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Need Fulfillment in Polyamorous Relationships

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Polyamory is characterized by simultaneous consensual romantic relationships with multiple partners. Polyamory allows individuals to fulfill their relationship needs with multiple romantic partners, yet researchers have not identified how having needs met in one romantic relationship may be related to relationship outcomes in a concurrent relationship. Polyamorous individuals (N=1,093) completed online measures of need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment for two concurrent romantic relationships. Participants reported high levels of need fulfillment and satisfaction in both relationships. Need fulfillment with one partner negatively predicted approximately 1% of the variance in relationship satisfaction with the other partner; however, there was no association between need fulfillment with one partner and commitment to the other. Generally, the findings suggest that polyamorous relationships are relatively independent of one another. This study provides initial evidence that polyamory may be a viable and fulfilling alternative way of conducting intimate relationships.

Polyamory is characterized by simultaneous consensual romantic relationships with multiple partners. Polyamorous individuals conceptualize their relationships as “ethical nonmonogamy” because all partners involved are aware that they are in a nonmonogamous relationship and agree to its terms (Klesse, 2011). Western cultural norms perpetuate the likely unrealistic expectation that one romantic partner should meet most of an individual’s needs (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Polyamorous individuals may be able to distribute their relationship needs across multiple partners, thereby lessening this expectation. However, there are no empirical studies of how having needs met in one romantic relationship may be related to relationship outcomes in another concurrent relationship. We addressed this gap in the research by examining how an individual’s need fulfillment in one romantic relationship was associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment in another concurrent romantic relationship.

Polyamory is theoretically interesting because it violates strong norms in Western culture that demand monogamy and restrict romantic love to monogamous couples (Anderson, 2010). The majority of adults in Western cultures expect sexual exclusivity in their relationships, believe that extramarital sex is wrong, and

expect individuals whose partners engage in extradyadic sex to end their relationships with their cheating partners (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Mint, 2004; Treas & Giesen, 2000). In addition, there are strong norms against consensual nonmonogamy (e.g., Anderson, 2010) and strong opposition to marriage to multiple partners (i.e., polygamy) in most Western cultures (Abacus Data, 2011; Saad, 2011). Although we are not aware of any research on societal attitudes toward polyamory, the large majority of polyamorous individuals in a U.S. convenience sample perceived that there is prejudice against polyamory, and 43% reported having personally experienced such prejudice (Nearing, 2000). Given the potential effects of such antipolyamory attitudes on polyamorous individuals and on social policies and laws (Emens, 2004), research is urgently needed to provide accurate information about polyamorous relationships.

Most published research on polyamory has come from a sociological perspective, has employed qualitative methods, and has focused on the experiences of self-identified polyamorous individuals. For instance, researchers have examined the role of gender in polyamory (Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Sheff, 2005, 2006), polyamorists’ creation of new words (Ritchie & Barker, 2006), polyamorous identity (Barker, 2005), conceptualizations of love in polyamory (Klesse, 2006, 2011), and polyamorous families (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006; Sheff, 2011). However, polyamory has been neglected by mainstream relationship researchers (see Barker & Langdridge, 2010), and only a handful of studies focused on processes in polyamorous relationships.

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For example, Wosick-Correa (2010) examined agreements and rules in polyamorous relationships, and Wolfe (2003) examined how polyamory affected individuals' experiences with and feelings about their primary partners. In this study, we extended research on polyamorous relationships by examining how need fulfillment was related to relationship outcomes in multiple relationships.

Polyamory and Need Fulfillment

Since the 1920s, romantic love has become increasingly associated with marriage, leading to an increased emphasis on intimacy, sexual passion, and companionship in conjugal relationships (Gillis, 1996). This shift in Western expectations of marriage has resulted in increased reliance on romantic partners to fulfill a variety of interpersonal needs that were previously met by a number of individuals (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Gillis, 1996). Monogamous individuals expect their romantic partners to meet many relational needs, including those for companionship, intimacy, intellectual involvement, and sex (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Cultural norms restrict fulfillment of certain needs (particularly sexual needs) outside of romantic relationships, and individuals may have limited opportunities to meet their needs with other people in a culture that privileges romantic relationships above relationships with friends and family members (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Social scientists have argued that individuals' overreliance on romantic partners to fulfill their needs can cause relational problems when partners do not live up to these high ideals (e.g., Charles, 2002; DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

In polyamorous relationships, relationship needs can be distributed across multiple partners, potentially lessening the expectation that one romantic partner should meet all or most relationship needs. However, we know little about the role of need fulfillment in relationships with multiple romantic partners. Although many aspects of polyamorous relationships may be of interest, we focused on need fulfillment for two primary reasons. First, need fulfillment captures a range of relationship domains, many of which have been highlighted in the literature on polyamory. For example, Klesse (2011) described the importance of emotional intimacy, freedom, and emotional support in polyamorous relationships. Second, as just described, need fulfillment is connected to one of the primary critiques of Western monogamous ideals, and polyamory has been suggested as a potential solution to the problem of overreliance on one romantic partner to meet relational needs (e.g., Cook, 2005). Consequently, we examined how need fulfillment in concurrent polyamorous relationships relates to relationship satisfaction and commitment in each relationship. We considered three potential patterns of association between need fulfillment and relational

outcomes in polyamorous relationships: an additive model, a contrast model, and a compensation model.

