

Why study threesomes?

I still remember the first time I heard that someone I knew had had a threesome. I was 17 years old, and the rumour was that a girl I was vaguely acquainted with from my sixth-form college, and her boyfriend, had engaged in a threesome with one of their mutual friends. Despite knowing virtually nothing about the encounter, what struck me was that before this point it had never really occurred to me that threesomes were something that ‘regular’ people did. To me it was something left to the realms of pornography, celebrity, or perhaps those at the very fringes of society. I also remember finding it strange being able to put a face to this sexual act, and not just any face, but one that I might run into between classes or at a party. Ten years later, midway through my graduate studies, and some things had not changed—knowledge of someone’s threesome still seemed to provoke disbelief. One difference, however, was that I now (regularly) witnessed these realisations from others rather than experiencing them myself. Let me explain.

When interacting with groups of strangers at social occasions, small-talk would usually go either very well or very badly. When people would ask: ‘What do you study?’, few, if any, were generally expecting my answer: ‘Threesomes’. Consequently, this could result in a number of interesting responses. If the questioner had not immediately shut the conversation down or steered it in a different direction, one of two things would generally happen: (1) someone from the group would enthusiastically admit to knowing someone who had had a threesome; or (2) someone from the group would admit to having had a threesome themselves. This second scenario often occurred in the presence of others who had no prior knowledge regarding this part of their friend’s sexual history. Cue reactions of astonishment!

But why does the knowledge of a friend’s threesome elicit such a reaction? Although there are a number of answers to this question, in part I believe that our relative reluctance as a society to openly talk about what are seen as ‘unusual’ sexual behaviours can lead to perceptions of particular activities that are distorted and exaggerated. The act of threesome sex is an excellent example of this. As a male participant once told me: ‘I always assumed that threesomes were the holy grail of sex and then once you have it, it wasn’t that great’. In

contrast, one of my female participants suggested that: ‘My preconceptions before was swinging and group sex, and you know, rooms with mattresses in and baby oil and horrible smells, dark rooms or dogging in the car park at the weekends. A little seedy’. Thus, the knowledge of a friend’s threesome might shock and disgust, or elate and excite, depending on your own personal perspective towards threesomes.

Looking to my own experiences, although I do not remember the expectations I had prior to my first threesome, I do know that it did not develop as I had expected. Rather than a one-time exploration with a previous partner and a comparative stranger, we continued to meet over a number of months. The three of us continued to have sex, and our friendship developed further, but no new romantic attachments seemed to materialise. Rather than illuminating what a threesome was all about, this experience had created more questions: is this how threesomes are for other people?

At this point, not knowing of anyone else who had had a threesome, I turned to the academic literature to try and contextualise the experience. Regarding threesomes, I was surprised to find that the last book-length study into them was published in 1988. Furthermore, there were few contemporary studies, and even fewer that offered a rich, in-depth insight into people’s lived experiences. In addition, other literature on open relationships, swinging, and polyamory, while sharing similarities with my experience, did not provide much further insight. Thus, with many of my questions remaining unanswered, the seed of a research project began to take root. What do threesomes mean to the people having them? How and why do they happen? How can they inform our understanding of sexual behaviour, romantic relationships, and society as a whole?

Accordingly, after many years of research, interviews, surveys, and informal conversations with hundreds of people, this book is an attempt to better understand threesomes.¹ It is hoped that this book can give voice to those stories often left unheard as well as ground our understanding of threesomes in reality, rather than myth, stereotype, and stigma.

The context of this research

In contemporary Western society, sexual behaviours that were once reserved for only the most brazen and adventurous of practitioners are becoming more and more commonplace and even expected (Attwood, 2005; Bernstein, 2001; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). For example, the acceptability of pre-marital sex has risen over previous years (Harding & Jencks, 2003; Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2015), as has anal sex (Mercer et al., 2013; Satterwhite et al., 2007) and oral sex (Mercer et al., 2013; Wells & Twenge, 2005).² England, Shafer, and Fogarty (2008) even go as far as suggesting that casual sex is now hegemonic compared to the pursuit of romance or a relationship among young adults.

All of the aforementioned changes are happening alongside a broader trend towards viewing pornography and sexual behaviour as a consumer experience,

one that people seek out as part of a desire to have different, varied, and unique experiences. This ‘consumer sexuality’ perspective, or what McNair (2002) calls the pornification of society, involves seeking pleasure as a way of bonding with one’s friends; of experiencing something different and new; and viewing sex as a harmless, healthy, consensual experience to be consumed as a leisure activity, only sometimes with one’s romantic partner (Attwood & Smith, 2013; Frank, 2008; Joseph & Black, 2012).

