057) study on polyamorous individuals in Norway relayed that, once their relationship configuration was disclosed, participants would be treated as "curiosities", and questions that would normally be considered inappropriate would be directed at the CNM practitioners in order to understand their differences. Participants likened their experiences to being zoo animals, and the unpleasant curiosity to which they were subjected as being poked with a stick. Once their differing relationship configuration had been exposed, others would derail the conversation to exclusively focus on their difference or "weird"-ness (Sandbakken et al., 2022, p. 1058). This study elucidates that CNM relationships become perceived as a social indicator of difference that allows practitioners to be labelled as other.

Similar to Goffman's (1963) explanation that an attribute is associated with negative stereotypes, the second component of Link and Phelan's (2001) definition implies that the identified label of difference facilitates associating the individual with negative attributes and stereotypes (Link & Phelan, 2001). Negative stereotypes about CNM persist, as many regard CNM practitioners as more promiscuous and more likely to have an STI (Balzarini et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2021). In fact, this particular stereotype may offer an explanation for stigma towards CNM, as one of the functions of stigma is disease avoidance (Bos et al., 2013). The stereotype of promiscuity especially when expressed by family and friends is felt by

practitioners to invalidate their relationships (Willis, 2019). Importantly, however, such perceptions have proven false (Conley et al., 2012; Lehmler, 2015). Nevertheless, other negative stereotypes beyond sexual promiscuity persist, such as that CNM configurations symbolise a lack of commitment to a relationship, that a relationship that allows extradyadic sex is a failing relationship, that CNM practitioners are still immature, and that they are less moral (Rodrigues et al., 2021; Willis, 2019).

The third component in the process of stigma is separating between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ such that the labelled individual is perceived as *being* their label, the extreme of which causes ‘them’ to be perceived as less human than ‘us’ (Link & Phelan, 2001). The dehumanisation of CNM practitioners was evidenced in Rodrigues et al.’s (2018) study, in which participants attributed less uniquely human emotions and more non-uniquely human (or animalistic) emotions to CNM practitioners. By denying CNM practitioners uniquely human emotions, they become demoted to a lower order of humanity, but by assigning more non-uniquely human emotions that are shared with animals, CNM practitioners’ characters are portrayed as more animalistic than people generally (Rodrigues et al., 2018). This stigmatisation and dehumanisation of CNM practitioners was found to be due to relationship arrangement irrespective of sexuality, such that both heterosexual and homosexual CNM practitioners are dehumanised (Rodrigues et al., 2018). Thus, divergence from mononormativity rather than heteronormativity can be considered a more important factor for stigmatisation and endangerment of in-group membership (Rodrigues et al., 2018). This is reflected in qualitative accounts from CNM practitioners that indicated greater willingness to publicly disclose their homosexual identity rather than their CNM relationship configurations (Sandbakken et al., 2022; Willis, 2019). Engagement in CNM may thus not only cause stigmatisation and othering for CNM practitioners generally but may possibly also endanger gay men’s acceptance within the gay community.

Separation between “us” and “them” also features when considering the halo effect surrounding monogamy. According to Thorndike (1920), a halo effect is a psychological phenomenon whereby an individual is perceived more favourably due to possession of a certain characteristic, which, for the purposes of this study, is monogamy. A halo effect is evident around monogamy, such that monogamous individuals are rated higher, and non-monogamous individuals are rated lower, in both relationship-relevant and arbitrary, relationship-irrelevant domains (Balzarini et al., 2018; Conley et al., 2013). For instance, Conley et al. (2013) found CNM practitioners are rated lower than monogamous individuals on relationship-relevant factors like loving and respecting each other, having similar values, and showing kindness to one another, while also being rated lower on relationship irrelevant factors like consistent recycling, generous tipping, and consistent teeth flossing. Balzarini et al. (2018) conducted research further exploring the halo effect from the perspective of desired social distance, which is an indication of the degree of willingness to engage in relationships of varying proximity, such as family member, friend, or acquaintance. This research found that, not only do all individuals rate monogamy with decreased desired social distance compared to CNM, CNM practitioners desire less social distance between monogamy and their own specific CNM configuration than to other CNM configurations (Balzarini et al., 2018). For example, a swinger would indicate less desired social distance from monogamous individuals and other swingers, and more desired social distance from polyamorous or open relationships. This indicates that, not only do the monogamous majority engage in the stigmatising component of separation in Link and Phelan’s (2001) definition, but that CNM practitioners may similarly stigmatise other forms of CNM than their own (Balzarini et al., 2018).

The fourth and final component in Link and Phelan’s (2001) process definition of stigma is status loss and discrimination, which entails the downward placement of the individual in the social hierarchy, leading to discriminatory behaviours that may yield unequal

access to opportunities. Regarding CNM practitioners' status loss, in Willis's (2019) study of practitioners of polyamory, family members would hide the CNM individual's relationship status from others, prohibiting them from being fully open with others. Family members' disregard for the individual's relationship places them, rather than the individual, as the authority on the validity, maturity, and acceptability of the relationship, as many imposed their own beliefs onto the significance of the relationship (Willis, 2019). This was mirrored in Sandbakken et al.'s (2022, p. 1059) study, wherein friends and family would deny the practitioner's label for their relationship as polyamorous and would instead insist that they are "friends with benefits" that are not in a relationship, or by insisting that the individual is "being used". CNM practitioners are thus demoted from the position of authority on their own relationships and are placed in the position of needing to defend the validity of their relationships to others (Sandbakken et al., 2022). This reflects a loss of social power, such that the whims and will of others takes precedence when discussing and considering one's relationships.

Incorporated into the component of status loss and discrimination is the element of structural discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Structural discrimination manifests in the policies and practices of institutions that disadvantage the stigmatised group, which may be intended or unintended (Angermeyer et al., 2014). Polyamorous parenting represents an abundant source of information on structural discrimination, as many polyfamilies report concealing their divergence from mononormativity as well as heteronormativity when engaging with institutions such as schools and health services (for a review, see Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013). Their children's school environment functions as one possible site of structural discrimination as schools suppress issues of polyamorous parenting and attempt to prevent children of polyfamilies from disclosing their family structure to their peers (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013). Polyamorous parents also commonly express the fear that disclosure of

their relationship arrangement to their children may lead to more indiscriminate public disclosure through their children, which may in turn endanger their custody over them (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013; Sandbakken et al., 2022). Indeed, 13% of polyamorous parents indicate having experienced discrimination in their engagements with Child Protection Services (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013). Fearing the consequences of disclosure appears to be common across CNM types, as both swingers and polyamorous individuals fear that public disclosure may endanger their employment situation (Jenks, 1998; Sandbakken et al., 2022). Existing institutions and social mechanisms that privilege monogamy also limit polyfamilies' opportunities, as polyamorous partners' inability to marry one another similarly impacts on their ability to collectively purchase and own a home (Willis, 2019).

While structural discrimination is thus evident with regards to polyamory as one type of CNM arrangement, less information can be found concerning structural discrimination against other forms of CNM. However, this can be explained by considering the nature of polyamory as distinct from that of other CNM configurations. Polyamory represents the only form of CNM wherein a primary dyad is not established or emphasised, and thus involves a specific set of partners on a more consistent or long-term basis than may occur in other CNM relationships (Rubel & Burleigh, 2020). For instance, other CNM dyads in monogamish or open relationship configurations maintain a primary dyad and may thus engage with specific extradyadic partners transiently or in single-episode occurrences (Hauptert et al., 2017b). This transient impact on the overall structure of dyads' relationships may thus potentially limit exposure to structural discrimination due to greater concealability. However, structural discrimination may still occur, as is reflected in CNM practitioners' encounters with health professionals who have encouraged individuals to practice monogamy (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013), and in ignorance or sexual health beliefs regarding CNM that may cause health professionals to pathologize CNM practitioners (Katz & Graham, 2020; Trexler, 2021). While

the element of structural discrimination towards all forms of CNM may thus require more research, the component of status loss and discrimination of Link and Phelan's (2001) definition of stigma can nevertheless be considered applicable and thus practically meaningful when discussing CNM practitioners' experiences.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has reviewed the research and literature conducive to developing a foundational understanding of how gay men might experience stigma towards their CNM relationship arrangements by other members of the gay community. By firstly examining the ways in which CNM relationships can be classified and understood, a groundwork has been laid that acknowledges the diversity of ways of experiencing CNM. It has been emphasised that CNM is a sexually and psychologically healthy experience that, despite significant research on risk behaviours, provides relationship benefits to its practitioners. Consequently, the chapter questioned who constitutes the practitioners of CNM owing to the emphasis and abundance of research on gay male CNM practitioners. Having understood that sexual minorities more prevalently favour and practice CNM, this chapter attempted to provide one possible explanation in the form of their divergence from heteronormativity and mononormativity. Gay men's attitudes towards and adoption of monogamy were discussed as a possible source of relationship reformulation. Acknowledging the potentially heteronormative relational privileging within the gay community provided the backdrop against which stigma towards deviating from monogamy may occur. CNM practitioners' experiences of stigma were elaborated upon in keeping with the specific definition of stigma utilised in this study, thus demonstrating the multifaceted aspects and ways in which stigma may and does occur. This chapter therefore provides a theoretical context that can be utilised in understanding the idiographic experiences of this study's participants and can be used in conjunction with the theoretical framework to be elaborated in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Overview

This chapter seeks to delineate the theoretical framework that I will utilise in this study through particularizing the distinctive theoretical components that underlie the research problem and its practical execution. In doing so, phenomenology is considered and described for its theoretical and applied relevance in the unique context of this study, and relevant criticisms thereof are subsequently explored. I then proceed with a portrayal of stigma theory as an additional component of the theoretical underpinnings of the present study, wherein I explore particular concepts and applications thereof. An integration of these two theoretical components is then followed by a concluding discussion of this chapter.

3.2 Phenomenology

The present study's emphasis on generating participants' experiences of stigma presupposes an attempt to uncover subjective understandings of a phenomenon. Its focus therefore is in line with the phenomenological endeavour of letting "that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 58), or developing originary understanding of the nature of a phenomenon (van Manen, 2017). Given this emphasis on experience, phenomenology thus acts as the overarching epistemological and ontological paradigm of this study as shall be explored, whereas stigma theory shall act as the interpretive lens for the analysis. This shall be expounded and elaborated in the following discussions.

Phenomenology currently acts as a commonly utilised qualitative research methodology, though its origins lie in its use as a philosophical discipline that was first implemented by Franz Brentano before World War 1 (Dowling, 2007). Within the field of psychology, phenomenology is rooted in Edmund Husserl's (1931) development thereof. For Husserl, phenomenological understanding must provide a concrete description of the essential

structures of experience, and is general and universal through its eidetic reduction to arrive at such essences (Giorgi, 2008; Williams, 2021). Doing so relies on description of first-person experience, and thus entails an investigation of phenomena as they appear to consciousness (Tuohy et al., 2013).

Phenomenology in its original sense thus aims to develop knowledge of the essence of experience related to a particular phenomenon. In doing so, it requires an emphasis on subjective experience with absent reference to external knowledge or systems of meaning-making (Williams, 2021). However, phenomenology has seen many revisions and adaptations since its original conceptualisation, with such significant contributors as Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960), Martin Heidegger (1962), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Alfred Schütz (1970). Indeed, its shifted utilisation within the context of psychological and other forms of scientific inquiry has necessitated its reformulation away from Husserl's descriptive approach and towards an interpretive mode (Matua & van der Wal, 2015). This shift within phenomenology necessitates further elaboration as it affects the ontological and epistemological foundations of this research study.

3.2.1 Descriptive Versus Interpretive Phenomenology

Phenomenology in its original sense, known as transcendental or descriptive phenomenology, was developed by Husserl during a period wherein the prevailing epistemological environment was reductionistic (Matua & van der Wal, 2015). Husserl thus sought out a method of investigating experiences as they appeared in consciousness that would be free from bias or the imposition of extraneous factors. To this end, while descriptive phenomenology implements first-hand experiences of an individual's life-world, it aims to generate universal essences of an experience that transcend the particular or individual (Williams, 2021). This reduction to universal or eidetic structures requires of the researcher to engage in a process of reduction to arrive at a state of transcendental objectivity (Lavery, 2003). This objectivity is premised on

the researcher's ability to implement epoché, the bracketing of all preconceptions or prior knowledge about a phenomenon (Matua & van der Wal, 2015). In this way, the researcher arrives at pure description of the phenomenon as it appears to consciousness (Tuohy et al., 2013).

This approach to phenomenological knowledge has been criticised for its underlying epistemological assumption that an individual can set aside their own subjectivities to reach unbiased understanding (Heidegger, 1962). In response to what he considered an impossible aim, Heidegger formulated an interpretive or hermeneutic approach to phenomenology that emphasises the individual's situatedness or da-sein in their quest for phenomenological knowledge (Crowther & Thomson, 2020). The introduction of da-sein, which is the individual's extant world of meaning that incorporates factors related to their social, political, and cultural contexts, acknowledges that understanding cannot be separated from the subjective self, and that epoché is consequently impracticable (Tuohy et al., 2013). Instead, researchers integrate their preconceptions about the phenomenon under investigation with the research findings by interpreting the meanings of the phenomenon within the contexts in which it transpires (Matua & van der Wal, 2015). This mirrors the sense-making processes of the lay-person, as Heidegger asserts that individuals are constantly engaged in sense-making of phenomena as they appear to them and as informed by their prior experiences (Tuohy et al., 2013).

In this way, interpretive phenomenological knowledge stems from the hermeneutic circle of understanding, interpreting, and revising one's understanding of experience. The researcher's engagement with participants' phenomenological understanding of their experiences thus becomes an act of co-constitutionality, whereby the findings become a blend of the effects of the researcher's da-sein on their meaning-making of the participants' meaning (Crowther & Thomson, 2020).

Owing to the study's objective to not only understand how consensually non-monogamous gay men experience stigma but also their meaning-making process regarding these experiences, the present study aligns itself with the interpretive approach to phenomenological research. My engagement as researcher with the meaning-making processes of the study's participants is directly linked to the co-constitutionality of phenomenological knowledge and corresponds further to a critical realist ontology that acknowledges the researcher's inability to directly access the truth (Crowther & Thomson, 2020; Willig, 2013). Consequently, the implementation of epoché in the descriptive approach would contradict the study's aims of exploring the phenomenon within the context of the gay community and the associated norms and normative beliefs that underscore this experience. Interpretive phenomenology thus poses an acceptable method of phenomenological inquiry in line with the aims and objectives of the research study. As such, this study aligns itself with a critical realist ontology, thus acknowledging an external truth only partially accessible owing to its mediation through the knower or researcher's socially located subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013). This critical realist ontology is paired with an interpretivist epistemology to underpin the theoretical conceptualisation of the knowledge generated from the present study. The interpretive mode of phenomenology corresponds to an interpretivist epistemology, as knowledge generated through sensory perception and reflection is particular to interpretivism (Hiller, 2016).

3.2.2 Critique of Phenomenology

Phenomenology provides the epistemological and ontological grounds of the study which orient me as researcher to the particular mode of data analysis utilised. Phenomenology thus delimits the bounds of the research, determining its limitations and scope in generating useful scientific knowledge. In this regard, many criticisms of phenomenology centre on researcher naïveté at alternate extremes of epistemological and ontological foundations (Applebaum,

2012). Naïve empiricist critiques claim that phenomenology, in its lack of objectivity and experimental designs, cannot constitute true scientific knowledge, which is rivalled by compensatory hermeneutic or postmodern naïveté, claiming that imposing rigor on social science is unnecessary and irrelevant, and in turn privileging subjectivity in the research process (Applebaum, 2012). The latter has led to phenomenological studies that have been executed without adequate consideration for the trustworthiness of the findings, and, consequently, a standard of objectivity in dialogue with subjective qualitative research is required for researcher implementation (Applebaum, 2012; Giorgi, 2008). While Giorgi (2008) places the onus of this on psychology as a discipline to still determine, this is accomplished in the present study by implementing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research.

A further critique of interpretive phenomenology targets the generalisability of research findings using this approach. Specifically, owing to the co-constitutionality and merging of horizons inherent in phenomenological research (Gadamer, 1967), knowledge generated can never be complete and generalisable, as the final themes are always in interaction with the researcher's unique meaning-making processes and *da-sein* (Crowther & Thomson, 2020). While phenomenology aims to produce universal essences, it is thus limited in its attempts to approach the truth, which, as with an asymptote, it cannot fully arrive at. Imperative in this regard is the researcher's critical and continual reflexivity regarding the influence of their preconceptions of the phenomenon, and to similarly adhere to the components of trustworthy research as engaged with in this study (Crowther & Thomson, 2020).

3.3 Stigma Theory

While phenomenology forms a key component of the framework underlying the present research, the experience of stigma *per se* remains an integral aspect of the theoretical underpinnings of this study's conceptualisation. Specifically, while phenomenology provides

the paradigmatic framework, stigma theory is used as the lens through which the results may be interpreted. To this end, a discussion of stigma and stigma theory is warranted in its utility and application to the data analysis owing to the foundational understanding it shall provide. The relevant theoretical models, levels, and aspects of stigma are consequently introduced in consideration of their bearing on stigma towards consensual non-monogamy. This is done through detailed examination of the components thereof and their application to the present study.

Stigma as a focus of scientific study was pioneered by Goffman's (1963) landmark treatise entitled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. In this work he expounded a theory of stigma as an attribute resulting in social discreditation and disapproval through the recognition of difference and consequent devaluation (Goffman, 1963). Importantly, Goffman highlighted this as a social process dependent on the sociocultural context in which it occurs. While Goffman's publication became influential in the field of sociology, research on stigma has expanded across scientific disciplines, including social psychology and health (Bos et al., 2013). Such research is made necessary by stigma's societal functions, being exploitation and domination to maintain inequalities between groups, social norm enforcement, and disease avoidance (Phelan et al., 2008).

Given these functions, stigma may result in structural discrimination, social prejudice, and consequent poor health outcomes, with some authors arguing that stigma is a primary driver of morbidity and mortality (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013). Indeed, research on stigma has yielded evidence of long-term consequences on both mental and physical health through multiple pathways (Major et al., 2018), which may be compounded by healthcare practitioners' own stigmatising beliefs when such vulnerable groups access healthcare (Corrigan et al., 2014; Geter et al., 2018; Hoffman et al., 2016). Stigma enacted by healthcare providers extends also to psychology and mental health professionals, who may exhibit a stigmatising approach to

CNM practitioners (Campbell et al., 2023; Katz & Graham, 2020). As such, understanding stigma becomes an important factor in understanding the experiences of vulnerable populations. Various theories and conceptualisations of stigma aid in this pursuit, with ones relevant to this study's implementation explored below.

3.3.1 The Stigma Lens

Stigma, as defined by Link and Phelan (2001)'s conceptualisation utilised in the context of this study and which has been outlined in Chapter 2, consists of four components: labelling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss and discrimination. While this definition yields a comprehensive conceptualisation of the social processes involved in the occurrence of stigma, other factors bear consideration in understanding the scope and effects of stigma more broadly. Applicable in this regard is Pryor and Reeder's (2011) model of the four dynamically interrelated manifestations of stigma, being public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association, and institutional stigma. While this model was originally conceptualised to explain HIV-related stigma, it is regarded as a useful model for explaining stigma generally and may thus be applied to the context of CNM (Bos et al., 2013). It may be paired with and complemented by Herek's (2007) model of sexual stigma due to some conceptual overlap. Herek's (2007) model is additionally applicable given that it portrays sexual stigma as pertaining to "any nonheterosexual behaviour, identity, relationship, or community" (p. 907). Its concepts of structural stigma, enacted stigma, felt stigma, and internalised stigma shall therefore be incorporated into the following discussion of stigma models in understanding how they may prove useful to the data's analysis.