Additive Model

Polyamory may be a way for individuals to achieve greater emotional and sexual need fulfillment than if they had only one partner (Cook, 2005; Sheff, 2006, 2011). For example, if Emily has her relationship needs fulfilled by two partners, Naomi and Carlos, she may have higher overall need fulfillment and may experience higher relationship satisfaction with both partners. This could occur because need fulfillment in relationships is positively related to psychological well-being (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000) and life satisfaction (Stinnett, Collins, & Montgomery, 1970). Thus, Emily may be happier overall because her relationships fulfill more of her needs, and her happiness may in turn enhance her relationships with both of her partners. Consistent with this speculation, some polyamorous individuals report that the excitement and sexual fulfillment gained from new romantic relationships—called new relationship energy (NRE)—can spill over into pre-existing romantic relationships (Cook, 2005; Wolfe, 2003). This suggests an additive model of the association between need fulfillment and relationship satisfaction with multiple partners: need fulfillment with one partner enhances relationship satisfaction with another partner.

Contrast Model

Many people in Western culture hold the view that having multiple romantic partners is likely to undermine satisfaction and commitment in each relationship (Wolfe, 2003). People tend to assume that individuals in polyamorous relationships will feel threatened and jealous by their partners having their needs met by other intimate partners (Mint, 2004). Consistent with this hypothesis, some polyamorous individuals report increased emotional distance from and reduced sexual interest in their primary partner after their partner returns from a night with someone else, and some think that polyamory increases instability and conflict in their primary relationships (Wolfe, 2003). Individuals may also contrast how well each of their partners meets their needs. That is, individuals who receive high need fulfillment from one partner may develop high expectations for their relationships and may therefore feel dissatisfied with their less fulfilling partners. If Emily experiences greater need fulfillment with Naomi than with Carlos, she may experience less satisfaction with Carlos.

The investment model posits that when desirable alternatives for a romantic partner exist, an individual may experience less commitment to his or her current romantic partner (Rusbult, 1980). Thus, as Naomi meets more of Emily's needs, Emily may come to see her as a higher-quality partner than Carlos; thus Emily

may experience less commitment to Carlos. In addition, committed partners are more likely to devalue and reject alternative partners than are noncommitted partners (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). If Emily is more committed to Naomi because she meets more of her needs, Emily may devalue Carlos to maintain her commitment to Naomi. According to the investment model, relationships become less committed as they become more costly to the individual (Rusbult, 1980). Thus, commitment may also lessen to the extent that polyamorous relationships are considered costly. If need fulfillment with one partner results in relationship conflict with another partner, polyamory may be less attractive than alternatives, including monogamy or remaining single. Thus, the contrast model suggests that need fulfillment with one partner will be negatively related to relationship satisfaction and commitment with the other partner.

Compensation Model

A third possibility is that individuals compensate for low need fulfillment in one relationship by seeking to fulfill those needs in another relationship. According to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) principle of substitution, individuals whose relationships do not satisfy their need to belong are motivated to seek new attachments. Similarly, the deficit model of infidelity suggests that infidelity results from a lack of need fulfillment in a primary relationship (e.g., Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). In a polyamorous context, individuals may compensate for low fulfillment in one relationship by fulfilling those needs in another intimate relationship. For example, Emily may find that Carlos does not meet her sexual needs, whereas Naomi does. If Emily was only in a relationship with Carlos her sexual needs would be unfulfilled, and she may experience lower relationship satisfaction and commitment. Having her sexual needs met by Naomi, however, may protect her relationship with Carlos from the negative effects of low sexual fulfillment. Thus, polyamory may offer one ethical way for individuals to compensate for a lack of complete need fulfillment in a given relationship (Sheff, 2011). However, Cook (2005) concluded that fulfilling unmet needs is an unanticipated benefit of polyamory rather than a primary motivation to have multiple partners.

Research Questions

The goal of this study was to examine how need fulfillment with two partners was related to relationship satisfaction and commitment with each partner. Although polyamorous relationships may involve more than three people, we assessed individuals' need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment with only two relationship partners, regardless of how many relationships participants may have been involved in.

Limiting the number of partners allowed us to make meaningful comparisons across partners and to employ standard statistical methods. In addition, analyzing only two relationships allowed us to make comparisons for as large a sample as possible, as previous research has found that the majority of polyamorous individuals have two partners (Wosick-Correa, 2010). We addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1. How does need fulfillment with two romantic partners relate to relationship satisfaction with each partner?
- RQ2. How does need fulfillment with two romantic partners relate to commitment to each partner?
- RQ3. Do the associations among need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment with two partners differ across different relationship needs?

In addressing these research questions, we controlled for neuroticism to account for the possibility that participants' responses were being driven by individual negative response biases, and because previous research indicates that neuroticism influences relationship outcomes (e.g., Kurdek, 1997; White, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2004). In addition, we controlled for relationship length (with both partners) because previous research indicates that relationship processes and outcomes, including relationship satisfaction, tend to vary with relationship duration (e.g., Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006).