At the same time, in recent years, consensual non-monogamy has also become more visible to the general population. Consensual non-monogamy is an umbrella-term that encompasses many styles of negotiated, non-monogamous relationships: for example, open relationships, polyamory, and swinging.³ Increased media visibility (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Wosick-Correa, 2010) and academic research into consensual non-monogamy has steadily grown and expanded to look at a wide range of aspects within the field (Barker & Langdrige, 2010). A ‘new burst of commentaries and debates every few months’ have allowed more people to be exposed to alternative relationship styles (Barker & Langdrige, 2010, p. 749).

The general population are now exposed to consensual non-monogamy through a multitude of sources, including popular entertainment, celebrity gossip, and the internet more generally. Reality television shows such as *Polyamory: Married and Dating*, *Sister Wives*, or *Louis Theroux’s Altered States* put a human face to unconventional relationship types and allow viewers the opportunity to observe the ways in which people might organise them. Elsewhere, in films such as *Short Bus*, fictional characters explore their sexuality and relationships; bringing others into a dyadic (two-person) relationship or alternatively, seeking exploration away from it. Well-known celebrities, such as Tilda Swinton, Will Smith, Zac Efron, Ashton Kutcher, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and many others are alleged to have practiced assorted forms of consensual non-monogamy at various times in their relationships, and to varying degrees of openness. The internet has also been of vital importance in allowing people to connect, engage, and learn about different relationship styles (Barker, 2005). Dating sites like OK Cupid now allow for open relationship and polyamorous statuses and Facebook allows one to identify as being in an open relationship (although not polyamorous).

The normality of threesomes is growing in popular culture (e.g. Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). Regularly featuring in a wide array of media publications and websites, there is a strong argument that threesomes have become a risqué but nonetheless socially accepted, perhaps even expected, part of a contemporary young people’s sexual repertoire of experiences. Highlighting the latter, Leitch’s (2006) article for *Men’s Health* suggests that men are supposed to have had a threesome by age 30! Other articles give advice on how to have a threesome (Buxton, 2015; Griffin, 2014); highlighting the impacts of threesomes on relationships (Gilmour, 2017); investigating how people make threesomes work for them (Bell, 2018); discussing what women think about threesomes (Bacharach,

2016); suggesting that they might be a gateway to open relationships (Parker, 2014); giving advice on finding the right partner (Gonzalez, 2014); and arguing that threesomes are so common they are now mundane (Moore, 2014). They are also a common occurrence in popular entertainment, including in movies such as *Zoolander*, *Vicky Christina Barcelona*, and *American Psycho* as well as TV shows such as *Gossip Girl*, *Sex and the City*, *True Blood*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *House of Cards*.

Threesomes are, furthermore, a popular category on porn sites, particularly among women. Analytics of the porn streaming site ‘Pornhub’ shows that ‘three-some’ was the fourth most commonly viewed category of pornography by women in 2018, and the eighth most viewed category overall (across all viewers) (Porn Hub’s 2018 Year in Review, 2019). Similarly, 2017 saw threesomes as the second most viewed category for women, and ninth overall (Porn Hub’s 2017 Year in Review, 2018), only marginally different from 2016’s results (Pornhub’s 2016 Year in Review, 2017). According to Pornhub’s data, women’s interest in threesomes may also be increasing, as it was only their fourth most viewed category in 2015 (eleventh overall), and eleventh most viewed category in 2014 (no data on overall ranking) (Pornhub’s 2015 Year in Review, 2016; Pornhub’s 2014 Year in Review, 2015). One can even simulate a threesome experience through the use of virtual reality equipment, such as Oculus Rift or Samsung Gear VR (Knight, 2015).

Facilitating real-life threesomes has also become easier with the advent of location-based smartphone apps such as Tinder, Grindr, and even some dedicated to finding threesomes, such as Feeld (formally 3nder), 3somer, and Tripple. Location-based apps allow users to find others looking for the same thing (be this dating, casual sex, etc.), sorted by geographical proximity (Weiss & Samenow, 2010). These apps allow users to upload pictures, provide personal information or what they are looking for, and chat with other users.