Public stigma according to Pryor and Reeder's (2011) model comprises the cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements of stigma. This entails an individual's beliefs about the stigmatised trait, including beliefs about the acceptability of reacting negatively to an individual with a stigmatised trait, which leads to affective reactions like anger and disgust, as

well as behavioural reactions like avoidance and social rejection (Pryor & Reeder, 2011). This mimics the process elements of stigma described by Link and Phelan (2001), whereby an individual's stigma attribute invokes stereotypes and consequent discriminatory behaviours. Public stigma's incorporation of cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements of stigma thus also includes Herek's (2007) category of *enacted stigma*, which pertains specifically to behavioural expressions of sexual stigma.

In combination, these elements of public stigma provide the socially accessible manifestations that participants may directly refer to in providing accounts of their stigmatising experiences. However, Pryor and Reeder's (2011) second manifestation of stigma, *self-stigma*, may be less evident although nonetheless essential in analysing participants' accounts. Self-stigma entails the internalisation of stigma towards one's own identity through a process of experiencing enacted stigma that leads to anticipated stigma, which is the expectation that one will be exposed to enacted stigma (Bos et al., 2013). This is termed by Herek (2007) as *felt stigma*, and he indicates that an individual need not be directly exposed to enacted stigma in order to be affected by this. This anticipated or felt stigma is paired with partial belief in the justifiability of stigma, known as *internalised stigma* according to both models, which leads to a diminished sense of self-worth through personally endorsing stigmatising narratives (Herek, 2007; Pryor & Reeder, 2011). Such internalised stigma can lead to label avoidance, whereby individuals avoid identity disclosure for fear of negative treatment. Self-stigma thus implies expecting stigma, personally identifying with the implied negative meaning of stigma, and compensatory behaviour strategies by the stigmatised individual. Self-stigma thus provides an essential aspect of individuals' meaning-making processes regarding their stigmatising experiences and is a key component for phenomenological consideration.

The final two manifestations of stigma according to Pryor and Reeder's (2011) model are *stigma by association* and *institutional stigma*. Stigma by association suggests that

individuals may be socially discredited for their association with a stigmatised individual, which may lead to feelings of shame and concern over their connection to the individual and others' knowledge thereof (Pryor & Reeder, 2011). Institutional stigma, also referred to by Herek (2007) as structural manifestations of stigma, represents the socio-political and ideological forces that legitimise or perpetuate the negative evaluation of the stigma trait. This can involve, for instance, laws and policies or social rhetoric, which reciprocally engages with and reinforces public stigma as well as the other stigma manifestations to promote a stigmatising narrative of the trait in question, or, in this study, of CNM (Pryor & Reeder, 2011). Herek (2007) also labels this as *heterosexism*, or the cultural ideology embedded in institutional practices that disadvantage sexual minority and, in particular, 'non-heterosexual' groups. In the same manner as public stigma, these two manifestations may yield more easily accessible instances of stigma for participants to recount. This model can thus be utilised as a conceptual framework for distinguishing between different types of stigma experiences identified by participants.

3.3.2 Stigma and Sexual Norms

While Pryor and Reeder's (2011) model is useful in understanding stigma generally, Herek's (2007) formulation of a model of *sexual* stigma in particular may provide nuances in its interpretative capacity. For example, while his framework utilises similar components to Pryor and Reeder's (2011) model as has been discussed, Herek (2007) provides the additional label of heterosexism onto that of structural manifestations of stigma. Heterosexism constitutes the institutional and ideological systems perpetuating and legitimating sexual stigma, which exist beyond the individual and provides the context for the formation and maintenance of such beliefs (Herek, 2007). Heterosexism is portrayed as societally pervasive and acts to disadvantage sexual minority groups even in the absence of individual enactments of prejudice or discrimination. Institutional or structural stigma would thus translate into mononormativity

within the current study, providing the societal foundations of acceptable relationship configurations to which gay community members may subscribe and adhere.

Herek's (2007) portrayal of felt stigma is also of particular significance. Specifically, owing to the concealability of sexuality, Herek posits that heterosexuals also experience felt or anticipated stigma and that they enact compensatory strategies to avoid being incorrectly labelled and stigmatised as homosexual, which may involve performative enactment of sexual stigma towards others. Should this be similarly applicable, it may yield interesting insight into the stigmatising behaviours of members of the gay community towards those practicing consensual non-monogamy, as it may imply stigma as a mechanism of ensuring social distance to avoid courtesy stigma. In this way, non-CNM community members could potentially seek social distance as a way of ensuring they are perceived by the greater public as 'good gays' rather than 'bad (CNM) gays' (Maine, 2022).

Seeking to avoid stigma by association can be explained through reference to CNM as coincident with the homoradical rather than heteronormative identity (Maine, 2022) owing to its placement within the outer limits of Rubin's (1984) charmed circle of sexuality. The charmed circle of sexuality denotes an inner ring of acceptable sexuality, that which is heterosexual, monogamous, within the confines of a relationship and marriage, and in private (Rubin, 1984). Historically, homosexuality has been positioned at the outer limits of the charmed circle, among that which has been socially constructed as 'bad', 'abnormal', and 'unnatural'. However, it has been stated that homosexuality has become normatively acceptable within some societies (Allen & Mendez, 2018), such as, in some countries, through the legal recognition and marriage rights granted to same-sex couples, possibly indicating a shift towards homosexuality as falling tentatively within some dimensions of Rubin's (1984) inner charmed circle. This may be likely within the South African context specifically, considering the finding that South Africans are demonstrating increasingly progressive or

accepting attitudes towards LGBTQ+ members of the population (Sutherland et al., 2016). However, while the homosexual identity may to a greater extent be normatively accepted and legally protected within South Africa, this may be contradicted by the lived experiences of many citizens of sexual minority status, such as through widespread issues of corrective rape, homophobic violence, and victimisation of transgender women (Kaighobadi et al., 2020; Mwambene & Wheal, 2015; Zahn et al., 2016). The accounts of the lived realities of this study's participants may thus potentially refer to this duality.

In contrast to the gay identity, non-monogamous sex remains positioned within the bad outer limits of sexuality (Rubin, 1984). While an acceptable gay homonormative identity may thus exist inasmuch as it mirrors a heteronormative identity, a homoradical identity that transgresses heteronormative ideology may potentially become stigmatised for the sociopolitical threat it poses to homosexuality generally. While CNM is behaviour performed at the personal level, the homoradical inevitably possesses political connotations in its challenge to existing norms (Maine, 2022), which may be feared and thus stigmatised by members of the gay community for the risk it poses by associating homosexuality with sexual deviance. Stigma by association in this way may become a political act, whereby not only is the associated individual at risk of stigma and shaming, but the entirety of the gay community as well. The particular sociopolitical inflections of participants' experiences of stigma may thus require close scrutiny in identifying the broader systems of meaning-making surrounding stigma, and these theoretical concepts related to stigma are hence invaluable in this regard.

As indicated by Herek (2007), the concealability of sexuality as a stigma attribute may have important consequences for the individual. CNM relationships' concealability may vary, with some configurations like polyamory being less concealable than, for instance, monogamish relationships, which have less visibility within public settings than romantic intimacy between more than two individuals would have (Moors et al., 2021). Indeed, stigma

visibility has been linked to increased discrimination and poor health outcomes such as depression and anxiety, and, even though sexuality is considered a concealable attribute, more visibly non-heterosexual gay men and lesbians experience worse outcomes on these factors (Doane, 2017). The visibility of participants' relationship configurations may thus play a key role in differentiating their degrees of exposure to stigmatising experiences and the consequences thereof, which may in turn have bearing on the ways in which they conceptualise and consider stigma directed at CNM.

3.4 Reconciling Phenomenology and Stigma Theory

The use of both an interpretive phenomenological and stigma-based theoretical framework is selected for the present study owing to the inherent requirements of the research question. While phenomenology provides the ontological and epistemological foundation for the scope of the study's knowledge generation, stigma theory is introduced as a referential frame that allows the phenomenological insights generated through this study's participants to be integrated into the greater socio-cultural and political context in which the experiences occur. Stigma theory thus provides a second order interpretive lens for the primary phenomenological meaning-making of participants' experiences, offering contextual nuance compatible with the situatedness of the interpretive phenomenological mode. Stigma theory hence provides the conceptual vocabulary for the study, capacitating the re-positioning of participants' experiences beyond the personally meaningful through its emphasis on the social nature of stigma, enabling access to the broader societal implications thereof.

These foundational and referential frames may also be complementary in the analysis of the findings by providing a conceptual balance in pursuit of the study's objectives. Specifically, stigma theory shall be utilised through a phenomenological perspective and shall thus directly and explicitly centre the lived experiences of the participants. The present study aims to centre the narrativized lives and experiences of the participants, especially given the

stigma that surrounds their relational subjectivities and experiences. While some critique may be laid against the use of stigma theory as a theoretical framework given that it prescribes an analytical focus on stigma in isolation, phenomenology as a mutual theoretical framework may serve to counterbalance this focus. Phenomenology may in this way offset stigma theory as narrowly focused and may also provide space for reflection and juxtaposition of other relevant experiences to generate a broader and more nuanced exploration of participants' experiences.

3.5 Concluding Remarks

The focus of this chapter has been on characterising the paradigmatic and theoretical underpinnings that constitute this study's conceptual frame. I have consequently structured the chapter by distinguishing the two disparate but complementary theoretical components, namely, phenomenology and stigma theory. This has allowed for the discussion of phenomenology and its interpretive mode with particular consideration of its practical utility in achieving the situated aims of the research question. Criticisms of phenomenology were also explored in connection with the way in which they are addressed within the particular study. I then expounded the second theoretical framework through a discussion of the models and relevant elements of stigma that can be employed to interpret participants' accounts. This was done to demonstrate the utility of its conceptual vocabulary in adding nuance to individual's meaning-making processes and in shifting the subjective accounts to the study's desired contextual awareness through implicit societal connotations. The chapter was then concluded with an explanation of the dual use of these two theoretical frameworks in their compatible capacity for yielding situated knowledge production. Having concluded these fundamental conceptual outlines and deliberations for the present study, I now proceed to the practical implementation of the research study in the form of its methodology.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Overview

In this chapter, I shall demonstrate the practical implementation and execution of the research study. This shall begin with an overview of the research question and its objectives before providing a brief outline of the paradigmatic foundations that ground and orient the operationalization thereof. I shall then proceed by providing a detailed account of the research design, method, and sampling procedures utilized with reference to how these were formulated. Ethical and quality considerations are described before concluding the chapter with a discussion on my reflexive processes and challenges experienced throughout the research.

4.2 Research Question and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to add to the broad knowledge on consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships by addressing an area of comparative paucity, being the experience of stigma directed towards gay CNM practitioners from within the gay community. Given the dearth of knowledge on attitudes towards CNM within the gay community broadly, and within South Africa specifically (for a review, see Hauptert et al., 2017b), the aim of the present study is to qualitatively explore how a sample of consensually non-monogamous gay men from South Africa experience stigma directed at them by other members of the gay community. This study therefore seeks to generate knowledge not only on the manifestations of stigma within the gay community but moreover on participants' experiential schemas thereof, with focus therefore also on the underlying systems of individual and social meaning therein contained. The research question guiding this exploration is thus:

How do gay men in consensually non-monogamous relationships experience stigma by other members of the gay community in South Africa?

The study is further guided by the following two objectives:

1. To identify and explore participants' experiences of stigmatizing social interactions within the gay community regarding their involvement in CNM; and
2. To explore how the sample of gay CNM practitioners understand and interpret these experiences of stigma by other members of the gay community.

4.3 Paradigmatic Point of Departure

The study is grounded within the theoretical foundations of phenomenology, or, more specifically, the interpretive phenomenological approach. The study utilizes both interpretive phenomenology and stigma theory as dual referential frames that construct the bounds and approach to knowledge generation. As such, this study is rooted within a critical realist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, operating according to the assumptions that truth is accessible only indirectly and knowledge of the truth ultimately consists of inter-subjectively constructed meanings (Hiller, 2016; Willig, 2013). The study therefore seeks to produce knowledge that approximates the true experience of the phenomenon in question *as is* by generating knowledge of the truth *as is interactively accessible and intelligible*, creating the cyclical hermeneutic verging of horizons described by Heidegger (1962). This paradigmatic basis therefore allows me as researcher to interactively access, interpret, and explore the foundations of truth and meaning embedded in the participants' lived experiences of stigma from within the gay community.

4.4 Research Design

The present study implements a qualitative research approach. Whereas the quantitative approach to research is suitable for the aim of theory validation through statistical analysis, qualitative research is more appropriate for inductive theory generation and explaining observed behaviour (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017). A qualitative research approach has therefore been chosen for its utility in exploring subjective experiences in line with the aims of

the research study, where the emphasis is on the texture and meaning of participants' experiences (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Willig, 2013). In light of the study's aims and sample characteristics, qualitative thematic analysis has been selected owing to its suitability for use with variable sample sizes and in considering the wider social context of meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis is a method of analysing and interpreting data and themes across cases, serving to not only reflect but unravel participants' reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach to the research design is therefore utilized with the intention of generating detailed insight into the lived experiences of gay men experiencing stigma due to their relationship configuration.

4.5 Reconciling Phenomenology and Methodology

A study's theoretical framework informs many aspects of the research process, and in particular, its approach to data analysis (Varpio et al., 2020). Whereas the interpretive phenomenological framework of the current study can be linked to interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a possible methodology, thematic analysis is alternatively employed within the context of this study. Thematic analysis is a method of data analysis that seeks to capture patterns of meaning and moves beyond mere description and summarisation to the level of interpretation of such meaning patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In this way, thematic analysis tracks directly onto the aim of interpretive phenomenology, which is to identify and interpret the essential structures that give meaning to an experience or phenomenon (van Manen, 2017). While thematic analysis and IPA have similarities and differences in their execution as qualitative methods of analysis, thematic analysis is suggested in favour of IPA when the analytical interest extends to the wider socio-cultural context of the experience in question (Braun & Clarke, 2012), as with this study's emphasis on stigma within the gay community. For this reason, thematic analysis as a methodology is more consistent with the practical and theoretical aims of the research question.

4.6 Sampling

4.6.1 Sampling Method

This study employs a purposive sampling technique, which is the deliberate selection of participants based on qualities they possess that are aligned with the aims of the research question (Etikan et al., 2016). Owing to the population under study being considered a double-minority, in that the gay population comprises a minority within South Africa (Sutherland et al., 2016), and that CNM practitioners constitute a further minority or subset of the gay population (Hauptert et al., 2017a), snowball sampling was utilized as the specific purposive strategy. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that is specifically suggested for use when access to a target population may be difficult to obtain (Sharma, 2017). Furthermore, similar snowball strategies to participant recruitment have proven useful in studies attempting to access practitioners of stigmatised sexual practices (Martin, 2023). This sampling approach therefore allows the inclusion of participants with relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

4.6.2 Sampling Criteria

Thematic analysis is suggested to be suitable for a wide range of sample sizes, ranging from 2 to 400 participants (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Fugard & Potts, 2015). Initially, an ideal sample size of twelve participants was selected in order to generate a sufficient but not overwhelming amount of data that can generate detailed analysis; however, only seven participants could be voluntarily recruited. While thematic analysis does not prescribe a desired range of sample sizes, this number is in line with suggestions that qualitative research samples should ensure saturation through a sufficient number of cases (Etikan et al., 2016; Willig, 2013), and this sample size is thus considered to be sufficient for the chosen method of analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In order to anonymise participants and maintain their confidentiality,

pseudonyms have been applied and paired with relationship configuration descriptors for analytical convenience. The following pseudonyms were applied:

Table 1

Summary of Participant Relevant Information

Pseudonym	Relationship Details		Age	Race	Region
	Configuration	Ongoing			
Keanu	Open	Yes	23	White	Cape Town
Tyron	Open	No	31	Coloured	Johannesburg
Nathan	Open	Yes	24	White	Johannesburg
Jean	Polyamorous	Yes	27	White	Johannesburg
Marius	Open	No	37	White	Johannesburg
Chris	Open	Yes	34	White	Ugu District Municipality ²
Mitchell	Open	Yes	36	White	Ugu District Municipality

Potential participants were identified and selected based on their compatibility with the following inclusion criteria:

1. *Cisgendered gay man.* Owing to the study's emphasis on stigmatizing experiences within the gay community specifically, participants were required to be gay men. The additional component of being cisgendered was included to ensure that participants were identifiable with the gay community generally rather than an even smaller subset thereof, being the transgender gay male community. This was done as the smaller subset may have additional associated stigma beyond the scope of the present study, which is the intersection of gay identity and

² *Ugu District Municipality* has been provided as the location for two participants. This was done to limit the potential for revealing such participants' identities by referring to the specific towns in which they reside, especially considering the smaller local populations thereof. Their towns of residence are thus generalised to the Ugu District Municipality.

relationship configuration in particular. Additionally, the age implication of ‘men’ requires individuals to be excluded if under the age of 18.

2. *Currently in or has been in a consensually non-monogamous relationship.* This criterion is an inherent requirement of the research study as participants must have experienced being in a CNM relationship in order to experience stigma directed towards their relationship. This criterion therefore distinguishes participants from members of the broader gay community in that they are additionally required to have personal experience with being in alternative relationship configurations.

4.6.3 Identification and Recruitment of Participants

The above criteria were selected to facilitate the collection of suitable accounts for the aims of the research study without imposing unnecessary restrictions on the pool of potential participants. These were then implemented within the recruitment process via inclusion in the participant information sheet (Appendix A), which was disseminated to potential participants after they had been identified. The recruitment process unfolded firstly through approaching existing interpersonal networks of individuals within the gay community with information on the study and seeking their assistance in identifying suitable participants, who were then contacted electronically, as per the first wave of snowball sampling (Abubakar et al., 2015). Once identified, these participants were able to generate additional recruitment contacts in line with the second phase of snowball sampling (Abubakar et al., 2015; Sharma, 2017). Participants were supplied with both the participant information sheet (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B) prior to securing their participation. Participants were required to sign the latter before conducting the interview. This procedure was initiated only after ethical approval had been obtained.

4.6.4 Sampling Limitations

The limitations of the utilized sampling procedure relate to its purposive nature. Purposive sampling, being done to ensure adequate experience with the phenomenon under investigation, is a nonprobability sampling technique (Etikan et al., 2016). Although this method of sampling allowed the utilization of existing social networks to identify suitable participants, the findings generated from such sampling methods have limited generalizability to the general population owing to its non-representative nature (Sharma, 2017). Additionally, the use of this sampling technique yielded a mostly racially homogenous sample group, with six out of the seven recruited participants identifying as white. The data collected may thus not be reflective of the experiences across differently racialised groups or communities of gay men. Furthermore, six out of the seven recruited participants identified their relationship configuration as ‘open,’ with only one identifying as ‘polyamorous.’ This limits the degree to which the findings may reflect shared experiences across different CNM configurations.

4.7 Data Collection

Data collection unfolded through the use of virtual unstructured interviews. Virtual interviews were chosen in order to permit participation from individuals regardless of transport limitations and region of residence, especially given that the purposive sampling technique yielded participants that were geographically scattered throughout South Africa. Virtual interviews in this way also broadened the potential participant pool beyond one specific location, which was made necessary by the discussed indications of gay CNM practitioners being a minority population (Hauptert et al., 2017a). Zoom was utilised as the virtual interview platform due to its use of end-to-end encryption and other security protocols including the use of an access key and waiting room. Participants would also not be required to pay a subscription fee for the use of this platform.