Method

Procedure and Participants

All procedures were approved by the university's research ethics board. Participants were recruited in February 2012 from 320 online polyamory groups, mailing lists, and forums. All online sources had a minimum of 10 members and were hosted out of U.S., Australian, British, Canadian, or New Zealand locations. We chose to sample from English-speaking, Western online polyamorous communities because Western polyamory focuses on similar ideals of honesty, communication, and love (Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2011; Sheff, 2005) and because these countries do not have laws prohibiting multiple simultaneous sexual or romantic partnerships. The recruitment message included a short description of the study, information about anonymity, and a link to the online survey. Participants were also encouraged to forward the link to their friends (but not partners) in polyamorous relationships. Upon linking to the survey, participants were asked for informed consent and then completed descriptive information about themselves and two of their partners. Participants then completed a measure of need fulfillment for their

two partners. Each need item was presented twice with the name of the specific partner piped into the question stem. Then, participants completed the relationship satisfaction and commitment measures for the identified partners, again with each item presented twice. Finally, participants completed a brief personality measure and viewed a description of the purpose of the study.

Of the 1,711 responses, 1,207 met the following inclusion criteria: 19 years of age or older, current involvement in two or more romantic relationships, completion of the online survey, and permission given for survey responses to be analyzed. Participants ($n = 112$) were excluded if they reported that one or both of their two partners had completed the survey because this would have violated the assumption of independence of observations required for multivariate analyses. Two additional participants were excluded because they reported having 99 partners. The final sample consisted of 1,093 individuals in polyamorous relationships.

The gender breakdown of the final sample was as follows: 623 women (57.0%), 412 men (37.7%), 32 gender queer (2.9%), 6 transgender (0.6%), 9 individuals (0.8%) who identified as "Other" but did not elaborate, and 11 individuals (1.0%) who did not identify a gender. Participants averaged 37.32 years of age ($SD = 11.35$; range 19 to 86 years). Generally, the sample was highly educated; 94.5% of individuals had completed at least some college. Nearly 90% of the participants identified as Caucasian, and 44% had children. As shown in Table 1,

Table 1. *Sample Characteristics by Gender*

Characteristic	Women ($n = 623$)			Men ($n = 412$)		
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Range	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Range
Age	34.98	10.09	19–74	41.65	12.01	19–86
Number of partners	2.57	1.02	2–10	2.63	1.11	2–12
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	
Sexual preference						
Heterosexual		122	19.6	253	61.4	
Bisexual or pansexual		421	67.6	114	27.7	
Gay or lesbian		16	3.9	12	2.9	
Other ^a		58	9.3	30	7.3	
Highest education level						
Graduate school		162	26.0	116	28.2	
College graduate		272	43.7	167	40.5	
Some college		153	24.6	112	27.2	
High school graduate		33	5.3	14	3.4	
Some high school		1	0.2	3	0.7	
Less than high school		1	0.2	—	—	
Children						
No		366	58.7	196	47.6	
Yes		255	40.9	214	51.9	

Note. $N = 1,035$.

^aCategory breakdown as follows: Heteroflexible (women: $N = 19$, 3.0%; men: $n = 20$, 4.9%); homoflexible (women: $n = 1$, 0.2%; men: $n = 1$, 0.2%); queer (women: $n = 32$, 5.1%; men: $n = 6$, 1.5%); uncategorized (women: $n = 6$, 1.0%; men: $n = 3$, 0.7%).

the majority of women ($n = 421$, 67.6%) identified as bisexual or pansexual, whereas the majority of men ($n = 253$, 61.4%) identified as heterosexual.

To make meaningful comparisons across partners, participants who had more than two partners ($n = 395$; 36%) were asked to report on the two partners to whom they felt closest. The majority of participants ($n = 715$; 65.4%) identified one partner as their primary partner. Primary partners were designated significant others (SOs), and participants' nonprimary partners were designated other significant others (OSOs). If participants did not identify one partner as primary, exclusive marital partners ($n = 114$) or cohabiting partners ($n = 55$) were designated SOs. For the remaining participants, SOs were designated based on relationship length ($n = 183$), frequency of contact ($n = 18$), or the order in which participants entered the names of their partners into the survey ($n = 8$).

Measures

Need fulfillment. Participants completed the Need Fulfillment in Relationships Scale (NFR) for each of their two romantic relationships. This scale was developed based on a pilot study of 147 individuals in romantic relationships. An online survey assessed the extent to which participants' romantic partners met their relationship needs. The initial version of the NFR contained 42 items, including items adapted from other measures of need fulfillment in romantic relationships (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; La Guardia et al., 2000; Lewandowski & Aron, 2002; Prager & Buhrmester, 1998). Responses for each item range from 1 (*never true*) to 9 (*always true*). Based on reliability analyses, we chose 29 items to assess seven relationship needs. We subsequently added 6 items to increase the range of relational experiences covered by the measure of needs. The final version of the NFR includes 35 items assessing seven subscales: Autonomy, Closeness, Emotional Support, Security, Self-Esteem, Self-Expansion, and Sexual Fulfillment. Sample items are presented in Table 2.¹ For this study, subscale scores (separately for SO and OSO) were derived by averaging the items corresponding to each need. SO and OSO subscales were reliable, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .78 to .92 and averaging .86. An overall need fulfillment score was derived by averaging scores across the seven subscales ($\alpha = .90$ for SO and OSO).