Thus, this research takes place in a period where sex is no longer intrinsically tied to procreation (Macklin, 1980), but is seen as having multiple potential uses and functions (McNair, 2013). At the same time, interest, information and exposure to different styles and forms of consensual non-monogamy are likely the highest they’ve ever been. Furthermore, studies are suggesting that a significant number of people are engaging in consensual non-monogamy. Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, and Conley (2014) estimate the prevalence of consensually non-monogamous individuals in Western society to be around 4 to 5%, whereas Hauptert, Moors, Gesselman, and Garcia (2017) estimate that approximately 20% of the population have at some point engaged in consensual non-monogamy. Specifically looking at threesomes, Herbenick et al. (2017) found that 18% of men and 10% of women from a US nationally representative sample of 2,021 adults had engaged in one. Despite the growing academic knowledge around consensual non-monogamy, however, research in the area of threesomes is still limited.

About this book

This book is the culmination of three separate studies into people's experiences of threesomes. Although the results of these studies have been combined in order to form a coherent narrative for this book, I will describe here each of the studies in greater detail. Specifically, I will give details on the focus of the study, the method of data collection, and the sample demographics. All three studies utilised thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for the analysis of data (for a further discussion of thematic analysis and other methodological considerations in this research, see Appendix 1). Furthermore, in all of the studies, ethical protocols were adhered to and participants were given a brief description of the purpose of the research, the right to anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Throughout the book, interview participants are referred to by their pseudonyms, and further information regarding these participants can be found in Appendix 2. Survey respondents are referred by demographic data including their: sex, age, sexual orientation, and the configuration of their last threesome. Owing to the fact that not all participants were asked the same questions, some chapters draw more heavily from specific participant sets than others. Although qualitative research (such as this very book) is generally unconcerned with issues of generalisability, for a discussion of this topic, and other limitations of this research, please see Appendix 1.

Study One

The first study was an investigation into university men's experiences and attitudes towards threesomes, conducted in collaboration with Professor Eric Anderson and Dr Lauren Joseph. Utilising semi-structured interviews, 30 heterosexual, undergraduate men attending a British University were interviewed about their actual and hypothetical experiences of threesomes. Participants were all in the second year of their university studies, and 29 out of 30 identified as White (the remaining participant identified as South Asian). The entirety of the sample also self-identified as coming from middle-class backgrounds. Using Savin-Williams' (2014) 9-point scale of sexual identification, 1 participant identified as mostly straight, 11 as straight, and 18 as exclusively straight. From this sample, ten had previously had a threesome. The remaining participants were questioned on their attitudes towards hypothetical threesome scenarios (further information on participants for this study can be found in Appendix 2).

Participants were recruited from a population that had already established a link with Professor Anderson; this link was created through his undergraduate teaching prior to study recruitment. It was felt that given the taboo nature of some of the topics, which dealt with same-sex sexual interactions or contact, the sampling strategy was deliberately designed to reduce the probability that the interview would cause excessive anxiety and prevent disclosure from respondents (Bahn & Weatherill, 2013).

Study Two

The second study, conducted entirely myself, was concerned with understanding men and women's experiences of mixed-sex threesomes (i.e. threesomes involving both men and women). Twenty-eight participants were gathered via snowball sampling (12 men, 16 women) and subsequently interviewed regarding their mixed-sex threesome experiences (for a more detailed discussion of the participant recruitment and method of data collection, please see Appendix 3).

Participants' ages ranged between the ages of 19 and 57 with the mean age of the male and female participants being 26.2 years and 31.2 years respectively. Participants were asked to self-identify their social class, and 18 identified themselves as middle-class. Four participants identified themselves as working class, two as upper class, and four suggested that they did not know. The sample was predominantly made up of those identifying as white, the largest category being White British (13 participants), followed by White American (4 participants). Only two participants classified themselves as having non-white identities (one mixed-race, one black). The sample was limited to mainly British, American, and Western European respondents.

Looking at levels of education, 17 of the sample had at least a Bachelor's degree, and nine of those 17 at the time of interview, were currently in post-graduate education pursuing master's degrees, PhDs, or medical degrees. With regard to occupation, 17 participants identified that they were currently students.

Participants' sexual identities were varied, particularly among the women. The majority of the men identified as heterosexual, whereas the majority of the women identified with non-heterosexual identities, or no sexual identity at all. From the male participants, ten identified as heterosexual (three exclusively heterosexual; six heterosexual; one mostly heterosexual), one identified as queer, and one struggled to put a label on his sexuality. Looking at the female participants, only two identified as heterosexual, four identified as heterosexual with some qualifying statements (e.g. being able to recognise a physical attraction to women), three identified as bisexual, one as bisexual/pansexual, one as pansexual, and two as queer. Three remaining participants were unsure of the label they would ascribe themselves (for a deeper discussion of these participants' sexualities, please see Appendix 4).