Unstructured interviews are non-directive and flexible, following a natural conversational style of interaction that allows participants to comprehensively discuss their relevant experiences (Barret & Twycross, 2018; Doody & Noonan, 2013). Unstructured interviews were chosen for their ability to produce depth of experience, as they typically elicit participants' views and opinions which can then be explored in depth to yield rich data for investigation (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017; Doody & Noonan, 2013). Consequently, the interviews were not guided by a structured interview protocol containing a set of prescribed questions, but rather utilized an introductory umbrella question to anchor and orient the discussion (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Here I sought to foreground the importance of an open dialogue of conversational exchange with participants about their sexual lives, not a structured inquisition. In doing so, I found my use of an unstructured format to the interviews to place participants firmly in control of the pace of our conversation, given that we were ultimately talking about intimate aspects and experiences of their personal lives and relationships. For the purposes of this study, the opening question used to orient the interview was, "Can you tell me about an incident where a gay man behaved negatively to you because of your relationship arrangement?"

The interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. The interview period commenced in August of 2022 and lasted until October of 2023. The interviews were conducted virtually via a free cloud-based video conferencing service called Zoom due to the ease of recording and to mitigate the possible prohibitive function of geographic distance to participation. The interviews were consequently audio- and video-recorded to aid with the transcription process. Each participant was provided with a unique video conferencing link with settings in place to prevent sharing thereof with others in order to ensure the privacy of the interview. A virtual waiting room was also used to ensure no intrusions occurred. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and disseminated to the individual

participants for checking to ensure the accuracy thereof and to thus mitigate researcher bias (Willig, 2013).

4.8 Data Analysis

4.8.1 Transcription Process and Notation

Once an unstructured interview was concluded, I then produced a verbatim transcription thereof. This was done manually without aid from transcription software in order to allow me to familiarize myself with the content of each transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The verbal content was transcribed using an orthographic method that has been utilized within thematic analysis research, and which is free from phonetic and paralinguistic features (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Specifically, this approach was done in line with Braun and Clarke's (2012) utilization, incorporating

all spoken words and sounds, including hesitations, false starts, cutoffs in speech (indicated by a dash; e.g., thin-), the interviewer's guggles (e.g., mm-hm, ah-ha), laughter, long pauses [indicated by (pause)], and strong emphasis (indicated by underscore). Commas signal a continuing intonation, broadly commensurate with a grammatical comma in written language; inverted commas are used to indicate reported speech; three full-stops in a row (. . .) signal editing of the transcript. (pp. 59-60)

This level of transcription was utilized for the analytical nuance it provides (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Willig, 2013). A full transcript notation protocol is provided in Appendix D. Once an interview transcript had been drafted, it was sent to the participant for confirmation that its contents matched that of the interview so as to ensure that the transcription provided a suitable analytical base free from researcher bias (Willig, 2013). All participants reported satisfaction with the interview transcript.

4.8.2 Interpretation Process

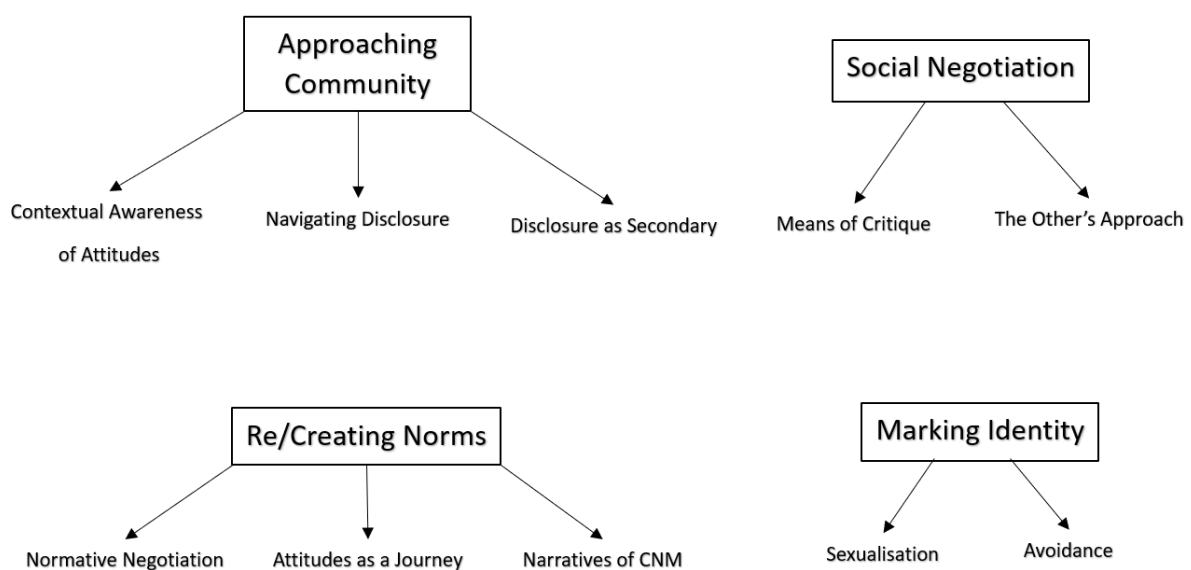
Once the transcripts were finalized, data analysis occurred through Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was selected for its accessibility to novice researchers and ability to yield meaningful in-depth results (Nowell et al., 2017). This analytical method allows the researcher to systematically identify and make sense of commonalities and shared experiences in participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is a flexible approach that can vary on several dimensions, an important one being on the continuum of inductive versus deductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). For the purposes of the present study, data analysis has been integratively positioned between these two poles, relying both on generation of analytical codes from within participants' accounts and on theoretically informed code generation pertaining to the components of stigma theory that have previously been set forth. This is in line with Braun and Clarke's (2012) assertion that a purely inductive approach is unattainable, and with their illustration of an integrative approach as being useful in employing theoretical concepts to visibilise the implicit meanings that participants' accounts contain. The analytical process was thus operationalized using the step-based approach as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012):

1. In order to familiarize myself with the data, I actively and critically read and reread through the interview transcripts while searching for meanings and patterns. This involved making initial notes throughout regarding thoughts and items of potential interest.
2. Codes, which are labels for a data feature of interest, were then identified and applied throughout by identifying potentially relevant data units. This involved the creation of descriptive semantic codes as well as more interpretive latent codes for meanings underlying the semantic significance.

- To generate themes, the existing codes were sorted according to their potential thematic significance and coherence by considering similarities and overlap between them. This involved creating a table collating the coded data extracts within these initially identified themes. A thematic map (Figure 1 below) was then constructed to conceptualise the themes and their subthemes.

Figure 1

Initial Thematic Map

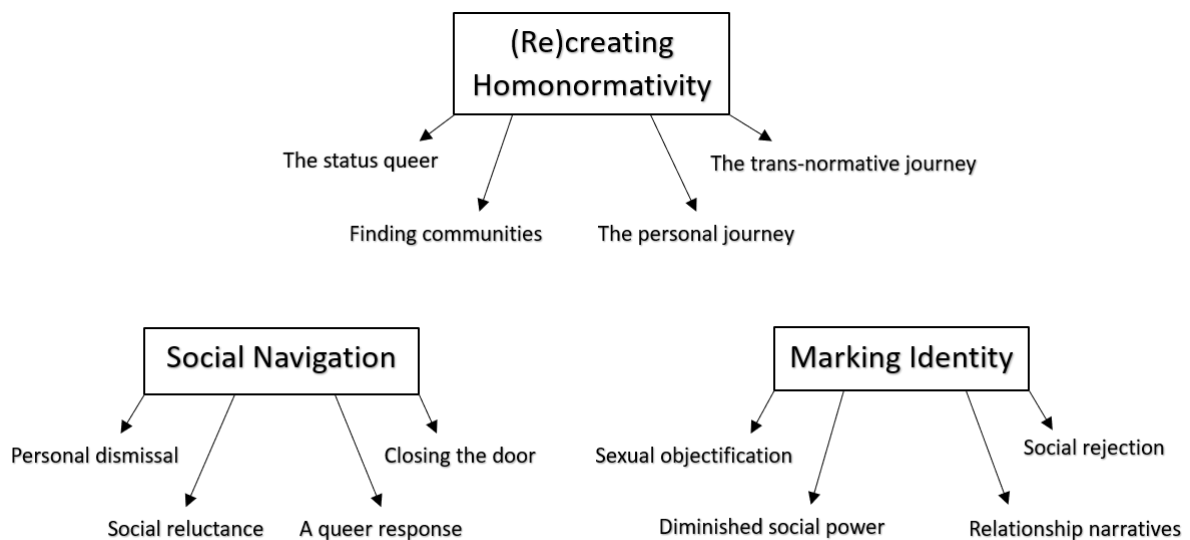


- The potential themes were reviewed for internal and external homogeneity to determine their internal coherence and fit with other themes. The themes were additionally reviewed to determine their fit with the original data, and where necessary, certain themes were discarded or relocated. This entailed a process of questioning the initially identified themes to determine their quality, depth (signifying that they are in fact themes rather than codes), boundaries, support within the data, and precision. Once the themes were finalized, they were then reconstructed into a new thematic map to demonstrate their relationships and hierarchical ordering. Once the final thematic map (Figure 2 below) had been

constructed, the second phase of theme reviewing was initiated. This entailed returning to the original data to ensure the validity of the themes in relation to it, as well as to identify additional data units that fit with the final themes and codes, but which had not been identified during the initial coding process. As the thematic map was considered satisfactory, I proceeded onto the fifth step of the analysis.

Figure 2

Final Thematic Map



5. The fifth step of refining and defining themes was undergone through considering the essence or crux of each theme, or the element of participants' experiences that it encompasses. This entailed considering the uniqueness or freedom from overlap of each of the themes before applying final theme labels.
6. The final step of the data analysis was concluded in the writing-up of Chapter 5 (Findings and Discussion). This step, however, is not fully distinguishable from the former steps, in that considering the essence of each theme required the identification of appropriate verbatim extracts for inclusion and a formulation of the analytical intent of each theme. This is in line with the assertion that writing

and analysis are intertwined within qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). This final step thus represented the tying together of the disparate elements into a cohesive narrative of participants' experiences.

4.9 Quality of Research

Owing to the nature of the research study, traditional quantitative concepts such as validity and reliability in the determination of scientific merit are not entirely applicable in evaluating the qualitative findings herein supplied (Willig, 2013). However, to avoid the hermeneutic naïveté of over-privileging subjectivity to the detriment of scientific standards (Applebaum, 2012), Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approach to trustworthiness and rigour in qualitative research has been implemented. This involved addressing the components thereof, being credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility, the first component of trustworthiness, refers to the confidence in or truth of the study and its findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the analysis phase, credibility was aimed for through iterative engagement with the data, wherein the fit of the analytical conclusions with the original meaning construed by the data was iteratively evaluated to ensure compatibility. Evidence of such iterative questioning is provided through inclusion of the first draft of a thematic map which illustrates the changes in how themes have been constructed. Beyond the phase of analysis, I aimed to further ensure credibility by maintaining a reflexivity journal throughout the operationalisation of the study, to reflect on my experiences and possible biases related to CNM so as to ensure that these do not threaten the credibility of the study (Connelly, 2016).

The second component of trustworthiness is the dependability of the findings, which refers to the temporal and contextual stability of the conditions underpinning the study and its data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As recommended by Connelly (2016), dependability was ensured within the data through indicating the sampling criteria and briefly describing their main

characteristics (while retaining anonymity), which is in line with Elo et al.'s (2014) assertion that this allows for an appreciation of the context of the findings. This was done to establish a clearly documented research process and its conditions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Thirdly, confirmability refers to the degree to which findings could be repeated owing to their neutrality or freedom from researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability can be ensured through similar methods to the previous components inasmuch as they prevent the biasing influence of a singular perspective on the research (Connelly, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). To this end, key considerations from the reflexivity journal will be incorporated into the study by means of a subsequent discussion thereof within this chapter.

The fourth component of trustworthiness is transferability, which is the degree of utility the findings of the study have to other persons and settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This component of trustworthiness is reader-determined, in that it must be considered on a case basis (Elo et al., 2014). To generate transferable findings, rich description has been provided of the study's context, including its sample characteristics, to assist readers in determining the degree of applicability the findings may have to other situations (Nowell et al., 2017).

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Before the commencement of the research study, ethical clearance (ethical approval number HUM002/0522) was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (Appendix C). Upon initial contact with potential participants, all were supplied with the participant information sheet (Appendix A) before obtaining their consent. They were then required to provide written consent by signing the informed consent form (Appendix B) prior to conducting interviews, which further included obtaining consent to the recording thereof for transcription purposes. The data gained from these recordings in the form of interview transcripts and the study's findings will be stored at the University in a secure location for a period of 15 years, and additionally in an encrypted and password-

protected electronic format on my personal computer. Access to the data will be subject to further ethical clearance; however, a copy of the study's findings will be disseminated to the participants once the dissertation has been finalized.

The participant information sheet detailed unto participants the voluntary nature of their participation including their right to withdraw from the study without fear of negative consequences. The risks and benefits of the study were also outlined. Regarding risks accrued from participation, the length of the interview was determined to have the potential to cause fatigue, and participants were thus informed that they may request a break at any point of the interview. Additionally, because the discussion of stigma could cause painful memories or emotions to be elicited, participants were provided with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group's mental health line details to utilize should this occur. While participants accrued no direct benefits from participation, they were informed that the study may provide insight that may be used in further research or as a resource for clinicians working with CNM practitioners.

A key ethical consideration for this study was protecting participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Though participants are not anonymous to me as the researcher, their anonymity has been preserved within this report through the use of pseudonyms and omission and alteration of identifying information. Owing to the nature of snowball sampling whereby participants may be familiar with one another and thus able to identify others from a discussion of their accounts, special emphasis was given to concealing participants' identities as well as that of their partners where referenced within the selected verbatim extracts. Furthermore, to protect confidentiality during the interview phase, access to the virtual interviews was restricted and participants were provided with a unique access link. A virtual waiting room was utilised to allow only the intended participant access to the interview. Participants were similarly encouraged to utilize the same privacy procedure as I employed, which was to conduct the

interview in an unoccupied room using earphones and with the door closed. The virtual platform, Zoom, utilises end-to-end encryption, meaning that data is secure and cannot be intercepted by external persons or by Zoom itself. The interview recordings were stored locally rather than through cloud storage and were password-protected.

4.11 Reflexivity

In attempting to ensure the credibility of the findings, reflexivity became evident as a necessary and intentional undertaking throughout the research process. This has involved attempts to acknowledge my individual belief systems and aspects of my identity as they may influence my values, biases, and assumptions (Connelly, 2016; Smith & Osborne, 2014). Reflexivity in this way is essential given the nature of the analysis as producing *constructed* themes that are created through co-constitutionality in dialogue with original participant meanings, and thus in order to ensure appropriate representation of participants' experiences (Crowther & Thomson, 2020; Willig, 2013).

It is firstly necessary to acknowledge my identity as it interacts and intersects with participants' experiences. While personally identifying as a gay man, I subscribe to traditional, mononormative ideals in the manner in which I idealise and approach relationships. My personal relational ideals thus largely conflict with those of the participants. In response to this, I attempted to highlight rather than mitigate where relevant participants' emphasis on normative values within the gay community, especially as it appeared to represent an essential element in how participants understood their experiences of stigma. I was in this way apprehensive of undermining the participants' experiences, which required me to confront my own narratives on relationship ideals.

This emphasis on not undermining participants' experiences caused me to experience some tension in our conflicting perceptions of the gay community. In particular, and as will be discussed, participants portrayed the gay community as largely non-stigmatising and accepting

of their CNM relationships, which differed from my interactions with community members. Specifically, when discussing my research study with gay peers, it appeared to me as though I was largely met with negative attitudes and dismissive, stigmatising narratives of CNM. I therefore struggled to comprehend the participants' experiences, and found myself questioning the validity thereof. In this way, it felt important not only to represent participants' experiences of stigma, but to do justice to their understanding of stigma's origins and occurrence within the gay community rather than to report solely on the means of its manifestation, as a sole focus on how stigma manifests would otherwise misconstrue such manifestations as being the norm and normal expectation for these participants.

Arising also from this conflict, I experienced the need to take on an advocacy role for my participants beyond the research interaction. Being met with negative attitudes resulted in personal conflict, in that my personal idealisation of monogamy became superseded in interactions where a need to defend the validity of CNM arose. I became aware during my analysis that this perceived need for advocacy infiltrated my constructions of community norms and the theme of *the normative journey*, in that I began positioning CNM more favourably than traditional ideals. I had to remain conscious of this personal normative tension and strove not to connote significance where none had been inflected by the participants themselves. As such, it became important to highlight the subjective nature of such ideals and normative negotiations as understood by these participants rather than as general proclamations and prescriptions of values.

Being a novice researcher, I at times experienced personal difficulty during the interview process. Specifically, I felt compelled to adhere strictly to the aim and objectives of this research study despite implementing an unstructured interview approach, and relinquishing the direction of the interview to the participants became a source of consternation. This occurred mostly during participants' discussion of how they experienced and constructed their

relationships more generally rather than in the gay community and in stigmatising interactions specifically. However, in engaging with the interview data, such discussions became evident as an integral way of contrasting, comparing, and contextualising their experiences relevant to the study's objectives. Rather than omitting such data as irrelevant, it therefore became key in guiding me to formulate how participants understood their experiences.

Beyond my status as a novice researcher, my position as an intern clinical psychologist may have had an impact on my manner of engagement with the data. Specifically, in my capacity as an intern psychologist, the emphasis has been on formulating an understanding of an individual's inner world in order to understand their experiences; the shift in this research is to understand an individual's experiential world. A subtle bias within my exploration and construction of the themes may thus have been present that caused me to prioritise the individual's systems of meaning for their experiences rather than the experiences themselves. While an awareness and emphasis of participants' interpretational worlds may thus be present in the analysis, I actively strove for balance with the portrayal of their experiences as interpretively valuable in their own right. I have therefore attempted to maintain a reflexive approach throughout the implementation of the research study, consciously considering how I influence and am influenced by the data collection, analysis, and final integration and demonstration thereof.

4.12 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the methodological operationalization of this study's research question. This entailed outlining the two objectives thereof and briefly rediscussing the phenomenological underpinnings before providing an overview of the qualitative research approach designed to implement the specific research question. The research process was then described with reference to the utilized approach to sampling, data collection, and analysis. In order to demonstrate my attempts to generate rigorous qualitative

knowledge, I then detailed the manner in which trustworthiness has been ensured throughout the research process before providing a description of the reflexive considerations that were taken into account. This chapter has therefore clarified the overall methodology and method utilized in the completion of this research study, and thus, the way in which the findings, which are described in the next chapter, have been generated.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview

This research study sought to explore how gay men in South Africa experience and interpret stigma towards their consensually non-monogamous relationship configuration within the context of the gay community. The contents of this chapter present the findings of the study as guided by these aims and is done through an exposition of the main themes and subthemes identified within participants' accounts per the thematic analytical protocol previously described. Integrated throughout the findings, I present a discussion of the particular thematic significance within a contextualised understanding of the relevant literature as it bears upon the holistic understanding thereof.

The analysis yielded a construction of three main themes within the participants' depiction of their experiences: *(re)creating homonormativity*, *social navigation*, and *marking identity*. Several subthemes were identified within each of these as will be elucidated. I begin this chapter with a brief enumeration of the themes and their identified subthemes. The discussion will then proceed in accordance with standard thematic analysis methodology in which illustration and comparison is made of applicable literature and theory in its supportive, confirmatory, or conflicting role to the themes herein expressed. I then conclude the chapter with a summative overview of the discussed findings.

5.2 Themes and Discussion

As indicated, three main themes were rendered during the analysis. These themes and their relevant subthemes were identified across but not necessarily within each participant's account. Given that participants provided diverging narratives from one another, an emphasis was placed upon synthesising the unique and interrelating features thereof. Table 2 below provides the result of this process. Each main theme was constructed through the combination of four subthemes that aim to provide complementary foci that converge throughout the analysis. The

sequential structuring of these themes and their subthemes is aimed to progress from the abstract to the particular, firstly providing an integration of participants' collective broader and contextual awareness that colours and informs their concrete experiences.