Relationship satisfaction. Participants completed the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) for each of their two relationships (Hendrick, 1988). The RAS is a reliable and valid test of relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998) composed of seven

¹The full NFR measure is available from the authors.

Table 2. *Subscale Sample Items for Need Fulfillment Measure*

Need Subscale	Sample Items
Autonomy	My partner supports that I do things on my own. My partner respects my independence.
Closeness	I feel closeness and intimacy with my partner. My partner really understands me.
Emotional support	My partner is there for me when I need comfort. My partner is understanding when I'm upset.
Self-expansion	I have a variety of new experiences with my partner. My relationship with my partner allows me to see the world in new ways.
Self-esteem	I feel good about myself with my partner. I like the way my partner makes me feel about myself.
Security	I feel secure in my relationship with my partner. I can count on my partner.
Sexual	My partner understands my sexual needs. My sex life with my partner is exciting.

items. Sample items include “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” and “How good is your relationship compared to most?” Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale. A total satisfaction score was derived by averaging the seven items. Cronbach's alphas were .83 for SO and .81 for OSO.

Commitment. Participants completed four items from Stanley and Markman's (1992) Commitment/Dedication Scale for each of their two relationships (cf. Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). A sample item is “I want this relationship with my partner to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.” Items were scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and were averaged to create a total commitment score. Cronbach's alphas were .76 for SO and .82 for OSO.

Neuroticism. Participants completed the Neuroticism Subscale of the Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). The subscale is composed of eight items; a sample item is “I am someone who worries a lot.” The neuroticism items were interspersed with eight items from the BFI Extraversion Scale to balance the negative focus of the Neuroticism Subscale. Neuroticism items were scored from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*) and were averaged to create a total Neuroticism score. Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Results

Data Analysis

We first conducted descriptive analyses of participants' ratings of their two relationships and compared characteristics of SO relationships with characteristics of OSO relationships using paired samples *t*-tests. Next, we computed bivariate correlations among need fulfillment,

relationship satisfaction, and commitment within partners and across the two relationships. Then, we compared need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment across participants' two relationships using paired samples *t*-tests.

To address our research questions, we conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regressions to predict satisfaction or commitment with one partner from need fulfillment with both partners. The additive model would predict that need fulfillment with a second partner (Partner B) would be *positively* associated with satisfaction or commitment with a first partner (Partner A) after controlling for need fulfillment with Partner A. The contrast model would predict that need fulfillment with Partner B would be *negatively* associated with satisfaction or commitment with Partner A after controlling for need fulfillment with Partner A. Finally, compensation may be indicated by a significant *interaction* between need fulfillment with Partners A and B in predicting outcomes with either partner, depending on the nature of the specific interaction.

Descriptive Analyses

Participants had an average relationship length of 8.84 years with their SO and 2.58 years with their OSO. Participants spent more time in person ($M_{SO} = 5.33$, $M_{OSO} = 3.80$, $t(1088) = 25.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.01$), communicated more frequently ($M_{SO} = 5.86$, $M_{OSO} = 5.32$, $t(1059) = 16.24$, $p < .001$, $d = .70$), and had more frequent sexual contact ($M_{SO} = 4.28$, $M_{OSO} = 3.50$, $t(1005) = 9.10$, $p < .001$, $d = .40$) with their SO than with their OSO. Approximately half of participants (46.6%) were married to their SO and 70.3% lived with their SO, whereas 2.0% were married to their OSO and 15.6% lived with their OSO. Of participants who were parents, 77% reported that their SO took on a parenting role with their children, and 26% reported that their OSO took on a parenting role. The majority of female participants (61.4%) reported on relationships with two men; an additional 21.1% reported on a male SO and a female OSO, 8.1% on a female SO and a male OSO, and 4.0% on two female partners. The large majority of male participants (86.6%) reported on relationships with two women; an additional 4.9% reported on a female SO and a male OSO, 4.6% on two male partners, and 1.2% on a male SO and female OSO.²

Bivariate Associations among Need Fulfillment, Relationship Satisfaction, and Commitment

Correlations among need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment are presented in Table 3.

²The gender breakdown of participants' partners does not add up to 100% because some participants did not identify their partners' genders and some did not identify their partners as male or female.