Rather than follow an explicit interview script, the interviews focused on a number of topic areas in order to allow for any unexpected emerging themes (Bryman, 2012). Interviews were recorded for transcription, allowing for rapport to build between the interviewer and participant, unimpeded by notetaking (Gratton & Jones, 2004), and for a more natural flow within the interview (Reinharz, 1992). The interviews focused on the participants' attitudes and experiences of threesomes, as well as other areas that may impact on their experiences: understanding of sexuality; experiences and attitudes towards sex; experiences and attitudes towards consensual non-monogamy; experiences and attitudes towards threesomes.

Since the taboo nature of some of these topics (Rubin, 1984) may encourage participants to give socially desirable answers (Bryman, 2012), steps were taken to put the participants at ease and encourage more truthful disclosure. For example, interviews started with easier topic material and the generation of rapport before moving on to more difficult topics (Hutchinson, Marsiglio, & Cohan, 2002). Aiding the development of rapport, and following Anderson's (2012) example, if desired by the participant, I disclosed my own relationship history and experiences. I also actively reminded participants that they were permitted to not answer any questions they were uncomfortable with (Hutchinson et al., 2002). Establishing rapport and trust through these practices, made participants more comfortable, and hopefully provided better insights into their experiences. It is, however, important to recognise that the meaning of the information given by participants was co-constructed with the researcher, and thus, subjective.

Interviews were conducted until the point of data saturation (Hallberg, 2006), where no notably new themes were forthcoming from interviewees. In this research, data saturation was concerned with gaining a general understanding of threesome behaviours, rather than aiming to find multiple participants who had experienced each possible configuration of experiences (e.g. a woman who had a spontaneous threesome with a male romantic partner; a woman who had a spontaneous threesome with a female romantic partner, etc.), as it was deemed that this latter approach would be outside of the practicalities of the research.

Study Three

The final study used a qualitative survey method to explore men and women's experiences of mixed-sex threesomes. This was conducted in collaboration with Florian Zsok, and Professor Eric Anderson. This survey requested basic demographic information alongside free-text questions related to their last threesome. Participants were gathered using social media, and the sharing of the survey online via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Data was collected from 213 participants (109 men, 104 women). The largest number of responses were received from those living in the UK (46.5%), followed by North America (25.4%). The remaining participants were living in the Netherlands (10.8%), Germany (5.6%), other European countries (4.2%), Australia/New Zealand (3.8%), Brazil (1.9%), and Asia (1.9%).

Respondents were aged from 18 to 70 years old; the majority falling into the 21 to 30 category, followed by the 31 to 40 category (see Table 1.1). Of the respondents, 71.8% identified as Caucasian/White, with the next largest groups being: other mixed background (4.7%), and Latino/Hispanic (2.3%). Of the participants, 19.2% did not respond to the question regarding their race/ethnicity. Regarding participants' level of education, the biggest group stated having a university or higher degree (77.9%), followed by sixth-form-college education (12.7%), and then

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Table 1.1 Study Three participant age range

Age	n	Percentage
20 and under	9	4.2
21–30	72	33.8
31–40	46	21.6
41–50	25	11.7
51–60	7	3.3
60 and over	2	0.9
Missing	52	24.4
Total	213	100

Note

Due to rounding, the percentage column actually adds up to 99.9%.

Table 1.2 Study Three participant sexual orientations

		Men	Women	Total
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	60	17	77
	Mostly heterosexual	32	29	61
	Bisexual	17	54	71
	Mostly homosexual	0	3	3
	Homosexual	0	1	1
	Total	109	104	213

Table 1.3 Study Three configuration of men's last threesome by sexual orientation

		Two men, one woman (MMF)	Two women, one man (FFM)	Total
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	19	41	60
	Mostly heterosexual	13	19	32
	Bisexual	12	5	17
	Total	44	65	109

Table 1.4 Study Three configuration of women's last threesome by sexual orientation

		Two men, one woman (MMF)	Two women, one man (FFM)	Total
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	8	9	17
	Mostly heterosexual	10	19	29
	Bisexual	7	47	54
	Mostly homosexual	0	3	3
	Homosexual	0	1	1
	Total	25	79	104

secondary-school education (8.9%). Regarding sexual orientation, participants were given a range of pre-determined choices alongside a free text option, the results of which can be seen in Table 1.2.