Table 2

Summary of the Main Themes and Subthemes

Main theme	Subtheme
1. <i>(Re)creating homonormativity</i>	1. The status queer
	2. Finding communities
	3. The trans-normative journey
	4. The personal journey
2. <i>Social navigation</i>	5. Personal dismissal
	6. Social reluctance
	7. A queer response
	8. Closing the door
5. <i>Marking identity</i>	9. Social rejection
	10. Sexual objectification
	11. Diminished social power
	12. Relationship narratives

5.3 (Re)creating Homonormativity

In the context of this analysis, homonormativity refers to the shared and widespread values and norms held by gay men in particular (and as perceived by the participants) that position them as being in opposition to or in conflict with traditional heteronormative modes of being. Homonormativity thus acts as a frame in which participants are able to construct and understand their everyday experiences of what it means to be gay.

Throughout their accounts, participants made reference to their experience of norms within the gay community. They positioned their (homo)sexuality as normatively adjacent to their non-monogamous relationship configuration or alternatively with the latter as a direct consequence of their gay identity. The homonormative value of CNM in this case becomes expressed as (1) *the status queer*, which is necessarily subject to gay men's experience in (2) *finding communities*. This manifests as an active process over time and is found by community members according to the process of (3) *the trans-normative journey* that is reflected in (4) *the personal journey* practitioners undergo. In this way, participants presented rhetoric that remade CNM as a homonormative relationship ideal. This perception of CNM presented as a fundamental element of understanding their experiences of stigma and the gay community generally, and (re)creating homonormativity therefore requires primary positioning in the analytical structure. This idea of CNM as adjacent to the gay identity is put concisely by Keanu, who states regarding CNM:

“I'd say it's almost just becoming like another thing of being gay. It's an automatic little perk that comes with it.”

5.3.1 The Status Queer

In attempting to explore participants' experience of stigmatising interactions, most emphasised that their social interactions in the gay community with regards to their CNM relationship were largely positive. A shared rationale amongst participants for this was the interpretation that CNM represented a common feature of the gay 'scene' or environment. As such, CNM was portrayed as occupying a position alongside monogamy within the gay community's status quo.

In explaining their understanding of CNM as a normal feature, participants referenced the amount of exposure they had to CNM within the gay community. This exposure was portrayed as being both conceptual and embodied, with the gay community acting as a site of ideological promotion and experiential opportunity. Keanu demonstrates this conceptual

advancement of CNM in the following quote by making reference to online means of gay networking:

“I mean, if you’re a gay man on the internet or on any dating app or anything like that, it’s going to be in your face. It’s not something you can avoid. It’s literally- I’d say in the gay community it’s a very open topic. It’s everywhere. There’s jokes about it. There’s videos about it. If you go on any dating apps, you’re going to see a lot of couples who are in open relationships...”

This is reiterated by Nathan and Tyron in their description of how their online networking experiences exposed them to CNM as a communally acceptable relationship alternative. For them, the sexual culture and exposure in terms of varied forms of sexual engagements assisted them in reaching this conceptual familiarity with or understanding of non-monogamy:

“And also, like, something to keep in mind as well, I guess, is a lot of the queer people I do know are on Grindr and are on Tinder. I think, like, especially the ones on Grindr, you see that everywhere. It’s very common. Hooking up with a married man, hooking up with an open relationship person, so I think the stigma is, like, less included there.” – Nathan

“I’ve been on Grindr. And there’s so many of those people requesting fuckbuddies and wanting you to be their friends with benefits, it’s- it’s not unusual for me to- to see that.” – Tyron

Having exposure to non-monogamies in various forms, whether through ‘fuckbuddy’ experiences or being a ‘third’ to open dyads thus was considered to facilitate conceptual promotion. Online networking is thus portrayed as a manifestation of and method for connecting to the gay community and is similarly expressed in the literature as a gay microcosm through which gay modes of being are expressed, constructed and explored (Duncan et al.,

2015; Roth, 2016). For these participants, the abundance of conceptual exposure in general whether through online or personal networks played a key role in suggesting that the gay community has become a place of greater ideological diversity. In effect, cultivating a wider spectrum of alternative relational and sexual configurations.

This conceptual exposure was paired with a social experience of CNM. Specifically, participants described a personal connectedness between themselves and other gay CNM practitioners that allowed for the normalisation of the alternative relationship configuration. When reflecting to Jean that he described greater comfort within the gay community regarding his CNM relationship, he explained how this social connectedness enables its personal realisation:

“Yes, because most of them are open (laughs). ‘If you’re doing it, I get to do it, too.’”

The conceptual exposure and familiarity with CNM is in this way portrayed as allowing gay men to embrace the alternative relational format, which is additionally spurred on by interconnectedness with its practitioners. This perceived abundance of exposure and connections to gay men in CNM relationships reflects Hauptert et al.’s (2017a) finding that over a third of gay men in the US reported that they had ever engaged in a CNM relationship, suggesting that CNM is perceived to be similarly present and prevalent amongst gay men in South Africa. Indeed, for some, the embodiment of CNM within the South African gay community was perceived as such a normal feature that it appeared to them to be the relational standard rather than exception.

“Like, a lot of the queer relationships I know are open relationships, and I think it’s quite rare to see a monogamous one, so that’s why I haven’t really seen stigma towards it.” – Nathan

“I don’t think I can even name a gay relationship that isn’t open at this stage.” – Keanu

While the above illustrations portray CNM as the status quo, participants located this perception as fundamentally grounded within the gay community and related to their gay identities. Homosexuality was presented as the initial gateway that allowed participants to remove themselves from hegemonic hetero- and mono-norms confining them to a particular way of being sexual as well as intimately partnered. In this way, CNM became positioned as homonormative for being both conceptually promoted by gay men and relationally embodied by gay men. Participants portrayed both of these processes as involving a severing from the heteronormative, and furthermore as a necessary identity innovation:

“I think just being gay and growing up gay, you are kinda automatically forced into a way you have to view the world more openly, because you yourself are seen as something as, you know, not necessarily normal.” – Keanu

“We’re a community that’s not necessarily normal, so to subscribe yourself to normal standards is a bit outlandish.” – Nathan

“Our society and traditions and cultures have in a heterosexual relationship has told us that you can only have one person. And it’s not all cultures and all traditions that say that, but I mean what is the most commonly ideal is that.” – Tyron

The participants in this way separated themselves from characterisations of ‘normal’ and heteronormativity by virtue of their gay identity. Tyron furthered his statement about unburdening himself from the restrictions of heteronormativity later on by stating that being gay was an advantage for relational experimentation:

“Yeah, gay people, we have a plus over the straights that we can try these things and know, mm-mm, it’s not for me.”

The participants have thus portrayed being gay as advantageous for the practice of CNM in that a gay identity creates the initial divergence from heteronormativity that permits further divergence from its ideological pillars, such as mononormativity. This notion is

supported by research indicating that divergence from standards of heteronormativity even amongst heterosexual individuals facilitates further deviation from mononormativity (Currin et al., 2016). Gay men, as expressed by these participants, may thus inherently experience a degree of divergence from heteronormativity through embracing their gay identities that enables CNM to be considered and accepted. Indeed, participants regularly contrasted the conceptual acceptance and embodied engagement within the gay community with their experience of the heterosexual community. Heterosexual others were portrayed as being incapable of understanding a CNM relationship, or instead, as accepting participants' engagement therein by virtue of their already divergent gay status. This can be seen in Mitchell's statement:

“[Straight people] do the whole, ‘Oh, that’s interesting. But good for you.’ (Laughs)
It’s almost like they accept anything that comes to a person being gay, bi, or lesbian.
They sort of like, ‘It’s all weird to me, so, hey, whatever you do, just do.’”

In Mitchell's case, the reaction he describes from heterosexual people mimics the idea that the gay identity provides a gateway to further heteronormative deviation, that gay men can be non-monogamous by virtue of them also being gay. However, for others, this gateway is examined in reverse, by suggesting that straight people are closed off from CNM conceptually and that participants consequently encounter more difficulty in broaching CNM with them. This may be reflected in research indicating that CNM is more prevalent amongst gay men and in sexual and gender minorities than in the broader heterosexual majority (Hauptert et al., 2017a; Moors et al., 2014), suggesting an ideological separation that facilitates negative attitudes towards and perceptions of CNM relationships and practitioners amongst heterosexuals (Rodrigues et al., 2018). This ideological separation may be seen, for example, in the following quote wherein Nathan describes unquestioning acceptance from gay

conversational others while heterosexual conversational others required conceptual elaboration or interrogation:

“Like, just a silly example, it’s like when I spoke to my straight friends, they were all like- not against it, but they were all very much, like, confused by what it means and, like, why you would want to do something like that. But when you speak to someone who’s queer about it, I’ve been, like, met with very open minds and people haven’t really expressed any negative feelings towards it.”

Jean further adds to this portrayal of conceptual inaccessibility for heterosexual people with the following:

“This is now just among gay people that you’re focusing on, right, because when we go to heterosexual people trying to understand gay polyamorous relationships, now that’s like- that’s insane. I think it’s like- They can’t. They can’t fathom it at all.”

As such, CNM is positioned by these participants as gay-adjacent and thus only *the status queer* within the bounds of the gay community. This culminates in an enhanced sense of comfort when discussing their relationship with the gay community as opposed to heterosexual others. Marius expresses this simply by stating that regarding “an open relationship, they [straight people] would be more judgmental,” and consequently that, “in those gay spaces, [he does] feel more comfortable.” Keanu shares this sentiment by stating that he would be more comfortable discussing his CNM relationship with an unknown gay couple in favour of a straight couple “mostly because they are gay.” He later comments that, for him, discussing CNM need not be socially intimidating but may be so depending on the population with which one is interacting:

“I’d say so, especially I’d say in the gay community. I think I would probably be a bit different if I was in a room full of all straight couples that I didn’t really know. I think it would be a very different environment to be in and discuss it.”

The divergent status of one's homosexual identity thus led to participants perceiving the gay community as a place of greater ideological inclusion and which consequently promoted a greater sense of acceptance and interpersonal comfort in their CNM relationships. The gay community in this way is seen to act as a place of refuge in which the expectation is of acceptance and stands in contrast to expectations of the heterosexism from the broader population as is mirrored in Adams et al.'s (2014) study. Gay men thus interpret the generally positive interactions around their CNM relationship within the gay community as a result of the conceptual and interpersonal exposure that generates greater ideological acceptance and permissive attitudes. Gay practitioners of consensual non-monogamy may thus expect and experience greater acceptance for their divergent relationship status within the gay community due to a perception of the gay community as already diverging from hetero-and mono-normative strictures.

5.3.2 Finding Communities

It should be noted that most participants bracketed their experiences of CNM being the status quo as a function of their personal gay networks bounded by location. They described that experiencing ease in their interactions with the gay community was due to the perceived prevalence of CNM within these locally anchored networks. This subtheme therefore explores how participants typically delimited their positive experiences with CNM when amongst gay peers as particular to their unique ties to community. As Keanu expresses it:

“I mean, even though in my own head it's not something I worry about, obviously having people around who are actually physically doing the same thing always created the sense of- I don't know, comfort, inclusion.” He later tied this geographically by saying: “... because, yeah, especially in Cape Town, most couples are in an open relationship. So, yeah, I feel very comfortable discussing it with people.”

As indicated by Keanu in the above quote, an individual's personal ties to community may engender support for the practice of alternative relational configurations. His indication that being connected with others who "are actually physically doing the same thing" suggests the creation of an intimate community of solidarity. This solidarity is also expressed by Tyron who states that "with this friend [he] can speak like that [about CNM] because he's open, too," thus portraying an individual's connections with other CNM practitioners as useful in finding support for one's engagement therein. The formation of a community through shared involvement in CNM is also supported by Chris who states that, for him and his partner, CNM "opens up new doors and [they have] made some very good friends through that." He recalled, for example, that an extradyadic sexual encounter with another gay CNM practitioner resulted in Chris and his partner being invited to the other's wedding, and that they have formed an enduring relationship through their encounter. CNM as *the status queer* within a particular community must thus firstly be understood through the idea of a community formed through lines of shared solidarity that connects CNM practitioners. This is not representative of the gay community as a whole, but rather the ways in which gay men may find support and connection through engaging with other CNM practitioners.

Given how the participants understood community thus as a function of locally anchored personal connections, it is worth noting in this regard that the participants themselves occupied one of three locations, being Cape Town, Johannesburg, or in towns located in Ugu District Municipality, KZN. Nathan also highlights his experience of CNM as accepted within the gay community particular to his location and personal gay network by stating:

"Uh, that's specific to Joburg, which is more known for its liberal nature, I guess.

Pretoria is a bit more conservative with a lot more traditional, and other- Also, like, keep in mind, like, the queer people I'm associating with also are often not very cultural or religiously ingrained ... Like, I'm pretty sure there's- Somewhere deep in

Pretoria, there's like a little Afrikaans group of gays who are very conservative and like still trying to understand themselves and who wouldn't be keen on open relationships. But I don't know those people ...”

An individual's ties to a geographically localised gay community were therefore portrayed as potentially facilitating their perception of CNM as the status quo, though by Nathan's indication, the nature of those ties may potentially facilitate the inverse. The gay community and its ideological norms in this way becomes viewed as dependent on its particular localisation, which is supported by Visser (2013) in his indication that the acceptance and expression of gay identity in South Africa requires local navigation through a myriad of unique heteronormative spaces affected by class, race, and culture. The sociocultural milieu in which a community is rooted and negotiated is thus expressed to impact *the status queer* and the possible acceptability of CNM amongst gay men.

Building onto the localisation of community norms, participants raised the idea that urban centres may function as enclaves of homonormative creation. Chris states that during his travels within South Africa “there's locations where people are more conservative and it might be a bit more difficult to explain what a open relationship is” but noted that in “big cities ... people are very liberal, they're very open.” He went on to mimic Keanu and Nathan's depiction of Cape Town and Johannesburg:

“But then again, if you go into Cape Town- I think again it depends on where you are in South Africa. I think in the big locations or bigger cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town, is definitely more open.”

The idea that urban areas may function as zones of safety for ideological divergence is also present in a statement from Jean, a participant residing in Johannesburg. His statement is in response to a question on whether he experiences the conceptual inaccessibility he describes among straight people occurring also within the gay community:

“Like, I’m lucky, a lot of the people that I encounter with [in the gay community] is quite woke, um but if you go to smaller towns and stuff ... um, then yes. I also think it carries over. Definitely.”

Indeed, participants’ reference to Johannesburg and Cape Town in particular highlight CNM’s acceptability as a feature of metronormative culture occurring in urban centres and calls into focus the particular geopolitical divisions of race and class that may impact upon community norms. Importantly, norms of desired and idealised identities and bodies occurring in such urban centres privilege a particular type of (young, white, middle-class, muscular) gay man to the near-exclusion of other identities (Reygan, 2016). As such, the particular localisation of a *gay community* in its socio-historical-cultural setting may variably determine CNM’s acceptability for particular *types* of gay men, with historical inequities becoming reproduced and reinforced in gay men’s relational negotiations. Historically, drivers of social change for accepting alternative sexualities have been urban (Brown, 2008), and CNM as *the status queer* within gay communities occupying urban centres may thus reflect racial and class-based differences in adopting and negotiating community norms.

Participants also contrasted this acceptability of CNM within particular communities with the acceptability of CNM within South Africa more generally. Marius (Johannesburg) stated broadly that “culture is conservative” and that the experience of gay men’s attitudes “depends on where you find yourself,” while Chris (Ugu District Municipality) highlighted that people in South Africa “are still quite religious” regardless of sexuality and even within the gay community. These participants therefore suggested that South Africa as a whole has a culture of conservatism, and therefore that South Africans generally have negative attitudes towards CNM. Sutherland et al. (2016, p. 23) support this by portraying South Africans as “progressive prudes,” with 72% of the population believing that sex between men is morally wrong and 76% of respondents stating that “God’s laws about abortion, pornography and

marriage must be strictly followed before it's too late." Mitchell, who is also from Ugu District Municipality, adds to this idea by stating that there are "very religious uh people I know in the LGBTQ+ community that also are hesitant about [CNM]," further portraying the influence of broader culture on normative negotiations within the gay community. In this way, the societal background of conservative and traditional belief systems is understood to cause tension in gay men's sexual values and decision-making, with local culture infiltrating and affecting a localised community's ideals.

As such, while the majority of participants have described their perception of CNM and homonormativity as being the status quo within the gay community, the gay community must therefore ultimately be understood as something fractured across multiple cleavages of identity, positionality, as well as space and time, that is to say, communities. The gay community rests upon the strength of the social and geographical ties between its constituents. However, given participants' accounts, homonormativity may potentially be found most easily in the ideological diversity of urban centres, where the number of ties to other gay men may be compounded and the foundations of their own ideology reinforced. This is supported by Kelly et al.'s (2014) study that found that attachment to the gay community is strongest in urban centres where socialisation with other gay men is higher. In discussing their positive experiences of CNM within the gay community, participants have therefore interpreted the overwhelming acceptance of their relationship as bound by the local interpersonal contexts and communities they occupy and move through.

5.3.3 The Trans-Normative Journey

In their understanding of why some gay men accept or reject CNM, the participants referred to the idea of a 'journey' between norms. This journey was understood to be a function of age and experience within the gay community, such that youth were understood to remain attached to broader hetero- and mono-norms, while older and more experienced gay peers were interpreted

as being emancipated from the constraints of heteronormative ideology. As such, participants largely referred to the type of experiences that gay peers have had in understanding their attitudes and approach to CNM. Accepting gay peers were portrayed as having undergone a process of personal normative negotiations, in which heteronormative ideals were found unsuitable and alternative, homonormative ideals were embraced. For those without experience or who had negative experiences of CNM, a heteronormative assimilation was envisioned, hindering their openness to considering and embracing alternative ideals – and those who embody them.

This characteristic of experience was often directly linked to age, with participants portraying younger members of the gay community as more negative in their attitudes towards CNM and with a greater desire for the heteronormative ideal of monogamy. This is illustrated in Chris's statement:

“So, I always thought like the young society or the youngsters would actually be more modern and more open, but I also find often that young people actually want it more traditional and have one partner ... what I noticed is that young people where I maybe have complete different thought about it are actually often also more into the monogamous relationship.”

Chris went on to explain this experience by referring to the broader cultural idealisation of monogamy:

“I think with them [young gay men], it's more because they might not have had a relationship. They all see these Netflix movies of these romantic one-on-ones and a prince finding this guy and stuff. So, I think they are all living a bit in that dream, if I can put it that way. And then once they encounter having a relationship and they might have been together for a year or two, then they suddenly feel like, ‘Oof, okay. There is actually more out there.’”

In Chris's reference to Netflix and the consumption of relational ideals is a demonstration of how contemporary iterations and commercial representations of gay identity and relationships have been shaped by longer standing hetero-and mono-normativities. Specifically, the romanticised fictional gay relationships depicted mirror traditional heterosexual narratives (i.e., "a prince finding this guy") and create a commercially palatable version of the 'good gay' – one that subscribes and adheres to the heteronormative script. Rather than undergoing ideological innovation as part of their gay identity, youth are portrayed thus as uncritically accepting a way of being and relating that has been transplanted onto them. Jean echoes this sentiment:

“For younger people, I think it's just um the initial reaction of being in a monogamous romantic relationship and that's the only person you're going to have. It's very romantic at first. Because you see it in movies and you have all these examples for it, and you're like, 'I also want to have this train station Christmas special happening in my life.' ... And I don't blame them, because also I was that way.”