Table 3. Associations among Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. SO satisfaction	4.20	0.59	—																		
2. SO commitment	4.27	0.85	.53	—																	
3. SO need fulfillment	7.93	0.99	.78	.43	—																
4. SO autonomy	8.27	1.08	.61	.29	.79	—															
5. SO closeness	8.15	0.98	.74	.46	.92	.75	—														
6. SO support	8.09	1.56	.65	.37	.84	.66	.80	—													
7. SO security	8.21	1.12	.71	.51	.77	.59	.75	.74	—												
8. SO self-esteem	7.81	1.28	.74	.38	.91	.69	.80	.76	.69	—											
9. SO self-expansion	7.49	1.33	.54	.30	.79	.53	.66	.52	.42	.66	—										
10. SO sexual	7.38	1.61	.50	.19	.72	.40	.53	.40	.29	.59	.68	—									
11. OSO satisfaction	3.96	0.64	.28	.13	.22	.18	.19	.15	.21	.23	.18	.13	—								
12. OSO commitment	3.57	1.02	.13	.40	.13	.09	.12	.08	.18	.14	.11	.03	.58	—							
13. OSO need fulfillment	7.68	1.06	.26	.15	.42	.31	.36	.33	.34	.41	.35	.27	.77	.53	—						
14. OSO autonomy	8.26	1.01	.25	.13	.39	.40	.36	.32	.31	.37	.28	.19	.58	.28	.78	—					
15. OSO closeness	7.73	1.13	.22	.12	.35	.27	.33	.26	.29	.34	.29	.22	.73	.52	.92	.72	—				
16. OSO support	7.47	1.54	.15	.12	.27	.21	.23	.25	.20	.28	.21	.16	.60	.52	.84	.58	.78	—			
17. OSO security	7.30	1.55	.20	.15	.31	.22	.26	.24	.30	.32	.25	.17	.73	.60	.84	.58	.75	.77	—		
18. OSO self-esteem	7.80	1.24	.25	.15	.38	.27	.33	.31	.33	.41	.29	.22	.73	.46	.90	.70	.81	.71	.71	—	
19. OSO self-expansion	7.56	1.23	.28	.14	.44	.29	.36	.33	.31	.40	.49	.33	.53	.33	.75	.54	.67	.47	.47	.65	—
20. OSO sexual	7.61	1.30	.19	.09	.32	.19	.26	.24	.22	.28	.31	.32	.45	.24	.67	.41	.52	.34	.39	.56	.60

Note. $N = 1,093$. SO = significant other; OSO = other significant other. Correlations of .11 and above are significant at $p < .001$.

Within partners, the subscales of need fulfillment were positively related (range $r_s = .29$ to $.81$). Total need fulfillment and fulfillment of specific needs were positively related to relationship satisfaction and commitment; correlations ranged from $.19$ to $.78$ for the SO and from $.24$ to $.77$ for the OSO ($p_s < .001$).³ Across the two relationships, the corresponding subscales of need fulfillment were positively related (range $r_s = .25$ to $.49$), and need fulfillment was positively related to relationship satisfaction (range $r_s = .13$ to $.49$, $p_s < .001$) and, to a lesser extent, to cross-partner commitment (range $r_s = .03$ to $.40$, with 16 of 19 correlations significant at $p < .001$).

Comparisons between SO and OSO Relationships

To compare individuals' experiences in their two relationships, we conducted paired-samples t -tests for partner differences on relationship satisfaction, commitment, and need fulfillment. Results are presented in Table 4. The SO and OSO relationships differed significantly on relationship satisfaction, commitment, overall need fulfillment, and four of seven needs. For all comparisons except sexual need fulfillment, the SOs were higher than the OSOs. To estimate magnitude of effects, we calculated Cohen's d for dependent samples. Effect size estimates ranged from $-.16$ to $.75$, with the largest difference between the SO and OSO relationships on commitment, and the smallest on sexual need fulfillment. To control for the possibility that relationship

length accounted for differences between the SOs and OSOs, we conducted follow-up analyses controlling for SO and OSO relationship length; the differences between the SOs and OSOs on sexual need fulfillment, security, and overall need fulfillment were no longer significant.

Multivariate Associations among Need Fulfillment, Relationship Satisfaction, and Commitment

RQ1: How does need fulfillment with two romantic partners relate to relationship satisfaction with each partner? To analyze the associations between need fulfillment and relationship satisfaction in two relationships, we predicted relationship satisfaction with the SO

Table 4. Means of Satisfaction, Commitment, and Need Fulfillment for Significant Other and Other Significant Other

Variable	SO		OSO		t	Effect (d)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Relationship satisfaction	4.20	0.59	3.96	0.63	10.68*	0.39
Commitment	4.27	0.85	3.58	1.01	22.11*	0.75
Need fulfillment	7.93	0.99	7.68	1.06	7.51*	0.25
Autonomy	8.27	1.08	8.26	1.01	0.18	
Closeness	8.15	0.98	7.74	1.13	11.15*	0.39
Emotional support	8.09	1.16	7.47	1.54	12.16*	0.45
Security	8.21	1.13	7.30	1.55	18.56*	0.67
Self-esteem	7.81	1.28	7.80	1.24	0.37	
Self-expansion	7.49	1.33	7.56	1.23	-1.73	
Sexual	7.38	1.60	7.61	1.30	-4.20*	-0.16

Note. $N = 1,093$. SO = significant other; OSO = other significant other. * $p < .001$.

³Given the large sample size in this study, alpha for all significance tests was set at $p = .001$ to avoid interpreting trivial effects.