The main data included in this book comes from participants' free-text responses to questions regarding how and why they engaged in their last threesome, as well as other comments they had in relation to threesomes. Only information related to participants' last threesome was gathered as it was determined that asking about all threesome experiences, in a survey format, would be overly complex and negatively impact response rates for those participants with a large number of experiences. Tables 1.3 and 1.4 highlight the make-up of participants' most recent threesomes. A very small amount of data was also collected from some non-binary, genderqueer, androgynous, and trans participants. Given the small number of responses, however, it was decided that the scope of this analysis would focus upon CIS-gendered participants.

The structure of this book

In this introductory chapter I have outlined the context of this research and how it came to be. The aim of this research was to understand the meanings of threesomes for people who engage in them. The last major study looking at threesomes (see Karlen, 1988) was conducted more than 30 years ago; but recent historical changes in attitudes related to gendered behaviours (Anderson, 2014; Worthen, 2014) and the increasing liberalisation towards sexual behaviours (Attwood, 2005; Bernstein, 2001; Sheff & Hammers, 2011), will have undoubtedly impacted upon contemporary threesome behaviours. Thus, this research is focused on developing an understanding within a contemporary context, investigating people's motivations for, experiences of, and attitudes to, threesomes.

The next chapter is concerned with the how monogamy in Western society maintains power through hegemony, or what Anderson (2012) calls monogamism. Being that monogamy is situated as the only viable option, this may contribute to why people cheat rather than explore consensually non-monogamous alternatives. In addition, this chapter also explores how gender norms may also serve to strengthen monogamy through the roles and behaviours which men and women are encouraged to embody. Adherence to these roles may also portray consensual non-monogamy as an unattractive prospect. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that expectations around men and women's gender expressions are changing, and this may subsequently impact upon how consensual non-monogamy is viewed and engaged in.

Chapter 3 outlines the specific ways in which consensual non-monogamy is stigmatised; aiming to construct it as a deviant and undesirable practice. In what I call the 'consensual non-monogamy burden', these negative assumptions around consensual non-monogamy include the notions that: it is only about

gaining more sex; it is oppressive to women; it demonstrates that you do not love your partner; it is a deficient relationship style; it does not work; it causes insurmountable jealousy; and that it is not natural. I interrogate each of these assumptions, providing evidence which contradicts and challenges these expectations.

Chapter 4 brings together previous research about threesomes. Here I discuss some of the terms that are used to talk about threesomes and outline why specifically looking at threesomes is important. Karlen's (1988) study into threesomes is also explored, describing some of his key findings and questioning some of the conclusions which were reached. Contemporary research on threesomes is also explored utilising Schipper's (2016) work on 'the threesome imaginary': collective cultural fantasies regarding how threesomes should be undertaken. Research on threesomes suggests that there are some key differences in how men and women perceive and engage in different threesome types. There are, however, also studies that challenge the idea that threesomes involving two men and one woman (MMF) are necessarily more stigmatised than those involving two women and one man (FFM).

In Chapter 5, I outline some of the main reasons why the people in my sample had threesomes. Similar to the diversity of reasons why people have dyadic sex (Meston & Buss, 2007), people also have a range of reasons for engaging in threesomes. For example, threesomes were seen as part of what I refer to as 'sexual experience gathering'. In other words, threesomes were something that some thought should be 'ticked-off your list', potentially before one becomes 'too old' and constrained by a serious romantic relationship. Threesomes would also be engaged in as expressions of 'sexual altruism'; attempts to make others happy or an expression of friendship. Alternatively, like dyadic sex (Fincham, 2016), threesomes were sometimes just seen as fun, or the only way in which someone was going to be able to have sex: a 'sexual compromise'.

Building off of the reasons why people have threesomes, Chapter 6 gives an overview of some of the circumstances that lead to threesomes. Similar to how casual sex is often associated with particular facilitating factors, such as alcohol (Rupp, Taylor, Regev-Messalem, Fogarty, & England, 2014) or being at university (Wade, 2017)⁴, so too do threesomes have particular circumstances under which they often transpire. Both the presence of intoxicants as well as a need to feel comfortable or trust the people in the threesome emerged as factors which aided a threesome in happening. Alternatively, for others, threesomes were just a normal part of their sex lives, sometimes as part of a multi-person relationship.