Jean provides further nuance in the following extract by suggesting that it is not only youth's relational inexperience that causes discomfort with diverging from traditional norms, but inexperience and lack of ease with one's gay identity. He indicates that his current polyamorous partner's initial inexperience simply with being openly gay was accompanied by increased anxiety about further diverging from the prescribed heteronormative relationship format:

“And then I found my second relationship and um he was very monogamous and was not open to the idea at all at first and didn't think that that's- like, he had just came out and everything, and everything was very new ... And he was still, like, semi-closeted. Like, he freaked out the first time I posted a picture of us on Instagram.”

The participants' portrayal of younger gay men as rejecting CNM and idealising mononormativity is supported by other studies in which heteronormative assimilationist attitudes were identified among younger gay men (Adams et al., 2014; Duncan et al., 2015; Goltz, 2014). While these studies reflect heteronormative idealisation among young gay men, the participants of this study suggest that this is not a longitudinal trend for the community's attitudes as a whole, but rather a part of young gay men's personal journey. They indicated the expectation that greater exposure to the gay community over time would result in the embrace of alternative ideals. This may be supported by research suggesting that mononormative beliefs are the result of socialisation (Conley et al., 2013), suggesting as the participants have that greater socialisation and induction into the gay community may impact this. This socialisation is also evident in Moodley and Rabie's (2020) study in which gay dyads initially idealised the monogamous "white picket fence" before ultimately adapting it to their personal CNM configuration. Continuing the idea of experience as protective, Marius states that, because older gay men have "been through the mill," they provide "a more mature reaction" to CNM. Chris furthers this idea of experience as promoting more homonormative attitudes with his statement:

"But I think that also has to do with experience. I mean, a forty-year-old probably has way more experience and knows the different types of relationships and I would say like what options are out there, where a eighteen-year-old just doesn't have that experience, I would assume. So, I think it's also, yeah, natural that they don't have that experience. And it's probably part of their journey."

Jean also explains the differences in reactions he receives from young versus older gay men in the following way:

"Um, because as we get older, we work on ourselves and we work on our insecurities and we understand ourselves and we're with our partners for very long ... Younger people are very insecure, worried about how they look and how they feel and what

they do, and they're still figuring out who they are." He later continues: "... where the older ones, like, we've lived the life, we know we want to sleep with other people, it is going to happen, you've made peace with it, we've made peace with it. Um, so I think they're okay with the open relationship situation."

Jean thus describes this reaction from youth as part of a process in which increased age results in dissimulation from heteronormativity and greater acceptance of homonormativity. Experience in this way was seen as dual-edged: amongst gay men with a lack of experience, participants expected to encounter more negative reactions towards their CNM relationships, while the presence of experience fostered more accepting attitudes and even greater engagement in alternative relationship arrangements. This positive nature of experience is expressed by Marius and Chris in the extracts below.

"Um, and others will just be hav- because they have experience with it as well, there's also a like 'Oh, okay. I know what you're talking about. I've been in such an environment or whatever.'" – Marius

"Unless the friends are themselves in an open relationship. Then it's more like, 'Oh, you guys are also open. Cool.' And then it's full stop." – Chris

Some participants went beyond the idea of experience as a protective factor to illustrate how having personal experience with CNM may also be involved in forming negative attitudes towards it. Marius expresses it thus:

"Also just depend on what they are looking for in life. And what they- What bad experiences and good experiences they've had. Yeah. I think that's been a thing in the community. Um let's put this word out there. It's all about the experimentation they have done and what has happened as a result of that. That influences their reaction."

He further explained that negative attitudes may be formed towards a CNM relationship when there is a breakdown of trust and communication:

“I think mainly a lot of times what I've experienced when you talk about this, so some people have been through the same themselves, and there has been- um, what do you call this? Something happened between the part- the two partners in regards with the third- another party. Or people doing things behind each other's back.”

Mitchell also briefly recounts how experience with a CNM relationship can affect his engagement with others due to the formation of a negative perception:

“Um, so I think there's just that, where some people feel like, ‘Oh, I've been through it, so don't do it. Because I'm telling you, don't do it.’”

This function of experience in forming negative perceptions towards CNM within the gay community can be seen in Tyron, who himself had been in an open relationship and had refrained from engagement therein thereafter. A negative perception is evident in his questioning of a CNM relationship within the following quote:

“I question if they are in love with each other. You know, is it genuine? I don't know. Why are they doing it? Why? What did I- I sometimes ask like, why, what did I miss? What did I not do right? Did I not enjoy it the way I'm supposed to because why is it working for these people?”

While the trans-normative journey is thus depicted to occur with age and experience outside of hetero-norms, experience may have a polarising effect, affecting whether the journey between normative landscapes is continued or reversed. For Tyron and the gay men described in the above accounts, negative experience with CNM appears to have resulted in a return to heteronormative ideology. Experience in this way is perceived to be a key factor in how other gay men approach CNM practitioners as it acts as one determinant in adopting an assimilationist or post-assimilationist attitude. This references the idea of necessary identity innovation expressed in *the status queer*, wherein one is required to reevaluate the norms one subscribes to as a result of one's gay identity. Participants in this way understand the more

rejecting approach towards CNM that is enacted by younger gay men in their interactions with them as a part of their *trans-normative journey*. They perceive that inexperienced gay men will hold more stigmatising attitudes than their more experienced counterparts.

5.3.4 The personal journey

This experience was not only reflected in their understanding of other gay men's attitudes, but within participants' own journey towards embracing homonormative ideals. Many recounted a struggle with their heteronormative upbringing and the traditional ideals that they were conditioned into, mimicking the idea of severance to the heteronormative discussed under *the status queer*. This severance was identified as an active process occurring over time, with different participants positioned at different points along this timeline. In this way, participants' own positioning along the trans-normative journey may serve to further demonstrate the ideas expressed under the previous subtheme.

Tyron's personal difficulty with CNM as illustrated in a previous quotation may indicate a return to heteronormative values, as he questions the underpinnings of others non-monogamous relationships (an idea that will be explored further under the main theme of *marking identity*). While Tyron's experience resulted in a return to the traditional, Nathan, who is currently within his first CNM relationship, appears to be in a transitional state between the traditional and the homonormative as expressed in the following extracts from his account:

“I just never thought it would be something I'd want to do, because I thought it was- I just didn't see a reason for it. Like, I didn't understand why you would want to kind of step outside of your relationship.” – Nathan

“We're a community that's not necessarily normal, so to subscribe yourself to normal standards is a bit outlandish. I don't- I don't necessarily agree with that, but at the same time, it makes sense ... Like, I'm still thinking about a lot of stuff, and more specifically- Traditions do exist for a reason, but at the same time, traditions also are

longstanding and ... usually confined by cultural and, like, religious norms, which I think we're outgrowing, so ... As I mentioned previously, I think it's mainly just about growing up in a very traditional, cultural, even somewhat religious household. Like, you don't really see that being normal. So, I guess that's the only conflict that really comes in is, like, trying to outgrow your old bias." – Nathan

"Look, I definitely think, like, for me at least, I don't see being open necessarily as a permanent state of being. And I think that's where, like, the conflict comes in. Like, I think, at a certain age, you should at least confine yourself to one person in a monogamous relationship." – Nathan

The above extracts indicate a personal battle with traditional beliefs and a movement towards alternative frames of thinking. He draws on narratives similar to those expressed by other young gay men that idealised monogamy as the ultimate relationship destination as seen in Duncan et al.'s (2015) study. Participants in the aforementioned study portrayed the casual sexual culture of the 'gay scene' as something that may be indulged in while young but should be grown out of over time (Duncan et al., 2015). Nathan can potentially be envisioned as within a chrysalis, undergoing an ideological metamorphosis in which the remnants of a conditioned traditional ideology become intermingled with a burgeoning homonormative acceptance. He is thus positioned in the midpoint of the trans-normative journey. The personal difficulty with embracing CNM and the homonormative that he expresses is also shared by Keanu in his account of his past:

"I was in like a fully monogamous relationship. And that relationship itself had a very heteronormative traditional view on relationships, so I kind of believed monogamy was the only way forward ... Um and then within that relationship, after three years, kind of started opening up to a non-monogamous relationship and kinda broadened my view ... So, no, I wouldn't say at first it was something I was comfortable with,

because my view on it was still very narrow. I didn't have much exposure to a non-monogamous relationship.”

Keanu's acceptance of CNM relationships is described as a continued undertaking. He reflects in the following quote that he at times reverts to his past way of thinking and the narratives therewith attached to CNM:

“... as much as you change and grow, you know, you can tend to kind of slack back on your very core way you were raised and just I think sometimes your brain kind of defaults for a second in certain situations, where you think, ‘Oh my god, people are going to think this.’ But in reality, they don't really care or don't really think that way.”

This concern over peer perceptions during the trans-normative journey described by Keanu is shared by Chris. He describes his initial hesitance about his open relationship by stating that he required reassurance from others, representing a desire to maintain approval while undergoing a transition in normative ideology:

“Yeah, there I felt more like sharing it and telling it to somebody, especially in the beginning ... I think actually I wanted to have some reassurance I could have imagined. You know, like ask, ‘What do you feel about that?’ and ‘What would you say?’ So, there I was still not as confident as I am now, and maybe was a bit scared of- of- yeah, how could it be and what comes.”

The concern and discomfort in CNM expressed by Keanu and Chris in their accounts may represent felt stigma, which is the expectation that one may experience stigma (Herek, 2007). According to Herek (2007), felt stigma motivates individuals to modify their behaviour in order to avoid such experiences, which may potentially be seen by Chris in his request for reassurance that his relationship is acceptable to others. For CNM practitioners, the personal journey between norms may thus represent a site of potential stigma that is either felt or

internalised rather than enacted by others. This is further evident in Nathan's previously provided account in which internalised stigma, or one's personal endorsement of stigmatising values (Herek, 2007) affects his engagement with and outlook on his own CNM relationship. By personally straying from once-accepted norms, their past perceptions and ideals must be challenged, and on this personal journey internalised or felt stigma may thus arise.

5.4 Social Navigation

The second main theme of social navigation reflects upon how engaging with one's CNM status is approached both in terms of CNM practitioners addressing the gay community and in how the gay community interacts with CNM practitioners. This is divided into four subthemes, with the first two examining CNM practitioners' approach towards the community, and the last two the inverse. While participants often described their experiences of how they engage the gay community in similar ways, a dichotomy arose in the implicit premising of their approaches that appeared to have bearing upon the objectives of this study. In particular, although participants couched their engagement with their CNM status within their understanding of it as homonormative (as discussed under the previous theme) and which consequently allowed a personal perception of their relationship status as non-noteworthy, this was engaged with in alternating fashion from either a dismissive perspective or one of avoidance and reluctance. This gave rise to the first two subthemes, being (1) *personal dismissal* and (2) *social reluctance*. Inversely, participants portrayed other gay men's approach to their status as CNM relationship practitioners in either positive or negative ways, leading to the creation of two further subthemes, (3) *a queer response* and (4) *closing the door*.

The following discussion explores this dichotomy in conjunction with applicable theory and in line with the study's objective of understanding how the participants interpret their social experiences relevant to their relationship status. In doing so, it should be noted that, while

participants' description of how their relationship status was engaged with across the subthemes, the ultimate aspiration was shared, and can be put simply through Chris's statement:

“You should feel as natural talking about it as you feel talking about clothes. ‘What are you wearing today?’ Yeah.”

5.4.1 Personal Dismissal

Many participants' accounts of their social interactions around their CNM status necessarily engaged their approach to the disclosure thereof. As such, this subtheme was formed in attempting to create an integrated understanding of some participants' perceptions of disclosure as unneeded or non-significant given that it has bearing upon the direction and nature of their social encounters within the gay community. This view regarding the disclosure of their CNM relationship configuration appears to be developed by two reciprocally engaging factors: the expectation of CNM's normal and acceptable status within the gay community and participants' own acceptance or comfort with their relationship configuration. Take, for example, the following statements from Keanu and Chris;

“[Disclosing] definitely wasn't something I'd say significant. Because I mean it was within a group of other gay couples who at that stage was also open. So it wasn't like news that would necessarily surprise anyone. Um especially not within the gay community ... So, it was very anticlimactic.” – Keanu

“It's like you don't even talk about it much. You just say, ‘Oh, by the way, I've got a partner,’ and they go, ‘Ah, cool, okay. let's have a beer later after we've met.’ So, you also get that. Actually, to be honest, I think it is a bit more that than [reactions on] the conservative side.” – Chris

As described by Keanu and Chris in the preceding statements, others' non-noteworthy reactions to their relationship disclosure lends a degree of comfort and expectation of acceptance towards the discussion thereof within a gay setting. Indeed, Keanu further portrays

disclosure as non-noteworthy by comparing it to “discussing the weather with someone.” In this way, one’s practice of CNM becomes viewed as lacking social significance, and in so doing, participants are empowered to regard it as a non-significant segment of their own identity.

CNM’s status as a socially non-significant segment of one’s identity allows practitioners to relegate it to the personal realm rather than the socially pertinent realm. This is evident in Chris’s narrative of his approach to disclosure wherein he states that his relationship is “something between Gavin and [himself]. It’s actually quite intimate.” Indicating thus that his CNM relationship is a personal matter rather than a social matter, he goes on to add that he is “not making it a secret, but it’s also not the first thing that [he feels] like [he needs] to share.” He explains this lack of need to share by stating that he is “not there to try and push through and get confidence or get reassurance” from others, further indicating a personal acceptance that relinquishes the power from social disclosure and its consequences.

Given this relegation of CNM to the personal rather than the social realm, disclosure then becomes a passive rather than an intentional process. Keanu describes this passive disclosure as it being “dropped into conversation, not really like a whole big coming out ... Because I’m kinda in my head already comfortable with it.” Here he directly refers to his own personal acceptance of CNM, which enables a social ease in disclosure, echoing Chris’s account as discussed above. Furthermore, because one’s CNM relationship is perceived as both personally and socially acceptable, the onus of discovery is shifted onto the practitioners’ social others. As Chris states:

“So, in that way, I’ve been very open, but I’m not- I’m not shouting it out. I’m not going around and telling people that I’m in an open relationship. It’s only if someone approach me and asks like, ‘Hey, what’s going on?’ then of course, I’d be transparent and open to it.”

Chris therefore portrays his relationship status as presumed to be socially irrelevant until others indicate the contrary. Disclosure is therefore passive as, given the intimate status of the relationship and consequent social irrelevance, the onus is not on the practitioner “to go and broadcast anything to anyone if it’s not really relevant to what you’re talking about” as Keanu also indicates. This passivity in disclosure is additionally seen in Mitchell’s account:

“Me or my partner will say something and then someone will go, ‘Uhh, okay. What is that about?’ ... But yeah, I suppose most of the time, it’s not like it’s needed to be like, ‘Hey guys. I’m in an open relationship, just letting you know.’ Doesn’t work like that.”

He later proceeds to invoke the personal nature of his relationship configuration by stating:

“What is the point of even bringing it up when, you know, it doesn’t really matter? It’s for me, not for anybody else.”

For some participants, their own engagement with their status as a CNM practitioner when amongst members of the gay community is thus seen as a passive process of limited social significance. This mimics Sandbakken et al.’s (2022) study of polyamorous individuals, in which their relationship configuration was felt to be private and irrelevant to most contexts. This is enabled in this study both through a perception of CNM as acceptable within the gay community and as something that has been personally accepted. In this way, their CNM status becomes irrelevant to social or personal identity as the perceived default. This approach to engaging with their gay peers indicates that, at least for some participants, low levels of felt or anticipated stigma are present (Herek, 2007). Here the connection between enacted stigma and felt stigma may be identified: by perceiving the gay community generally as a place of tolerance for their CNM relationships, participants do not expect or anticipate its occurrence, and approach disclosure thus without social significance attached. This is in line with Stults et

al.'s (2023) finding that yielded a relationship between enacted and anticipated stigma, wherein low levels of enacted stigma were correlated with low levels of anticipated stigma. Participants' presentation of CNM as common or a typical relationship configuration within the gay community may also explain the low levels of enacted stigma experienced, as individuals within CNM relationships express less desired social distance, and thus more accepting attitudes, towards those of a similar relationship configuration (Balzarini et al., 2018). The relevant abundance of CNM relationships perceived by participants to exist in the gay community may thus lead to greater acceptance and less enacted stigma, permitting one's CNM status to be personally dismissed as socially significant when amongst members of the gay community.

5.4.2 Social Reluctance

Despite participants' largely depicting their social interactions with gay men in terms of CNM as *the status queer* described under the first main theme, many presented a manner of approaching their social interactions relevant to their CNM relationship as a matter of sensitivity. Whereas for some gay men disclosure is non-noteworthy and passive as has been previously discussed, for others, it appears to be a consciously considered process. This appears to be driven by an awareness of and sensitivity toward the possible negative consequences thereof. Jean illustrates this dichotomy of social approach by comparing his own personal dismissal with his partner's social reluctance:

“So, coming out socially as polyamorous was totally fine for me because I didn't care what people think. For my partner, it was a little bit more difficult because he was scared of what people will think.”

An awareness that the disclosure of one's relationship status may affect others' perceptions and engagement thereafter appears to be a salient factor in generating a sense of anxiety or discomfort towards disclosure. For Jean's partner, this was explained as being in

terms of the particular perceptions others would develop of his character and relationship. He feared, for example, that others would perceive “that [their] relationship isn’t real, or that ... [they] are just promiscuous like horny guys,” suggesting the presence of internalised stigma given that he has personally expressed and accepted stigmatising narratives (Herek, 2007) that will be further explored under the main theme of *marking identity*. Notably, Jean’s partner had been positioned as undergoing the trans-normative journey during this initial phase in their relationship, and was portrayed as still attached to heteronormative values. That he expresses internalised stigma is explainable by Rodrigues et al.’s (2024) research showing that CNM individuals who endorse greater mononormative beliefs also experience greater internalised CNM negativity. Social reluctance may in this way be a feature not only of the stigma one anticipates experiencing, but an unlearning of the internalised stigma still held onto during the trans-normative journey.

The idea that anxiety towards disclosure modifies behaviour is further mirrored by Nathan’s partner, who is described as follows:

“So, like, for example, with my current partner, he’s very stressed with any form of stigma that may arise from people finding out that we’re open. So, for example, one of our ... arrangements, I guess, is that you’re not allowed to hook up with specific groups of queer people in Joburg ... that we refer to as the Rosebank Gays or the Babylon Gays.”

Fear of negative engagement upon disclosure of one’s CNM relationship configuration to gay peers may thus be present among practitioners. However, this concern may be delimited rather than general, at least for some. For example, whereas Jean’s partner appeared to express a general discomfort regarding disclosure, Nathan’s partner’s concern appeared limited to particular segments of the gay community. This delimited concern appears to be shared by Nathan, who expressed a general lack of discomfort regarding disclosure, but indicated that he

would at times fear that others may utilise his disclosure as a way of violating his sexual boundaries:

“But, yeah, I’ve, like, considered not telling some individuals just because I haven’t felt like they’re- I definitely feel like they wouldn’t respect that boundary at all, and I have felt more safe by not telling them that I’m open.”

As consequence of his fear of boundary violation upon disclosure, Nathan portrays himself as engaging in an evaluation of whether to disclose. This can additionally be seen with Tyron who describes himself as being “very private about [his] sexual life,” and who says in response to this, “I’m not always open to being like, ‘Hey, this is what I do all the time, and I’m this and I’m that.’” Implicit in Tyron’s statement is the suggestion that others may engage with him with an altered perception or approach specifically in response to his disclosure regarding his CNM relationship configuration. His reluctance to disclose is also portrayed as specific rather than general, as can be seen in the following extract:

“So, basically with this friend I can speak like that because he’s open, too. And then there’s others that I know, mm-mm, this is a church girl here. We’re not going there. We’re not going to have those discussions.”