Table 5. Predicting Relationship Satisfaction Based on Need Fulfillment

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2
SO relationship satisfaction					
1 SO relationship length	0.01	0.00	.12	6.12*	
OSO relationship length	-0.00	0.00	-.02	-1.20	
Neuroticism	-0.02	0.01	-.03	-1.37	.03*
2 SO need fulfillment	0.50	0.01	.84	38.19*	.59*
3 OSO need fulfillment	-0.05	0.01	-.08	-4.03*	.01*
4 SO \times OSO need fulfillment	0.03	0.01	.06	2.86	.00
OSO relationship satisfaction					
1 OSO relationship length	0.00	0.00	.00	0.19	
OSO relationship length	0.00	0.00	.03	1.34	
Neuroticism	-0.04	0.02	-.06	-2.90	.04*
2 OSO need fulfillment	0.49	0.01	.81	38.46*	.56*
3 SO need fulfillment	-0.07	0.02	-.10	-4.48*	.01*
4 SO \times OSO need fulfillment	0.02	0.01	.05	2.26	.00

Note. *N* = 1,093. SO = significant other; OSO = other significant other. *B* = unstandardized beta weight; *SE* = standard error; β = standardized beta weight; ΔR^2 = change in the multiple correlation squared. **p* < .001.

from need fulfillment with the OSO, controlling for need fulfillment with the SO (see Table 5). In the first step, we controlled for SO and OSO relationship length and neuroticism. In the second step, SO need fulfillment significantly predicted SO relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .79$) and explained 59% of the variance in SO relationship satisfaction. In the third step, need fulfillment with the OSO negatively predicted SO relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.08$; $\Delta R^2 = .006$), suggesting that higher need fulfillment with the OSO is associated with lower satisfaction with the SO. In the fourth step, the interaction between SO and OSO need fulfillment did not predict additional variance in SO satisfaction.

We conducted a parallel analysis predicting satisfaction with the OSO from need fulfillment with the SO, controlling for need fulfillment with the OSO. As shown in Table 5, results were similar in that OSO need fulfillment significantly predicted OSO satisfaction ($\beta = .76$; $\Delta R^2 = .56$), and the addition of SO need fulfillment in the third step negatively predicted OSO satisfaction ($\beta = -.12$; $\Delta R^2 = .011$). Again, the interaction between SO and OSO need fulfillment was not significant.

RQ2: How does need fulfillment with two romantic partners relate to commitment to each partner? We repeated these analyses predicting relationship commitment. As shown in Table 6, SO need fulfillment significantly predicted SO commitment ($\beta = .48$; $\Delta R^2 = .22$). However, neither OSO need fulfillment nor the interaction of SO and OSO need fulfillment predicted additional variance in SO commitment. Similar results emerged when predicting OSO commitment, as shown in Table 6. That is, OSO need fulfillment significantly predicted OSO commitment ($\beta = .54$; $\Delta R^2 = .28$),

Table 6. Predicting Commitment Based on Need Fulfillment

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2
SO commitment					
1 SO relationship length	0.03	0.00	.30	10.80*	
OSO relationship length	-0.01	0.01	-.02	-0.75	
Neuroticism	0.08	0.03	.07	2.74	.05*
2 SO need fulfillment	0.43	0.03	.50	15.99*	.22*
3 OSO need fulfillment	-0.05	0.02	-.06	-2.08	.00
4 SO \times OSO need fulfillment	-0.02	0.02	-.04	-1.24	.00
OSO commitment					
1 OSO relationship length	0.03	0.01	.11	4.24*	
OSO relationship length	0.02	0.00	.16	5.86*	
Neuroticism	0.07	0.03	.05	2.13	.05*
2 OSO need fulfillment	0.55	0.03	.57	20.60*	.28*
3 SO need fulfillment	-0.05	0.03	-.05	-1.54	.00
4 SO \times OSO need fulfillment	0.05	0.02	.06	2.14	.00

Note. *N* = 1,093. SO = significant other; OSO = other significant other. *B* = unstandardized beta weight; *SE* = standard error; β = standardized beta weight; ΔR^2 = change in the multiple correlation squared. **p* < .001.

whereas SO need fulfillment and the interaction term were not significant predictors of OSO commitment.

RQ3: Do the associations among need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment with two partners differ across different relationship needs? To explore how the associations between need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment may vary across different needs, we conducted separate parallel regressions for each of the seven need subscales. Across all seven needs, SO need fulfillment predicted SO satisfaction and commitment, and OSO need fulfillment predicted OSO satisfaction and commitment (β s ranged from .45 to .75 for satisfaction and .23 to .52 for commitment).⁴ However, need fulfillment with one partner independently predicted the other partner's relationship satisfaction or commitment in only 1 of 28 analyses. When we added the interaction of SO and OSO need fulfillment for each need to the regression equations, 10 of 28 interactions were significant. Generally, the interactions predicted SO and OSO relationship satisfaction (and in two cases commitment) for three needs: autonomy, closeness, and emotional support. We graphed the interactions following procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991). The pattern of interactions is illustrated in Figure 1 with fulfillment of the need for autonomy predicting SO satisfaction. In all cases, when need fulfillment with one partner was relatively high, need fulfillment with the other partner was positively associated with satisfaction or commitment with the first partner (an additive effect). In contrast, when need fulfillment with one partner was relatively low, need fulfillment with the other partner was negatively associated with satisfaction or commitment with the first

⁴Full results of these analyses are available from the authors.