Looking at one of the presumed problems with threesomes, Chapter 7 explores participants' experiences of jealousy stemming from their threesome experiences, as well as the role of communication and experience in mitigating these. Instances of jealousy were not uncommon among those who had a threesome while in a relationship, and could lead to feelings of exclusion or a desire to protect the dyadic relationship. Although protecting the relationship often led to positive experiences, some of these practices are also theorised as leading to other problems.

Further exploring the reach of the threesome imaginary, Chapter 8 looks at the stigma around MMF threesomes from the perspective of women. Findings suggest that although some women perceived MMF threesomes to be potentially objectifying and unsafe, this referred to a very specific type of MMF threesome—ones that did not include men engaging in same-sex sexual interaction. In contrast, threesomes which did include men who interacted together sexually were seen as less objectifying, safer, and a potential source of arousal.

In Chapter 9 I continue to explore stigma around threesomes and focus on the participants' views on being open about their experiences. Results suggest that participants were subject to relatively little stigma, although this may in part be a result of the selective approaches to disclosure that were deployed. It is also suggested that the relative lack of stigma participants received might be a product of how threesomes are seen differently to other forms of consensual non-monogamy.

Chapter 10 focuses upon the outcomes of threesomes in terms of altered perspectives and future behaviours. I find that some participants were able to develop more understanding and empathy for consensual non-monogamy as a result of their threesome experiences. In addition, some participants also highlighted how their expectations of threesomes had been realigned. Finally, although many participants espoused positive attitudes towards and future interest in, threesomes, there were still potential barriers to having future threesomes.

In the final chapter, I summarise some of the key points in this book to contextualise and discuss what we now know about threesomes. I also offer some suggestions of how this research can be used to further our understanding of other theories related to gender and sexuality, offer insights and directions for future research, and highlight the importance of complexity in future research.

Thus, although this book in no way claims to fully understand threesomes or offer a representation of threesomes which will capture each and every experience, it does provide an in-depth and rich account of how threesomes are for some people. From this foundation, a deeper understanding of this often misrepresented and misunderstood sexual behaviour can be better realised.

Notes

- 1 This book is focused on threesomes as a sexual act rather than specifically looking at three-person relationships (sometimes referred to as throuples; Moss, 2016; Shepherd, 2019). That said, although it is not a focus, some participants do discuss their threesomes from within the context of multi-person relationships.
- 2 The changes that have happened are particularly stark when considering and comparing contemporary attitudes and sex and relationships to the work of Gayle Rubin. Rubin (1984) argued that our sexual values system was previously based on determining good and bad forms of sex and relationship practices. She conceptualised the 'good' behaviours as existing within a 'charmed circle' (p. 153), with their comparative opposites existing in the 'outer limits' (p. 153). Sex within the charmed circle adhered to particular expectations such as being heterosexual, monogamous, non-commercial,

and reproductive. Since the publication of Rubin's essay, however, many of these previously stigmatised behaviours have begun to enter into acceptable practice. For example, attitudes towards sexual minorities are improving at a substantial rate (Clements & Field, 2014; Keleher & Smith, 2012) particularly among young men (Anderson, 2014; McCormack, 2012). Gabb and Fink (2015) argue even that particular expressions of same-sex desire have moved to the centre of Rubin's charmed circle. Consequently, there now appear to be multiple charmed circles in operation as attitudes towards sex and sexuality have diversified.

- 3 Much of the academic research in the area of consensual non-monogamy looks at what are often considered the three main forms: open relationships/marriages; swinging; and polyamory. Within an open relationship/marriage, the primary relationship takes precedence, but members of the couple mutually agree upon methods that are acceptable in gaining sex outside of the relationship (Adam, 2006). If extra-relationship sex happens, then it should be enhancing of, rather than a detriment to, the primary relationship (Rubin, 2001). Swinging is a generic term for those whom exchange sexual partners or have group sex with other like-minded people; similar to open relationships, sex is the primary motivator, and the dyad remains of the upmost importance (Rubin, 2001). Polyamory, however, has a larger emotional focus and often 'involves having multiple relationships which may be emotionally close and/or sexual in nature' (Barker & Langdrige, 2010, p. 750). There are, however, a whole range of different forms of consensual non-monogamy, and although I often draw upon the aforementioned forms when providing examples, that is not to discount the multitude of other ways in which people may organise their relationships.
- 4 This does, however, depend upon the sort of university one attends, the social circles one is a part of, as well as personal desires (see Karioris, 2019).

Understanding Threesomes

Gender, Sex, and Consensual
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