How gay men approach disclosing their relationship arrangement to their gay peers thus appears to be affected by generalised or specific concerns that result in an active evaluation process. This evaluation process may be based on particular criteria, such as perceived sexual safety in Nathan’s case, or the expectation of a conservative reaction in Tyron’s. Disclosure criteria are also evident in other participants’ accounts, as in the following extract from Marius, who describes disclosing based either upon a desire for social relationship formation or as a result of sexual interest:

“There might be two reasons why. So, the one reason is I just feel comfortable with this person. I’d like to know this person more, so you share who you are ... And then I

would also maybe mention it when I feel that I would like to engage with that person in that open relationship environment. If you understand what I'm saying."

Nathan reiterates the criterion of safety while broadening his explanation of the considerations involved in disclosure:

"I've mostly judged that based on level of closeness and um- I- As well, interest. Like, I'm more likely to tell someone that I feel like I have a connection with, who I could possibly, like, hook up with I guess, or I'm more likely to tell someone I trust with that information."

The participants are thus seen to engage in a process of active evaluation with reference to particular interpersonal concerns and which consequently affect how they approach disclosure based on the weighting thereof. This indicates the presence of felt or anticipated stigma that results in individuals modifying their behaviour in order to avoid stigmatising encounters (Herek, 2007). By choosing not to disclose or by avoiding disclosure to individuals and groups that they evaluate may respond pejoratively, participants thus demonstrate the presence of felt stigma. While for some, this may result in avoiding disclosure as in Tyron's case, it may alternatively lead to a guarded approach to disclosure. This process of developing a guarded approach can be seen in Mitchell's account when he states that he needs to "read the room first and see what people are like," and that he similarly will "maybe throw some questions out to see how they feel about scenarios" prior to choosing to disclose. Mitchell reports that while this is his current approach to disclosure, it had not always been the case as he had initially been "excited about it, to talk to people about it," but that he had then encountered "some animosity towards" CNM, and that "those negative things kind of shaped [his] way going forward." In this way the relationship between enacted and felt stigma is expressed explicitly and mirrors the correlation expressed in other research (Stults et al., 2023).

Mitchell's account is also in line with other research wherein negative engagement upon disclosure led to greater reluctance to disclose (Sandbakken et al., 2022).

Marius also enacts a guarded approach to disclosure by portraying it as “a tiptoe,” but that it “also depends on what type of- we would call it lubrication you have” that will then “influence on how easy you blab.” Marius states that, beyond the criteria previously mentioned, he would only disclose “if the situation calls for that and if they do ask,” and “if the question would be asked directly.” His guarded approach is also evident in using intentionally vague language to disclose. He provides the following examples:

“... you know, like, ‘We didn’t stay together, but you know, we had friends.’ Then people automatically know- People in the gay community, they know what terminology means sometimes, right?” – Marius

“... if somebody asks me, then I will tell, ‘Well, there is a friend, or there’s a person I’m not so serious with.’” – Marius

It is evident that, while some gay men experience disclosure as a non-noteworthy phenomenon, for several of the participants it appears to represent a potentially stigmatising situation that must be suitably evaluated and acted upon. Specific concerns may lead to criteria of disclosure or alternatively to a guarded approach to disclosure which allows CNM practitioners to protect themselves against the stigma they anticipate. Guarded approaches to disclosure and the use of language to obscure one's CNM relationship mirrors other research suggesting that non-disclosure and concealment are typical tools that CNM individuals implement in response to anticipated stigma (Füllgrabe & Smith, 2023; Valadez et al., 2020; Willis, 2019). This subtheme thus adds nuance to this literature by extending such social reluctance beyond public interactions more broadly (Füllgrabe & Smith, 2023; Sandbakken et al., 2022; Valadez et al., 2020) and towards the demonstration of anticipated stigma within the gay community in particular. In this way, gay men in CNM relationships may engage in self-

policing through guarded disclosure as an act of self-protection even amongst other gay men. While self-policing is employed as a protective tool for masking sexuality (Kirby & Hay, 1997), it may thus also feature as a means of protecting oneself against stigma towards CNM. Participants' use of criteria like comfort and perceived sexual safety even amongst gay peers may potentially reflect lived realities of homophobic violence (Kaighobadi et al., 2020; Mwambene & Wheal, 2015; Zahn et al., 2016) that permeate and inform the queer subconscious.

5.4.3 A Queer Response

Having explored how gay CNM practitioners approach their gay peers, the inverse may also be reflected upon. Specifically, this subtheme examines how gay men approach CNM practitioners and their relationship configuration in positive ways. Similar to participants' indications that their CNM relationship configuration generates generally positive and accepting social interactions that allows them to consider CNM as homonormative, participants also indicated that the most common response they receive from their peers is one of genuine curiosity rather than stigma or judgement. This curiosity was framed as welcome, innocuous, and expected rather than invasive or critical. Genuine curiosity reflected to these participants a desire to understand that implied a social rejection of ignorance and conservatism in favour of gently embracing the unknown. Jean indicates this inquisitive reaction and its commonly occurring nature as follows:

“They would love to know more. They're very like, ‘Oh, that's so interesting. I would love to know more.’ That's basically always the case.”

Indeed, when amongst gay peers who do not similarly have a CNM relationship, a positive response to one's CNM relationship configuration has consistently been characterised as a curious one. Participants regularly reflected on the nature of their peers' curiosity, suggesting that genuine curiosity is evidenced by a desire for understanding rather than a desire

for justification. This became expressed through an emphasis on ‘how’ questions rather than ‘why.’ This can be seen in both Chris and Mitchell’s statements below:

“[In positive reactions] it’s more of the ‘How?’ I would say. They will then say, ‘Oh, that’s amazing. How do you guys do it? What is your secret? How are you not getting jealous? Um how do you- how do you react if [Chris’s partner] takes or brings somebody home?’ and things like that. So, they ask more the curious, exciting questions, I would say.” – Chris

“There have been times when it’s positive and they then ask questions. But it’s normally like short, sweet questions like, um, ‘How does it work?’ Um, ‘What do you guys talk about or whatever?’ Um, most of the time, it’s, ‘How does it work?’ when it comes to the positive stuff.” - Mitchell

Mitchell’s characterisation of these questions as “sweet” highlights their perceived innocuous nature. This questioning was also typically welcomed, as Mitchell stated that he appreciated “the opportunity to explain,” while Chris stated that would generally “understand that they have questions.” This may conflict with Sandbakken et al.’s (2022) findings that excessive curiosity may be alienating and unpleasant given that the participants of this study experienced it positively. However, this may be explained by how participants in this study perceive the function of such curiosity. Specifically, participants portrayed gay peers’ curiosity as permitting discussion that allows for those amongst the gay community without personal experience in CNM to consider its functioning, and this curiosity thus represented an open doorway to alternative frames of thought. Keanu further reiterates the common response of curious discussion and the ‘how’ response in his own statement:

“So, those are often discussion points. Um, like I just said, like the whole seeing other people, how that works, how emotions that come up, how you challenge those, what boundaries you have up – are points of discussion that do often come up.”

For some participants, this desire for discussion from their inexperienced peers symbolised not only an openness to considering alternative frameworks but also to embodying them. Curiosity represented a researching of how CNM may be practiced should others be sufficiently enticed to engage in it themselves. Chris directly explains curiosity in this light in the following extract:

“Because I think people are very interested with the concept, but they just- and they would like to have a life like that for themselves because it seems enticing for them.”

Keanu also suggests curiosity and discussion as a function of gay men’s openness to consider and embody the alternative:

“It will be a discussion point if it comes to either a couple who are fully monogamous and quite radically so necessarily, or couples who might be thinking of being more open.”

Genuine curiosity as the typically encountered response towards CNM relationships in this way suggests an openness to alternative ways of being and believing amongst gay men. It represents the second half of gay men’s positive method of approach to CNM relationship practitioners, with the first positive method of approach having already been alluded to within the subtheme of *personal dismissal*. In *personal dismissal*, gay practitioners of CNM encountered non-noteworthy reactions upon disclosure that suggested their practice thereof was not significant amongst gay peers. Importantly, this non-noteworthy reaction was contingent upon the perception of CNM as a normally occurring feature within the gay community, and so a non-noteworthy reaction was suggested to be caused by gay men’s experience of CNM either ideologically or personally. Relationally inexperienced gay men are thus reflected to have a positive approach to CNM through genuine curiosity, while experienced gay men are expected to react impassively. This can be seen in the following extract from Chris’s account:

“Unless the friends are themselves in an open relationship. Then it’s more like, ‘Oh, you guys are also open. Cool.’ And then it’s full stop. Because then we both, like both parties sort of know what they- what it means. It’s more the people that are not used to it [that have questions].”

Mitchell echoes that a positive approach is dichotomised by either questioning or impassivity in the below extract, while Keanu reiterates the non-noteworthy reception amongst his own circle of experienced and “openminded” gay peers:

“So, there’s a lot of, like, questioning of it ... whereas the ones that are just accepting, then they’re like, ‘Oh, okay.’ And they don’t ask any questions on it and we move on.” – Mitchell

“It’s like, ‘You’re in an open relationship? Oh, okay.’ It’s nothing really to talk about.”
– Keanu

Having previously located CNM within the realm of the homonormative and thus accepted and acceptable within the gay community, the typical approach from practitioners’ gay peers has been portrayed as positive and non-stigmatising. This positivity in approach and attitude is dichotomised on the basis of relational experience, similar to the role of experience in positioning gay men along *the trans-normative journey*. When gay men have experience with CNM, they approach it impassively as a normal feature of the gay community, while those who are presently inexperienced but perceived to be interested in gaining experience are shown to approach practitioners with genuine curiosity. This is supported by research suggesting that CNM practitioners are more likely to disclose to those perceived as open-minded and affirming (Valadez et al., 2020), which gay men have thus been positioned to be, and mimics that positive attitudes towards others in CNM relationships are associated with personally engaging in one (Balzarini et al., 2018), as the emphasis on experience here suggests. The gay community as a place of acceptance rather than stigmatisation also aligns with research indicating that

divergence from heteronormativity is associated with increased acceptance of CNM (Currin et al., 2016). In this way, the *trans-normative journey* previously outlined may allow for an understanding of gay men's approach and attitude towards CNM, in that a positive approach is enacted by those who have undergone the transitional process or by those standing at the threshold and peering through the ideological doorway.

5.4.4 Closing the Door

This subtheme represents the ways in which participants described their experience of a negative and potentially othering approach that some members of the gay community enacted towards them due to their alternative relationship configuration. It stands as the counterpoint to the positive approach depicted as the normal and expected one within the previous subtheme, highlighting instances of social and ideological tensions. Continuing the motif of the ideological doorway enabling gay men to proceed along the trans-normative journey, the following integrated accounts portray a shutting of the door or a reluctant partial opening.

The least severe of these social approaches towards CNM practitioners is depicted in a slow, yielding engagement. Rather than a complete dismissal, some gay men may engage in a discussion in which opposing frameworks are presented and considered, allowing CNM practitioners to incrementally open the ideological gateway. Mitchell introduces this by stating that “They accept it. Eventually they do. It takes a little bit of [discussion]” and in this way highlights the acceptance as a reluctantly yielded outcome. Marius also portrays this hesitant engagement as follows:

“So, people who don't react as drastically is they actually take in the situation. So, they hear what you are saying, and they think about it.”

Importantly, this slow engagement is not framed by a lack of awareness regarding CNM, but rather personal difficulty. This idea is put forth by Mitchell who remarks that “our community, like, sort of has more of an understanding, but then also kind of has reserves about

it.” Keanu also iterates that discussion occurs when encountering those whose personal relational preferences are positioned against CNM:

“But I guess there’s been one or two people that don’t necessarily themselves like the idea, but even then, they won’t, like, ‘Oh my god, this is so bad.’ It’s just like give their opinion on it. It’s not attacking, it’s more of a discussion.”

While slow engagement was in this way portrayed as signifying negative attitudes towards CNM, the element of discussion thereafter was viewed to have a transformative capacity that could yield mutual agreement when confronted with contrasting positions. As Mitchell states, he would “kind of cross [his] philosophy with sort of people and then they’re like, ‘Oh, I didn’t think of it like that.’” Discussion for transformation has elsewhere been portrayed when others are deemed sufficiently important or curious (Füllgrabe & Smith, 2023), though here an emphasis on willingness to engage appears most prominent. The transformative nature of discussion is also shown in Nathan’s account of disclosing his CNM relationship to his friends within the gay community and being met with his friends’ personal difficulty to understand why he would choose to engage in one:

“I mean, when I first spoke about it with one or two of my- well, specifically queer friends, they also didn’t really understand, like, why. But slowly, through an open discussion, we kind of resolved ... there was, like, an understanding that did start to happen.”

Discussion as transformation may further require a disputation of gay men’s beliefs about CNM rather than simply confronting an opposing ideology, a confrontation of societal misconceptions similar to participants’ experiences in other research (Valadez et al., 2020). For example, Mitchell describes how he also had to challenge the idea that he had been forced into adopting a CNM configuration by his partner:

“You know, eventually they do, when you start explaining a little bit more to it and try and explain to them that it’s actually- you know, it’s something that I have chosen to do. I’m not forced to do it. Um and yeah, I guess eventually they start realising it and opening up to it a bit more.”

Negative attitudes may thus be counteracted by a partial willingness to engage in discussion, a crack in the doorway allowing for a tentative inspection of alternative ways of being in relationships. This partial willingness to engage appears motivated by a “live and let-live” attitude some individuals may express despite their personal relational orientations (Séguin, 2019, p. 687). However, negative attitudes may be seen in other gay men’s approach towards practitioners of CNM through a complete unwillingness to engage in discussion therearound, with the conceptual doorway remaining fixedly shut. When this is encountered, practitioners’ attempts at discussion may be rebuffed by masked reactions and non-verbal cues signalling a lack of genuine engagement, or alternatively a directly expressed unwillingness to engage.

Mitchell introduces the impenetrability and concealed nature of some gay men’s negative attitudes by indicating that, despite attempts at discussion, “there’s always this behind-the-scenes sort of like, ‘Mmm, it’s not for me, so I don’t know how I feel about it.’” Jean also expresses that direct dismissal towards his relationship “doesn’t happen that often” as it would be “weird for people to go ‘Ew’ and ‘Why?’ when [he is] right in front of them,” while Chris has experienced such questioning directly:

“I think a lot of people ask why. Like, ‘Why are you doing this? I mean, you’ve got this beautiful looking guy. Why?’ I think that’s the biggest question. And then often comes in a why- I don’t know how to explain it, but you know it’s a ‘why’ where they already judging in a way. It’s like a judging ‘why?’”

This unwillingness to engage is seen therefore as contrasting to the genuine curiosity of “how” questions, with Chris indicating that questioning may occur without a genuine desire for understanding. This lack of genuine desire is seen in the above extract through non-verbal cues to generate an understanding that the other is engaging in discussion superficially and is in fact masking judgement. Marius also expresses how non-verbal cues signifying negative attitudes is identified through “tone of voice” or “your conscious or subconscious” as contained within masked reactions:

“Expression can be hurtful. Body language can be hurtful.” – Marius

“I did feel a little bit judged ... it was a reaction that they, like, ‘No, this is not for me.’ They looked at it- they sort of glanced eyes together, you know?” – Marius

Marius thus references how non-verbal affective cues impact how he experiences himself within certain spaces and interactions. Body language may thus present as a manifestation of micro-aggressions that undermine and other a CNM practitioner and consequently lead to experiences of felt stigma. While negative attitudes towards CNM may thus lead to a masked reaction preventing genuine engagement, they may contrastingly lead to a direct expression of unwillingness to engage. This is done either through a refusal to interact, or a proclamation of the individual’s personal disregard for CNM. Refusal to engage regarding CNM can be seen in Marius’s statement below, while both can be seen in the extract from Chris:

“I can’t remember distinctive situations, but I’ve had interactions where it’s like, “Oh, okay, well, that’s nice.” ... I don’t know how to explain it otherwise. But then they show disinterest towards that topic ...” – Marius

“But I have encountered situations where the opposite did not know how to deal with it and either walked away or said like, ‘Oh, no, that’s not my vibe,’ and, ‘I can’t understand what you guys are doing.’” – Chris

Marius further indicates that this unwillingness to engage may manifest itself also with gay men in online spaces, stating that they “would just cut [him] off and stop talking.” While some may thus discontinue the interaction or conversational topic, others may highlight their personal distaste for CNM as was indicated by Chris in the above quote. This reaction of directly expressed personal rejection of CNM is similarly portrayed by other participants:

“Um, they would pretty much say, ‘Um, that’s a bit weird,’ and I’m like, ‘Why is it weird?’ and then they would say ‘That’s definitely not for me.’ ... ‘I could never deal with that ...’” – Mitchell

“And then the other one would be, ‘I would never be able to do that,’ um or they just feel weirded out by the whole concept, type of thing ... they just like don’t get it and leave it alone.” – Jean

Implicit in these reactions is the suggestion that CNM practitioners are doing something distasteful or abnormal. An unwillingness to engage, however expressed, suggests that CNM and its practitioners are to be avoided and may be rejected. For these gay men, CNM appears as conceptually inaccessible as it was portrayed to be for the heterosexual community and they can hence be seen as ideologically closed off. They position themselves as categorically opposed to CNM, before a closed door that others may have the willingness to peek through. An othering is therefore portrayed, a separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ on the basis of relationship configuration, evincing one component to the process of stigma described by Link and Phelan (2001). This reflects findings that an individual’s CNM status generates greater stigmatising attitudes than their sexuality (Rodrigues et al., 2018), demonstrating how CNM represents a label that, at least for some gay men, justifies in-group separation.

5.5. Marking Identity

Referring back to the ancient Greek origins of stigma as a visual mark upon the person (Goffman, 1963), *marking identity* here refers to the ways in which participants have depicted

their identities being undermined, rejected, and demeaned based upon the sole criterion of their relationship configuration. This theme therefore reflects the ways in which participants have encountered and reflected upon their experiences of more directly embodied stigma within the gay community than has been previously dissected through the earlier themes. Components of stigma are subsequently explored according to the identified features of participants' accounts, being (1) *social rejection*, (2) *sexual objectification*, (3) *diminished social power*, and (4) *relationship narratives*.

5.5.1 Social Rejection

The first feature of rejection continues and extends participants' accounts from within the subtheme of *closing the door*, in which others were unwilling to engage with practitioners following the disclosure of their relationship configuration. This unwillingness to engage is extended here beyond a situational encounter and towards a general social dismissal. A severing of social ties has been depicted in participants' accounts, with practitioners of CNM being dismissed as desired social others.

For Chris, this came in the form of someone being “judgemental” of his relationship and who had consequently “stopped communication” with him. Ceasing communication entirely also occurred for Marius, who stated that others may “sort of start ghosting you,” referring colloquially to a process of distancing from someone by gradually or suddenly halting communication. He stated, for example, that he had “[spoken] with somebody who was very busy with work earlier,” indicating an implied lack of desire to engage with him socially upon disclosure. Tyron also explained that a “person [may start] distancing themselves from you,” further suggesting the idea of gradual social severing. While indicating that this may be a rare occurrence for him, Mitchell describes this severing of social ties unequivocally in the following extract:

“I think there’s maybe one or two where the people are very judgemental about it um and have pretty much parted ways with me and the idea of that.” – Mitchell

Marius integrates the previously discussed concept of a masked reaction and non-verbal judgement with the outcome of social separation in his account. He describes how an existing friend became unwilling to engage with him upon Marius’s disclosure of his relationship configuration:

“But we’ve been friends together quite a while. And then the person’s like, ‘Oh, okay.’ ... Well, I didn’t see the friend very much after that, you know, for a period of time. You can see them- but you can see them being online, for example, on Grindr as well.”