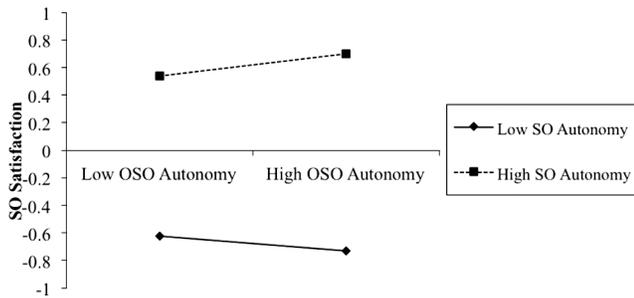


Figure 1. Standardized interaction between OSO autonomy and SO autonomy in predicting SO relationship satisfaction. SO = Significant other; OSO = Other significant other.

partner (a contrast effect). However, in no case did the interactions explain more than 1% of the variance in satisfaction or commitment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how need fulfillment with two partners is associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment with each partner. We examined three potential patterns of associations: (a) the additive model, in which need fulfillment with one partner may positively predict satisfaction and commitment with another partner; (b) the contrast model, in which need fulfillment with one partner may negatively predict satisfaction and commitment with another partner; and (c) the compensation model, in which need fulfillment with one partner may compensate for the negative effects of low need fulfillment with another partner on relationship satisfaction and commitment. There was no support for the additive or compensation models. Need fulfillment with one partner was not associated with higher relationship satisfaction with or commitment to another partner. In addition, polyamorous individuals did not appear to compensate for low need fulfillment in one partner by having their needs met by another partner. Rather, need fulfillment was consistently high with both partners across all needs studied.

There was some evidence for a contrast model; need fulfillment in one partner was, to a modest extent, associated with lower relationship satisfaction with the other partner. This result suggests that getting needs met with one partner may somehow threaten the relationship with another partner, perhaps because high need fulfillment with one partner fosters comparison between the two, leading to relatively less satisfaction with the less fulfilling partner. However, need fulfillment with one partner predicted approximately 1% of the variance in satisfaction with the other partner (after controlling for need fulfillment with the other partner). Thus, it is unlikely that need fulfillment with one partner has a meaningful effect on satisfaction with another partner. As well, need

fulfillment with one partner was unrelated to commitment to another partner.

The pattern of associations among need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment differed to some extent across relationship needs. In contrast to findings for overall need fulfillment, there was only one independent association between need fulfillment with one partner and relationship satisfaction or commitment with the other partner at the level of the individual needs. There were, however, some significant interactions between SO and OSO need fulfillment for individual needs in predicting relationship satisfaction and commitment. Follow-up analyses indicated that when need fulfillment (on some needs) was higher in one relationship, need fulfillment in another relationship had an additive or enhancing effect on relationship satisfaction or commitment in the first relationship. Thus, if individuals feel that certain needs are met in one relationship, having another partner meet those same needs may have an enhancing effect on both relationships. In contrast, when need fulfillment was lower in one relationship, need fulfillment in another relationship had a contrast or detracting effect on relationship satisfaction or commitment in the first relationship. Thus, a second intimate relationship may only be threatening to another relationship if individuals feel that the latter relationship is not fulfilling their needs in some respects. However, this interaction pattern did not hold across all need subscales, and the interactions accounted for only a small proportion of variance in SO and OSO satisfaction. Therefore, as with the findings for overall need fulfillment, these effects are too small to be of practical significance.

Overall, these results suggest that polyamorous individuals' relationships with one partner tend to operate relatively independently of their relationships with another partner. Thus, having multiple partners in itself does not appear to have a strong positive or negative effect on dyadic relationships. The investment model (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) posits that individuals will be less committed to a relationship to the extent that attractive alternatives are available. Contrary to the investment model, results from this study suggest that individuals are able to maintain commitment to their relationship partners despite the presence of attractive alternatives. In a polyamorous context, the investment model may be more relevant to explain why people become polyamorous (i.e., because it is an attractive alternative compared to having one partner or no partners) rather than to explain their commitment to one partner over another. In addition, the investment model suggests that high need fulfillment with one partner should increase individuals' comparison level or expectations for romantic relationships, potentially leading to lowered satisfaction with additional partners who fail to meet this standard. However, there was limited evidence in this study that high need fulfillment with

one partner was associated with markedly lower satisfaction with another partner. Future research should further examine polyamory from an investment model perspective, perhaps by including individuals' expectations about relationships compared to their actual relational experiences.

This study had several strengths. First, it adds a psychological examination of polyamorous relationships to the emerging body of research on polyamory by examining need fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. We also compared individuals' experiences across two concurrent romantic relationships, and examined how need fulfillment with one partner was related to satisfaction and commitment with another partner. This is also the first large-scale study to provide information about relationships characteristic of the polyamorous community. The participants in this study composed a large sample of polyamorous individuals in multiple communities in several countries. Large samples are important when conducting research with marginalized groups to help establish realistic norms for the community. In addition, our use of quantitative methods adds a different perspective to the existing qualitative research on polyamory by assessing broad patterns of polyamorous experiences rather than the specific experiences of a few individuals.