Gay men’s social separation from CNM practitioners also extends beyond the social to sexual or romantic rejection as well. Jean suggested that the “biggest” or most extreme negative reaction occurs specifically when gay men “develop feelings and they can’t see themselves in relationships like that,” and that it leads to anger and rejection in response. He and Chris share similar accounts of sexual and romantic rejection following discovery of their relationship configuration:

“I would [disclose] when it eventually arises in the conversation. And then they feel like you led them astray. Um, like, they feel like, um, you should have told them from the start because now they feel hurt and you have been like tempting them ... but they can’t be part of a dynamic like this.” – Jean

“Sometimes they even get angry. So, I had situations where they sort of got angry and said like, ‘But why have you not told me that you’ve got a partner?’ And then I say ‘First of all, we met five minutes ago, and for me, because- because being in an open relationship, you know, my partner’s not the first information I need to share. I mean, you approached me because you saw me, you were interested in me.’” – Chris

While the men Chris and Jean described in their accounts were interested in forming intimate connections with them, their disclosure appeared to generate and affix a socially significant label that prohibited them from further pursuing these connections. This is evident given that the singular criterion for this reversal in approach was the discovery of their CNM relationship configuration. The primary step of labelling in Link and Phelan's (2001) process model of stigma, as well as the second step of separation whereby individuals are considered specifically in terms of their label, is therefore herein depicted. Indeed, for Chris and Jean, this did not appear to be an uncommon experience:

“Usually, it’s just like over Instagram or social media where they, like, slide into your DMs and then you say that’s the case and then they’re like, ‘Ugh.’ – Jean

“I mean, we live together, and if I’m planning on having a guy over, I of course have to say that I’m not staying alone or whatever. And then people will say, ‘Oh, no, that’s not my vibe,’ and, ‘I can’t come through when your boyfriend is there.’ So that happens quite often.” – Chris

Social and relational rejection therefore represents an essential and identifiable feature in how gay men may stigmatise CNM practitioners as contained in these participants' accounts. It not only signifies the attachment of an undesirable label to CNM practitioners but also an act of separation, a discreditation of the individual as a viable social, sexual, or romantic peer. Enacted stigma is thus clearly made visible in the gay community in the overt shunning and ostracization of participants (Herek, 2007). This enacted stigma towards divergence from a dyad amongst gay men may appear absurd given that both gay men and CNM would be positioned on the outer region of Rubin's (1984) model of charmed circle and so equally deviant, especially given the assertion that stigma can only occur in a context of power differences (Link & Phelan, 2001). However, gay men's monogamous relationships may position them closer to the inner circle of accepted sex practices (Rubin, 1984), and may

facilitate their migration towards heteronormative status (Allen & Mendez, 2018), allowing a perceived hierarchy of gay acceptability. To some gay men, CNM practitioners may thus become constructed and othered as ‘bad gays’ outside of acceptable (homo/mono)norms (Maine, 2022), making such social rejection that the participants have experienced permissible.

5.5.2 Sexual Objectification

While in some cases the discovery of one’s relationship configuration resulted in social and sexual rejection, it was also portrayed by some as resulting in sexual objectification. This sexual objectification implies an essentialisation of participants as explicitly sexual beings, negating a holistic perception of them as human peers and instead invoking them to behave in a certain (sexualised) way. Jean goes so far as to say that this is the “most common response” from gay men upon discovery, that they “always ... just want to know if you’re available to have sex with them.” Tyron expresses this idea of objectification as invoking CNM participants to behave in a certain way by stating:

“Or people have expectations about you that they just want to now sleep with you, that you’re open to sleeping with everyone, and you- one of you do these things, so you have to behave a certain way.”

While Tyron directly expresses the perception that CNM practitioners are sexual beings and as such can be called upon to act in a particular way, also implicit in his statement is a perceived stereotype. He indicates that gay men identify persons in CNM relationships as “open to sleeping with everyone” and thus as promiscuous, a stereotype that is regularly applied to CNM practitioners (Balzarini et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Willis, 2019). Stereotyping may accompany the sexual objectification of CNM practitioners as is evidenced further by Jean’s account below. Accompanying his experience that others regard him “as a free sexual object that goes around and is passed around,” he states that he has encountered the following sexualised stereotypes:

“... that you are a hoe and a slut and you’re easy game for everyone. And that you just literally have sex with whatever comes your way and you have no preferences and everything is just, like, free game, I don’t know. All those type of concepts, they do occur.”

Sexual objectification is also explicitly referenced by Nathan who explores how others’ regard for him is affected upon discovery of his CNM relationship:

“I think it just allows- I think it just means that they’re- Like, I’m not necessarily a target, but like a target, in a sense. I’m free, like, livestock, I don’t know. I see it more as objectification than, like, humanizing them. So, I just think it means you’re one of the people that’s on the roster or can be on the roster.”

Indeed, Nathan and Jean go beyond the idea of sexual objectification and stereotyping by suggesting that gay men feel entitled to sex thereafter. Nathan explains this by stating that “saying you’re open gives them an excuse to be like, ‘Why won’t you do it then? You’re open.’” Jean mimics this questioning reaction by stating that gay men are “very confused with why [he] says no” as they have the perception that “you have to have sex with [them]” as a result of one’s relationship configuration. This sexual entitlement is most clearly expressed in Jean’s account below:

“He was like, ‘Okay, cool, let’s hook up.’ And I was like, ‘Um, no thank you. I am not interested.’ And he was like, ‘But you said you’re polyamorous. Are you?’ And then I was like, ‘Yes, but that doesn’t mean I want to sleep with you.’ And he then got angry and ... he literally said, ‘But are you not polyamorous?’ And then I was, like, very confused by it because I am, but he assumed that if I am polyamorous, I have to have sex with him.”

Gay men may consequently reduce CNM practitioners to a hyper-sexualised being, devoid of agency in their sexual decision-making and a blank canvas upon which they may

project and realise their sexual desires. As Jean puts it, CNM practitioners may become viewed as “a vessel ... to fulfil their needs,” stripped of their “different layers” and ultimately “less of a person.” This coincides with dehumanisation of CNM practitioners found in Rodrigues et al.’s (2018) study, in which CNM practitioners were portrayed as having less uniquely human emotions. Indeed, such essentialisation is an essential component of stigma according to Link and Phelan (2001), as individuals are perceived to *become* their label. Reducing individuals in this way allows others to advance their own sexual agendas due the stripping of personhood and of consequent personal boundaries. As Nathan states:

“So, I feel like telling some people that you’re open can mean that they’re more likely to push those boundaries, even if it’s not consensual.”

The violation of boundaries as indicated by Nathan in the above extract is a non-consensual process, and speaks to anxiety around sexual victimisation as a result of disclosure. While no participants directly referred to experiencing sexual victimisation as a result of their CNM disclosure, Nathan suggests that it has the potential to arise given the sexual entitlement and objectification that may at times be enacted. Nathan again reiterates the perceived absence of boundaries by stating that others had “more respect” when he was in a monogamous relationship, and that currently “they are definitely less respectful” and “do push boundaries more.” Other studies have also highlighted that practitioners’ boundaries become violated in how they are interacted with, at least in terms of the traditional boundaries of conversation (Sandbakken et al., 2022), though the participants extend this boundary violation here to show a sexualisation and objectification. Jean also indicates a reduction in respect is evident in perceiving CNM practitioners as “free game” because it “is also dismissive of [one’s] relationship in a sense.” These aspects are most evident in a narrative provided by Nathan. He reflects upon how a gay male friend began to push his own sexual agenda when Nathan’s

relationship became open, violating boundaries and undermining the integrity and validity of his relationship:

“And when I became open, I felt like he was trying to constantly ... undermine the relationship a lot and almost kind of get validation that he’s actually the one I should have chosen, or like I still choose him more than I choose my partner, and that kind of, like, experience ... he started to, like, try interfere through, like ... a grooming kind of method. So, he was very much experimental and pushing boundaries and stuff all the time ... So, eventually he pushed boundaries to the point where it became uncomfortable and I had to end the friendship ...”

Some gay men’s sexual objectification of CNM practitioners as discussed by the above participants may thus represent two components of Link and Phelan’s (2001) model of stigmatisation, being stereotyping and separation. Whereas stereotypes are directly evidenced in the above accounts by portraying practitioners as promiscuous, separation is evident in that CNM practitioners are seen as less uniquely human, as shown in the described elements of reduced respect, increased boundary violation, and sexual entitlement. This research thus extends existing findings on the dehumanisation of CNM practitioners (Rodrigues et al., 2018, 2021, 2024) by identifying that, at least within the gay community, this dehumanisation may at times present itself as sexual objectification.

5.5.3 Diminished Social Power

An interesting feature of some participants’ accounts is that they may at times have their social power diminished during some interactions with other gay men. This is done in one approach by placing practitioners on the back foot, by questioning their actions in a manner that requires of them to justify their relationship’s existence. Apparently innocent expressions of concern become inflected with the power of authority, whereby practitioners’ social others position

themselves as having greater knowledge or expertise than the practitioners of CNM themselves.

Jean expresses this succinctly:

“And with them raising their concerns of the relationship, they actually show you that they are concerned about your relationship and so you have to justify your thoughts and feelings.”

Keanu reflects that the CNM configuration of his relationship may at times arise as “a point of concern,” which Marius reflects may act “as a kind of warning as well.” Monogamous gay men may in this way suggest that CNM practitioners are doing something ill-advised or reckless, requiring of them to justify their relationship unto others. Mitchell states that this expression of concern is the reaction he receives most often from gay peers, explaining it as follows:

“Probably, ‘Ooh, have you thought about it?’ You know, ‘Have you really gone into it and understood what it’s all about?’ And, ‘Do you really feel like that’s a good way to go? Aren’t you guys going to have problems?’ So, there’s a lot of, like, questioning of it, I think.”

Evident in the above extract is the reallocation of power within the interaction, with gay men undermining the CNM practitioner’s understanding and decision-making, suggesting that their peers have the authority on relationship functioning. How gay men undermine CNM practitioners’ power as experts over their own experiences mimics research that indicates that friends and family of CNM practitioners may similarly invalidate their relationships and authority regarding it (Sandbakken et al., 2022; Willis, 2019). Chris also highlights this questioning response as common with the additional connotation of social unacceptability or deviance:

“I think a lot of people are also worried of what other people think. So, they also ask, ‘But what are other people saying? Are you not worried that people talk behind your

back?’ And um that also often happens, yeah, happens often. And I think I’m quite self-secure enough to say that I’m not worried about that ...” – Chris

The capacity of this questioning response to undermine participants’ power in interactions was also accompanied for some participants by an alternative approach to diminishing social power. This alternative method was described as occurring when gay men would enforce their own beliefs upon the CNM practitioners, positioning themselves as the experts on CNM. This was done through direct statements rather than indications of concern. Mitchell expresses this clearly in the following two extracts:

“I think when it’s negative, they know how it works or think they know how it works and try and push how they think it works, um, and don’t give you the time of day to decide on yourself what- how you feel it is working or not working.” – Mitchell

“There have been one or two out of probably ten, that will say, ‘Oh, no. I don’t know. It’s just not going to work. But you continue doing what you want to do. I can tell you now, it’s not going to work.’” – Mitchell

Undermining participants’ position as the expert on their own experiences may represent status loss, which is the fourth component in Link and Phelan’s (2001) model of stigma, and through which individuals are placed further down on the social hierarchy and consequently lose social power. This loss of social power may also be seen in Chris’s account, in which others advise against his relationship and enforce their own expectations of its consequences:

“Like, it didn’t happen often, but they really go like, “Don’t do this,” and we “will struggle,” and “You’ll have fights,” and “You’ll be jealous.” ... It’s just when they get very pushy and try to force me to understand their opinions, that’s when I switch off.”

CNM practitioners may in this way have their identities marred and marked by their relationship configuration, leading to others viewing them as needing their expert guidance on

matters relational. They are removed from the office of expert on their own relationships and choices and must either be provided with guidance through gently questioning their decisions and so showing them their errors in judgement, or these errors in judgement must be confronted directly. These two approaches to diminishing social power thus appear to represent a significant way in which some gay men may enact stigma towards CNM practitioners and aligns with other accounts of social invalidation (Sandbakken et al., 2022; Willis, 2019). Apart from dehumanised perceptions of CNM practitioners (Rodrigues et al., 2018), and institutional discrimination (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013; Sandbakken et al., 2022), it should be noted that not much research currently appears to exist on the more subtle ways in which CNM practitioners experience status loss within social interactions. Microaggressions, or casual slights and invalidations that send denigrating messages (Sue et al., 2019), may thus represent an area for further research given that participants are invalidated through subtle interactional forms of enacted stigma beyond the direct expression of hurtful stereotypes.

5.5.4 Relationship Narratives

This subtheme is constructed from the narratives participants have been confronted with regarding their relationship or of themselves within those relationships. It represents common ways in which gay men may stereotype CNM relationships and its practitioners, which become mutually intermingled as one and the same. In other words, stereotypes regarding the person and stereotypes regarding the relationship appear difficult to disentangle as they rest upon shared beliefs. This subtheme thus also extends ideas from other subthemes within *marking identity*, in that evident in the discussion of these beliefs is viewing practitioners by the sole criterion of their relationship configuration, as well as the denial of practitioners' own experiences, reducing them to a lesser status.

One way in which gay men may invalidate CNM practitioners and their relationships is through questioning their motives for engaging therein, or by supplanting it with their own

fixed belief regarding their motivation. This questioning of motivation is directly embodied within Tyron's account, whereby he approaches others' CNM configurations with scepticism following his own negative experience with one. He states that he is "guilty of questioning" if partners "are in love with each other," and whether this love is "genuine." He ascribes to CNM a connotation of immorality by portraying it also as selfish:

"But I do feel it can be very selfish to want an open relationship sometimes, um, because who is requesting it and why? I question the reasons why you both want it."

This perception of CNM as selfishly motivated is described also by Mitchell who refers to the beliefs that he encounters from other gay men:

"I think they think that maybe your partner kind of told you that, 'This is how it's going to be,' and you have to just deal with it. And it's not like that ... Um, I think a lot of people think that you get pushed into it by the other partner, but in our instance, it was chatted about."

An individual's motive to engage in CNM may also be perceived as selfish in a sexual manner, in that gay men may perceive that CNM is adopted due to a desire for promiscuity that undermines one's respect for one's partner. Tyron expresses this idea himself:

"... I think we get conflicted with why we're doing it. So, it's either because we are very horny. You know, we just wanna hop around, horny bunnies. Or- I don't know."

Sexual immorality may thus be applied to CNM practitioners, but the relationships themselves may also become labelled as immoral. For Mitchell, this is evident in a description of his relationship as sanctioned "cheating," while additionally undermining his own satisfaction in his relationship with his partner:

"... the perception is that a lot of people are like, 'Oh, so you're just' - That was another one now that's popped into my head. 'It's just another form of cheating but you know about it.' ... And they're like, 'Oh, well, you're obviously just not happy in

your relationship.’ And that’s just another one that comes up ... ‘Are you not happy in your relationship? Are you not happy to just be with one person?’”

While directly questioning the foundations of the relationship is evident in the above extract from Mitchell, Nathan personally evokes CNM relationships as potentially sexually immoral by indirectly questioning and deprecating one’s motivation to continue the relationship as one ages:

“I don’t see being open necessarily as a permanent state of being ... I think, at a certain age, you should at least confine yourself to one person in a monogamous relationship ... I know, like, a lot of relationships that are still open at like 45, but I personally think that’s a bit weird.”

Nathan implies that a CNM relationship is sexually motivated and inferior to the commitment between partners in monogamous relationships. In this way, undermining the relationship also presents as undermining participants’ love for and satisfaction with each other, presenting CNM relationships as inferior to monogamous ones. A stigmatising social hierarchy is herewith enacted, in which participants once again find themselves diminished by others’ fixed perceptions. This can be seen in Chris and Jean’s statements below:

“And often they say, ‘Why are you not jealous?’ and ‘Do you really love him?’

Because often people combine jealousy with love. They say if you’re not jealous you don’t really love.” – Chris

“... they see it as a lesser version from being monogamous. Like people in monogamous relationships who are only committed to each other is somehow higher on the hierarchy than the rest because their love is more pure and real and all they need for happiness is each other.” – Jean

Monogamous gay men may further diminish CNM practitioners through comparison, with Marius stating that “they mention how long they’ve been together,” as a way of signifying

that CNM practitioners and their relationships are inferior. Nathan also reflects this sentiment by stating that “they kind of regard it as almost, like, being single” and consequently not “having a responsibility to someone as much.” A CNM relationship may thus become perceived as “less of a relationship” as Jean puts it, or alternatively, as a relationship bound to fail due to selfishness and dissatisfaction. Some gay men may express this by stating that “they don’t believe it’s a way forward that’s functional” according to Keanu, while this is also directly expressed by Tyron:

“... and then there’s the immediate thought of this is not going to work out, because someone is not in love in the relationship. Or that ... they have reached the point where their relationship is failing because they can’t satisfy each other’s needs ... This is always spoken about. It’s always thought. It’s almost like, ‘Mm, okay, open relationship? Basically the end of it.’”

Here the intermingling of narratives about CNM relationships and the individuals engaging therein is clearly seen, with narratives of the individual supporting and compounding narratives about the relationship. For example, the idea that partners “can’t satisfy each other’s needs” supports the perception that CNM relationships are doomed to failure. Such failure appears to be expected as a function of perceiving CNM as harmful, whether to the relationship as a whole or to the individual. Mitchell and Keanu express encountering this perception that CNM is directly harmful to the security of the relationship in the following extracts:

“Um, well the most strongest one that people always push is that it destroys your relationship. And it will completely destroy everything.” – Mitchell

“I’d say some people who it- might not necessarily like the idea of an open relationship would see- would have concern that it would damage said relationship or lead to ... one party falling in love with another party or stuff like that.” – Keanu

CNM is also perceived as harmful to the individual, especially in terms of sexual safety.

This is expressed by Marius and Mitchell below:

“... they would raise their concerns in regards with my personal safety. No, not personal safety, but just my wellbeing regard in general ... Sexual risk, or just mental wellbeing, let’s call it that.” – Marius

“The other thing [that is said] is that it's not safe. For the both of you ... because you’re now seeing all these different people, you’re opening yourself up to a potential problem when it comes to your sexual health ... There have been instances where they’re like, ‘Ooh, so, you’re probably, you know, walking around with an STD.’” – Mitchell

CNM is not only positioned in this way as inferior but also as actively damaging. In Mitchell’s account the intermingling of narratives about relationship and individual can also be seen, by extending the idea that CNM is sexually risky to the notion that practitioners are sexually unhealthy. Similar relationship narratives are prevalent within the literature, suggesting that the stereotypes perceived to be expressed by gay men in this study are a part of broader societally held stereotypes. Specifically, CNM practitioners’ love for and commitment to each other is often undermined and invalidated (Rodrigues et al., 2021; Sandbakken et al., 2022; Séguin, 2019), they are considered immoral (Rodrigues et al., 2021; Séguin, 2019), promiscuous (Balzarini et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Willis, 2019) and sexually unhealthy (Balzarini et al., 2018; Conley et al., 2013), and their relationships are portrayed as failed, harmful, or inferior (Balzarini et al., 2018; Séguin, 2019). The relationship narratives thus constructed in the exploration of this subtheme are not unique to gay men, but represent a way in which societal narratives of CNM may have infiltrated the values and perceptions of members of the gay community.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has introduced and discussed the main findings of this research study on how gay men experience stigma within the gay community towards their consensually non-monogamous relationships. Three main themes were constructed, being (1) *(re)creating homonormativity*, (2) *social navigation*, and (3) *marking identity*. The first main theme aimed to frame participants' experiences as occurring within their particular constructions of community and community norms, and how these are understood to be personally and generally negotiated within the gay community. Having explored this background of how the gay community adopts normative values which participants understood to fundamentally influence their experiences, I then presented how CNM practitioners and members of the gay community approach each other during interactions about CNM relationships. This was explored to understand some practitioners' comfort or discomfort in disclosure, while also demonstrating and exploring how gay men may approach such interactions either positively or negatively. Direct forms of stigmatisation were subsequently addressed and explored in terms of how practitioners' identities are undermined. This was demonstrated to occur in multiple forms, being rejection, objectification, diminished social power, and relationship narratives or stereotypes. This discussion integrated the available literature in its supportive role, and was demonstrated to be aligned with current research. Having thus explored the findings of this study, consideration shall now be directed to its implications for further research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Overview

In this final chapter, I provide a concluding summary of this study's findings. This is provided through an overview of the particular themes that have been constructed as well as the limitations, contributions, and recommendations that have been drawn therefrom. This shall proceed with a review of how the constructed themes answer and satisfy the study's research aims and objectives before considering the ultimate limitations and recommendations that these provide.