This study has implications for the polyamorous community. These results may help to destigmatize polyamory because they suggest that individuals can have fulfilling, satisfying, and committed relationships with multiple partners without those relationships having a notable negative influence on one another. In addition, we did not find evidence to support a compensation model. This finding may suggest that, contrary to stereotypes about polyamory, people do not become polyamorous because of low need fulfillment with their primary partners. Rather, participants were moderately more fulfilled with their more primary partners on several attachment-related needs, although generally need fulfillment was high across both partners.

These results also have implications for the clinical treatment of polyamorous relationships. Some polyamorous individuals believe that clinicians attribute their relationship problems to polyamory, rather than to dynamics specific to the dyad (Weitzman, 2006). Our findings suggest that polyamorous individuals' multiple relationships are largely independent of one another, which implies that clinicians working with polyamorous couples should focus their interventions on problematic interactions within the dyad, rather than working toward a monogamous relationship structure. However, in some cases, it may be helpful to include other or all partners in assessment or therapy and to treat the multiple relationships as a system rather than focusing on one dyad. Such treatment choices should be dictated by the nature of the problems and the involvement of other partners.

Individuals in this sample reported high levels of relationship satisfaction and need fulfillment in both of their relationships. Moreover, having needs met with one partner was minimally associated with relationship satisfaction and unassociated with commitment with another partner. Previous literature indicates that sexually open couples can and do maintain fulfilling and committed nonmonogamous relationships (e.g., Bergstrand & Williams, 2000; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Rubin & Adams, 1986). This study confirms that individuals can also have simultaneous fulfilling, committed attachments to multiple romantic partners.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

A serious limitation of this study is the focus on only one individual's perspective in a polyamorous relationship. It is possible that the participants and their partners experience their relationships quite differently. For example, polyamorous individuals who have only one partner but desire more partners may feel dissatisfied or jealous if their partners are romantically involved with other people. In contrast, individuals with high needs for autonomy may feel relieved by their partners' romantic involvement with others. Although romantic partners' levels of relationship satisfaction are typically positively correlated (e.g., Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988), the strength of this association may differ in a polyamorous context. Thus, future research should include the perspectives of multiple romantic partners in a polyamorous network and should assess potential individual and situational moderators of processes in polyamorous relationships.

An additional limitation is that we assessed only individuals' relationships with two romantic partners. As noted in the results, about one-third of our sample reported that they were in relationships with more than two partners. Future research could address how need fulfillment with more than two partners may be related to satisfaction and commitment within each relationship. It would also be valuable to consider polyamorous relationships from a systemic perspective, considering the interrelations of all individuals in a polyamorous network, and the broader social system (including children and extended family members) in which polyamorous relationships are embedded.

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to all polyamorous individuals. Given that the polyamorous community emerged on the Internet (Barker, 2005) and a large sample was required to address the research questions, the online survey method seemed appropriate. However, Sheff and Hammers (2011) have argued that use of the Internet to recruit polyamorous samples may underrepresent the experiences of racial minorities or those with low socioeconomic status. In addition,

some individuals in polyamorous relationships may not identify with polyamory or online polyamory communities and thus would be unlikely to receive the link to the survey. As well, our findings do not represent the experiences of polyamorous individuals who are not currently in relationships or who have only one romantic partner. Finally, the findings reflect general patterns across the large sample of participants reporting on two concurrent relationships. Though, on average, these relationships were largely independent (with some limited evidence of contrast effects), this pattern of findings inevitably obscures the variability in participants' relational experiences.

This study is limited by an exclusive reliance on self-report measures of all key constructs. Participants may have felt obligated to represent polyamory positively and may thus have inflated their self-reported need fulfillment, satisfaction, and commitment with each partner. However, polyamorous individuals are likely subject to the same idealization of romantic relationships that are common in monogamous relationships. In addition, the observed mean scores on the relationship satisfaction measure (RAS) are comparable with monogamous individuals' scores (Hendrick, 1988). Participants may also have been motivated to be consistent in their responses about each partner and thus may have rated each partner similarly throughout the survey. However, this survey was deliberately constructed to create contrast between the partners, and there were significant differences between the two relationships assessed on commitment, satisfaction, and fulfillment of some needs. In addition, although SO and OSO scores on all measures were positively correlated, these correlations were low to moderate in strength, indicating considerable variability in how individuals' perceived their experiences with their two partners.

This study is a first step in understanding romantic relationships with multiple partners. In particular, these findings provide some insight into how individuals can meet their relationship needs with multiple partners and how need fulfillment in two relationships may relate to relational satisfaction and commitment. Continued research on relationship processes in polyamorous relationships can help to legitimize and normalize polyamory, and to further our understanding of nonmonogamous relationship configurations. In particular, longitudinal studies could help clarify whether need fulfillment is causally contributing to outcomes in polyamorous relationships and, more generally, how polyamorous relationships develop over time. There is also a pressing need for research involving all partners in a polyamorous relationship. This study provides initial evidence that polyamory may be a viable and fulfilling alternative way of conducting intimate relationships.

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