6.2 Integration and Summary of Themes

The aim of this research study was to provide a qualitative exploration of how consensually non-monogamous gay men in South Africa experience stigma directed at them by other members of the gay community. In doing so, it was guided by two main objectives. Firstly, the analysis identified and explored experiences of stigmatising social interactions within the gay community, while secondly aiming to explore how the sample of CNM practitioners understand and interpret their social experience of stigma within the gay community. Through an investigation of subjective accounts provided by seven gay men in South Africa regarding their inter- and intrapersonal experiences within the gay community, three themes were constructed following a thematic analysis: *(re)creating homonormativity*, *social navigation*, and *marking identity*.

The three themes collectively provided an in-depth understanding of gay CNM practitioners' experiences of stigma as grounded within their particular understanding of community and community attitudes. The findings revealed that for these individuals, experiencing stigma towards their relationship configuration within the gay community was not perceived to be the norm, though the opportunity for it to arise was found both in their own navigation of varying norms and in other gay men's normatively-informed perceptions of them.

The participants therefore provided a portrayal of their CNM relationship status as a non-significant feature of their identity among gay peers largely contingent upon their gay peers' personal journey through normative tensions related to their gay identity. Normative tensions were thus utilised to understand not only other gay men's stigmatising approaches to the participants, but also the potential personally stigmatising narratives endorsed by the practitioners themselves. These participants' accounts in this way align with literature portraying the gay identity as having radical connotations (Goltz, 2014; Kean, 2015; Rubin, 1984) given that participants' experiences of stigma or lack thereof within the gay community were largely explained through an understanding of the alternate norms embraced or rejected by members of the gay communities that they inhabit. Thus, when stigma was encountered from gay peers, it was enacted in ways similar to the heteronormative majority (Conley et al., 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2018). To further nuance these findings, the three themes are individually summarised and integrated with the relevant literature below.

In the first main theme, I described how participants presented CNM as a normally occurring feature of the gay community that allows them relative comfort in their interactions with other gay men, at least within their personal manifestation of the gay community, where attitudes and interactions were depicted as generally positive. This perception of CNM as a common occurrence is in line with research suggesting that CNM is more prevalent amongst sexual minorities (Hauptert et al., 2017a; Moors et al., 2014) and amongst men (Hauptert et al., 2017a; Levine et al., 2018). Participants highlighted that CNM's acceptance within the gay community is dependent upon the broader societal values that may infiltrate into gay men's norms and belief systems, and within the regional manifestations thereof which differ between urban and other geographic settings. Such norms and belief systems were also understood to be continuously negotiated by gay men through a process of heteronormative unburdening with greater experience in the gay community, such that they perceived greater acceptance towards

CNM amongst more experienced gay men who had, in their perspective, sufficiently embraced homonormative identities. This normative negotiation has been seen to occur in other research about gay men's relationships (Duncan et al., 2015; Moodley & Rabie, 2020; Philpot et al., 2018), though this study extends the understanding of this normative negotiation as related to an individual's community experience and experiences. Participants themselves were seen to have undergone this process, with some demonstrating personal difficulty in negotiating their positions between hetero- and homo-normativity. As such, CNM practitioners' own normative tensions provide the opportunity for felt and internalised stigma, as is also suggested by other research (Moors et al., 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2024).

In the second main theme, I explored how participants approach the gay community and how they are in turn approached as well. Specifically, the CNM practitioners were described as either dismissing the social significance of CNM due to perceptions of its normative status and thus as of little consequence to their identity, or alternatively were described as enacting a reluctant approach to disclosure due to anxiety and discomfort. This guarded approach to disclosure was understood to demonstrate self-policing in response to the presence of felt or anticipated stigma. A guarded approach to disclosure in which it is actively evaluated and potentially concealed mimics findings from other studies (Füllgrabe & Smith, 2023; Sandbakken et al., 2022; Valadez et al., 2020) but broadens the discussion on how practitioners decide to disclose, especially amongst gay peers. How gay men approach CNM practitioners was then explored in terms of the positive or negative approaches they enact, with the positive characterised by genuine curiosity and non-noteworthy reactions. Negative approaches were understood through their lack of genuine curiosity, in which discussion and compromise were either reluctantly undertaken or dismissed entirely. Such negative attitudes were understood in terms of gay men's attachment to heteronormativity, with an individual's CNM label justifying separation and alienation from the in-group (Rodrigues et al., 2018).

The final theme served to illustrate the manner in which participants have encountered stigma by gay men more explicitly in ways that undermined their identity. In particular, CNM practitioners were avoided and rejected as valid and desirable social and sexual others, demonstrating labelling and separation based upon their status as CNM practitioners (Link & Phelan, 2001). For some, rather than their identities being undermined through rejection, this occurred through sexual objectification, in which gay men would reduce them to sexual beings without regard for their sexual or relationship boundaries, and with whom they were perceived to be entitled to have sex with. This was done in terms of the sexual stereotypes often applied to CNM practitioners (Balzarini et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Willis, 2019) and aligns with research demonstrating their dehumanisation (Rodrigues et al., 2018). Participants also experienced their social power to be diminished and undermined, with gay men positioning themselves as authorities and experts on the participants' lives and experiences. This represented the component of stigma described as status loss (Link & Phelan, 2001) and mirrored other accounts of social invalidation (Sandbakken et al., 2022; Willis, 2019). Finally, gay men's commonly held narratives of CNM/practitioners were illustrated and understood to represent stereotypes commonly held by people generally. Specifically, gay men would undermine CNM practitioners' identities and relationships by referring to them as immoral, promiscuous, lacking in love and commitment, and inferior (Balzarini et al., 2018; Conley et al., 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Séguin, 2019; Willis, 2019).

The above discussion has provided a summative overview of the main findings of this research study as it pertained to the aims and objectives that guided it, and has demonstrated the study's relevance to the extant body of literature on CNM and the stigma it elicits. The study has thus revealed the particular manifestations of stigma within the gay community in particular and explored this in terms of gay men's adoption of and positioning relevant to societal and community norms. These normative tensions were felt to underpin participants'

experiences as a key determinant in how gay men engage with practitioners' CNM status, and reveals the ongoing radical potential inherent in the gay identity.

6.3 Limitations and Contributions

The research aims and objectives of this study were implemented through a qualitative thematic analysis rooted in an interpretive phenomenological framework. While this framework has facilitated the idiographic exploration of participants' experiences and understanding of stigma within the gay community, certain limitations do apply. Firstly, inherent in my analysis of participants' accounts has been my own *da-sein* as researcher, or my particular contextual situatedness that influences engagement with the phenomenon under investigation (Matua & van der Wal, 2015). In this way, the results herein constructed represent not an absolute truth of participants' experiences but a co-constitutionality, reflecting my subjective meaning-making of participants' original meaning (Crowther & Thomson, 2020). Indeed, the findings herein presented are formed through an investigation into particular individuals' subjective meanings, and are in this way further removed from an absolute truth of this phenomenon generally, and is instead an approximation of the truth for these particular participants that is not generalisable (Crowther & Thomson, 2020). Thematic analysis as the particular implementation of this interpretive phenomenological framework is also understood to reflect experiences relevant to a particular sample, and thus lacking in generalisability (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Sample limitations are also present. Specifically, while a sample of twelve participants was initially aimed for, the final sample comprised of seven individuals obtained through snowball sampling. While this is an acceptable amount for the implementation of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the personal networks through which sampling was conducted yielded a largely homogenous sample. The majority of the participants were white, English or Afrikaans speaking men from predominantly urban to semi-urban areas, with only

one individual identifying as coloured. Given that the findings from these participants emphasise the importance of the particular norms encountered in an individual's location, personal ties, and community in general, the lack of cultural and racial diversity in this sample represents a significant limitation in providing a culturally sensitive understanding of experiences of stigma within the gay community. Furthermore, the majority of participants utilised a label of their CNM configuration as 'open,' with only one individual identifying as 'polyamorous.' This represents a limitation in that the findings represent mostly open gay men's experiences of stigma as a particular subset of CNM practitioners. This is especially important given that stigma may also be enacted by and between practitioners of different types of CNM configurations (Balzarini et al., 2018), an issue that was alluded to insufficiently within this study to merit thematic significance.

While these limitations must be dutifully considered in the study's findings, several contributions are made. The primary contribution of this study is in addressing the dearth of research regarding stigma towards CNM occurring amongst gay men in particular given indications of its prevalence within this community (Hauptert et al., 2017a; Moors et al., 2014), gay men's potentially radical identities (Maine, 2022; Rubin, 1984), and normative relational negotiations (Duncan et al., 2015; Moodley & Rabie, 2020; Philpot et al., 2018) that serve to distinguish them from the general population. As such, this study has highlighted that, at least for these participants, CNM practitioners may not generally expect stigma towards their relationship to occur when amongst gay peers, but that it may manifest in ways similar to the general population. This study also extends the literature regarding how stigma manifests by highlighting that sexual objectification may be experienced, as well as more subtle forms of status loss within interactions alongside other methods of marking identity. Finally, this study has demonstrated how gay individuals in CNM relationships may experience normative tensions that impact upon their personal and interpersonal attitudes and interactions. These

findings may consequently be used as a resource for mental health practitioners in better understanding CNM practitioners' relational experiences, and may thus help to counteract the stigmatising trend amongst healthcare providers (Campbell et al., 2023; Trexler, 2021).

6.4. Recommendations for Future Research

Given the key limitation of this study's largely racially homogenous sample, future research may contribute to a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon by having a more inclusive sample of South African diversity in terms of race, culture, language, and geographic location. This may facilitate a better conceptualisation of stigma within the gay community as grounded and enriched by a more greatly nuanced appreciation of varied subjectivities. This may also generate an understanding of how cultural norms add to or are experienced in gay men's normative tensions regarding CNM. In particular, the enactment of stigma within the gay community in specifically rural settings may be important in understanding potential experiences of marginalisation in vulnerable communities where access to support and mental healthcare services may be limited.

This study has explored CNM practitioners' experiences of stigma within the gay community as they have encountered it, and may thus not represent an accurate portrayal of attitudes held by gay men generally given the concealability of such attitudes. As such, a reversed approach to the subject of investigation may be recommended, being the direct exploration of gay men's attitudes towards CNM. This may yield a complementary exposition of stigmatising or non-stigmatising attitudes within the gay community, and may further aid in understanding how gay men in South Africa approach and consider their normative positioning. In further complementing the nature of the present research, this may be done as a quantitative follow-up study. A quantitative approach may facilitate greater generalisation and understanding of attitudes towards CNM across South Africa, and may yield insight into the differential adoption of normative ideals by different segments of the gay community or even

the South African population more broadly. In line with this recommendation, given that the findings of this study are limited to the experiences of gay men in South Africa, future research may be done to provide insight into how stigma may manifest in the gay community within other international settings. This may in turn corroborate, contrast, and elaborate the results of the present study.

Finally, given participants' accounts of the gay community as a place of relative acceptance and open-mindedness regarding their CNM relationship configuration, future research on CNM stigma and the gay community may benefit from doing so through the use of a more positive lens. Specifically, community-belongingness amongst gay CNM practitioners can be studied in terms of its potential value in promoting resilience, normalisation, and relationship satisfaction. Such research may be important in generating an understanding of how gay CNM practitioners may experience and access informal systems of support.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

This research study has demonstrated findings comparable to the existing body of literature that serves to show the ways in which individuals in CNM relationships may encounter and experience stigma (Balzarini et al., 2018; Conley et al., 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Willis, 2019). This study adds the indication that, at least for some individuals, the gay community may represent a place of relative refuge rather than a site of alienation. In doing so, this study has demonstrated the ongoing normative tensions gay men encounter due to the multiple ways in which they may find themselves diverging from the standards of heteronormativity, with inclusion and acceptance to be found amongst the homo- rather than the heteronormative. These findings thus serve to demonstrate the ongoing need to promote a culture of acceptance and inclusion irrespective of personal ideologies in order to protect vulnerable minorities from stigma and victimisation. Indeed, given CNM practitioners' minority status, activism cannot

only occur through ground-level stakeholders, but requires a dedication to professional advocacy and representation as well. The present findings may thus represent an important step along the way of promoting greater acceptance and support for those engaging in CNM relationships in South Africa.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

TITLE OF THE STUDY

Consensually non-monogamous gay men's experiences of stigma within the gay community in South Africa

Hello, my name is Liam Erasmus. I am a student currently completing a Master's in Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria. You are being invited to take part in my research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully, which will explain the details of this research project. Please feel free to ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

- The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of stigma towards consensual non-monogamy from within the gay community. In other words, the study will try to create an understanding of how gay men act towards other gay men in relationships that allow partners to have sexual or romantic relationships with others. Previous studies have assessed attitudes toward consensual non-monogamy among the general public, but less is known about how the gay community perceives such relationships. I have decided to conduct a study on experiences of stigma by other gay community members to help provide clarity about prevailing attitudes.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

- You are being invited to participate because you have been referred to me by someone who believes that you may be able to contribute to this study – in other words, you comply with the criteria described below.
- You identify as a cisgendered gay man.
- You are or have been in a relationship arrangement that can be characterised as open or consensually non-monogamous.

- You have been in an open or consensually non-monogamous relationship for a significant period of time. In other words, your experience of consensual non-monogamy within your relationship has not been limited to a single, brief episode.
- You are 18 years of age or older.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

- Your participation in this study will take the form of a virtual interview. This interview is expected to take 60-90 minutes to complete. You will therefore require access to an internet connection and an electronic device that is capable of conducting the interview.
- During the interview, I will ask you to describe your experiences surrounding stigma from other members of the gay community. I may ask for examples of verbal and non-verbal experiences where you felt like people may have been judging or looking down on you because of your relationship. I may also ask you about how you behave in those situations.
- Once the interview is completed, you will be sent a transcript of what was said for you to review and amend in the case of any errors.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

- Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason, if you decide not to take part in the study without negative consequences or being penalized

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

- Your confidentiality will be ensured by using a pseudonym throughout all research notes and documents to protect your identity. Any information that can be used to identify you, such as your place of work or occupation, will be omitted or changed for your protection.
- To maintain your confidentiality during the virtual interview, I will conduct the interview in an unoccupied room with the door closed and I will use earphones. You will be advised to do the same. All participants will receive unique invite links to their respective interviews to ensure that other participants will not be able to access your interview.
- Findings from this data will be disseminated through conferences and publications. Reporting of findings will be anonymous; only the researchers of this study will have access to the information.
- The fully anonymised data collected for this study will, however, be archived and will be available for use in possible future research.
- Please note participant information will be kept confidential, except in cases where the researcher is legally obliged to report incidents such as abuse and suicide risk.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

- There will be no direct benefit to you for participation in this study. However, I hope that information obtained from this study may contribute to a better understanding and acceptance of consensually non-monogamous relationships.

WHAT ARE THE ANTICIPATED RISKS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

- Owing to the length of the interview, you may feel fatigued. To minimise this, you will be able to request a break at any point during the interview.
- Discussing your experiences of stigma has the potential to elicit painful memories and emotions. Should this occur, you are advised to contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) at 011 234 4837 for free telephonic counselling.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

- Electronic information will be stored for a period of 15 years. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.
- Participant information in hard copies of raw data will be locked in a cabinet and electronic data will be kept in a file that is password protected in the Department of Psychology.
- The electronic data held by the researcher will similarly be kept on a password-protected device and encrypted.

WHAT WILL THE RESEARCH DATA BE USED FOR?

- Data gathered from the participant may be used for research purposes that include:
- Writing a dissertation and article publication.
- National and international conference presentations.
- To inform further research or for secondary data analysis.

WILL I BE PAID TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- No, you will not be paid to take part in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

- This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria.
- Ethical approval number is HUM002/0522
- A copy of the approval letter can be provided to you on request.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

- The findings of the research study will be shared with you by Liam Erasmus after one year of completing the study.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE CONCERN, COMPLAINT OR ANYTHING I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE STUDY?

If you have questions about this study or you have experienced adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided below. If you have questions regarding the rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the researcher, please contact the supervisor, and contact details are below.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and, in advance, for participating in this study.

Researcher

Liam Erasmus

082 607 5035

u18020242@tuks.co.za

Supervisor

Dr Jarred Martin

012 420 2830

jarred.martin@up.ac.za

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form



Consensually Non-Monogamous Gay Men's Experiences of Stigma Within the Gay Community in South Africa

ETHICAL APPROVAL NUMBER: HUM002/0522

WRITTEN CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any consequences or penalties.			
I understand that information collected during the study will not be linked to my identity and I give permission to the researchers of this study to access the information.			
I understand that this study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance from Research Ethics Committee Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pretoria.			
I understand who will have access to personal information and how the information will be stored with a clear understanding that, I will not be linked to the information in any way.			
I give consent that data gathered may be used for dissertation, article publication, conference presentations and writing policy briefs.			
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.			
I consent to being audio recorded.			
I consent to being video recorded.			

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I consent to have my audio recordings /videos be used in research outputs such as publication of articles, thesis and conferences as long as my identity is protected.			
I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication whilst remaining anonymous.			
I have sufficient opportunity to ask questions and I agree to take part in the above study.			

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Appendix C: Permission from the Faculty Ethics Committee



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho



20 June 2022

Dear Mr LP Erasmus

Project Title: Consensually non-monogamous gay men's experiences of stigma within the gaycommunity in South Africa
Researcher: Mr LP Erasmus
Supervisor(s): Dr JH Martin
Department: Psychology
Reference number: 1802024
2 (HUM002/0522)Degree: Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 20 June 2022. Please note that before research can commence all other approvals must have been received.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project. Sincerely,



Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof KL Harris (Chair); Mr A Bizos; Dr A-M de Beer; Dr A dos Santos; Dr P Gutura; Ms KT Govinder Andrew; Dr E Johnson; Dr D Krige; Prof D Maree; Mr A Mohamed; Dr I Noomé; Dr J Okeke; Dr C Puttergill; Prof D Reyburn; Prof M Soer; Prof E Taljard; Ms D Mokalapa

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Appendix D: Transcript Notation

<i>Notation</i>	<i>Significance</i>	<i>Example</i>
Hyphen-	Sentence cutoff	They were very- Oh, that's another thing.
(laughs)	Laughter	Well, (laughs) I wouldn't say that.
(pause)	Long pauses	Let me think. (pause) I don't know.
<u>underlined</u>	Strong emphasis	Unless they're <u>very</u> curious about it.
'inverted commas'	Reported speech	He was like, 'That's not for me.'
Ellipsis ...	Editing of the transcript (omission)	He said that ... it just wasn't for him.
[squared bracket]	Editing of the transcript (insertion)	I don't really think that [gay men] think that.