Motivations for Engaging in Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships in North America: McClelland's Human Motivation Theory

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Abstract—Exploring and engaging in intimate, sexual, and romantic relationships carries the opportunity of personal growth, pleasure, connection, and enhancement of well-being. As more and more North Americans begin to consider and engage in romantic and sexual orientations outside of monogamy, the question of their motivations arises. We utilize McClelland's human motivation theory to investigate the intersections of motivational attributes for North Americans engaging in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. The need for achievement, power, and affiliation all influence and interact with each other within CNM relationships. The interplay of these motivations is vital for CNM relational structures to operate and effectively navigate conflict. Further studies should explore these motivational components within the individuals who practice CNM and examining the differences in various CNM relational structures.

Keywords—Consensual non-monogamy, motivations for non-monogamy, McClelland Motivation theory, CNM.

I. INTRODUCTION

EXPLORING and engaging in intimate, romantic, and sexual relationships can offer fulfillment on multiple interpersonal levels, as well as rejuvenate wellbeing. All of this makes sense when a lot of what comes down to a satisfying human experience is based within the connection that we have to others. So, it is no wonder that people want to explore this connection with others beyond the realm of what has been legally, culturally, and socially prescribed for relationships from generations. The conventional understanding of what a successful or satisfying romantic partnership positions is that the individual is sexually and romantically monogamous with another, and that this relationship is not only deemed as normal behavior, but the only way in which a sexual and romantic relationship can occur [1]-[3]. Folks are expanding their understanding and conception of these relational norms and embracing the possibility of a myriad of sexual, romantic, and intimate connections with multiple individuals through what is known as [consensual] non-monogamy. Little is known about the motivations in which those engaging in non-monogamous structures encounter, but this paper will be exploring David McClelland's human motivation theory for those engaging in non-monogamous relationships. We will begin with a discussion about what non-monogamy and human motivation theory entails. Then, we investigate the three forms of motivation under this theory, achievement, power, affiliation, and explore how these concepts intersect with research on why folks engage in non-monogamous relationships.

II. CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGAMY

Through various population wide, North American consensus questionnaires of nationally representative samples, researchers have viewed an ongoing increase in those engaging and identifying themselves as situated in CNM relationships. In Canada, one in five people report that they have been in an 'open relationship' at some point in their life, while 2.4% of the population is currently engaged in an 'open relationship', and these percentages continue to slowly rise year after year [5]. CNM relationships can vary from one relational structure to the next, with fluctuating degrees of intimacy, and sexual connections. Folks involved with non-monogamy often use terms like consensual non-monogamy, poly/polyam, open relationships, swingers, and partnered and solo polyamory have all been thrown into the mix to define and identify their structure. These relationship structures can be short-term, long-term, sexual, or not, there could be multiple romantic figures, or none, the base line of all these structures is mutually agreed upon consent [6]. Non-monogamous marriages are currently illegal throughout North America, but there has been shifts in the legal systems to include protections for those who are engaged in this structure not yet recognized by law [7]. For the remainder of this paper, we will simply be referring to the term, consensual non-monogamy (CNM), to describe the myriad of structures of sexual, romantic, and intimate connections, outside of monogamy.

Stigma and negative depictions of CNM relationships being unstable, and thus resulting in relational distress, remain apparent in multiple levels of our legal systems, media, Christian religious affiliations, and many more [8]. As a result of the negative depictions and stigma, many of the assumptions for the reasoning and the motivations of CNM folks engaging in this structure have been assumed to arise from a promiscuous sexual lifestyle that utilizes potentially dangerous, non-monogamous sexual activities to cope with their mental instability [9]. Even with these harsh misconceptions, those engaged in a CNM relationship structure frequently report high levels of relational well-being [10]. Understanding that CNM structures offer similar if not more satisfaction in relational

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well-being, much of the research for the motivational influences for engaging in a relationship, tend to reside within heterosexual, and monogamist couplings [11]. Therefore, it is important to theoretically compile a composition of motivational attributes that contribute to this relational wellbeing.

III. DAVID MCCLELLAND'S HUMAN MOTIVATION THEORY

Psychologist David McClelland proposed a theory in which the needs of individuals are identified over time and further shaped and molded by the experiences of that person's life. Human motivation theory holds many other titles such as, Three Need Theory, Learned Theory, Theory of Needs, and Acquired Needs Theory, but for clarity and the purpose of this paper we will utilize the Human Motivation Theory (HMT). McClelland in his 1961 book [12], *The Achieving Society*, felt the need to move away from the learned behavior approach, and shift towards human behavior theories of motivation based on their knowledge of psychoanalytic thinking and investigational experiments of animal motivation. The early 1940's motivational theory of human behavior was largely focused on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, that identified the basic proponents that guided human motivation, that being psychological, safety, belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization [14]. Instead of operating solely from a hierarchical organization, which has many critiques [15], McClelland's work highlighted the interplay of our cultural environment, and the experiences within it, shaping and shifting our internal processes, and how those internal processes shift through time as an extension to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. An individual's motivation and effectiveness in obtaining one's goals is driven by three main predictors, a need for Achievement, Power, and Affiliation [12]. McClelland [12] situates that people aspire for these drivers of motivation, and that they occur regardless of one's culture, age, and gender because the motivations behind these drivers shift to react with the environment.

Motivation researchers seek to understand the force that moves people to act, make a commitment, and achieve their goals through this action [13]. There has been little research examining individuals' motivation for the need to engage in, and commit to CNM practices, and relationships. With that being said, there have been examples of lived experiences in literature that indicates a play of internal, and external motivational factors that align with the achievement, power, and affiliation drives above. The remainder of this paper will examine these drives in relation to CNM relationships, with a focus of examples being drawn from research, *The Ethical Slut, third edition* [4], as well as Tristan Taormino's book *Opening Up* [6].

A. The Need for Achievement

The first motivation of McClelland's work that we will investigate is the need for achievement [12]. The need for achievement indicates that there is a want to reach success in various aspects of one's life, and that successfully overcoming obstacles is part of what fuels this drive. According to

McClelland, those who resonate most closely with the achievement drive will aim to avoid a low-reward, and low-risk circumstances, while simultaneously working to avoid circumstances with high-risk of failure. The achievement drive thrives on accomplishment-based tasks and does not value approval for acknowledgements about their progress, but to simply complete the set goals in an environment that is neither too low of a risk or too high of a risk [12].

This achievement motivation may bring up conflicting emotions as we still are within a traditional mono-normative culture that prioritizes long term monogamous marriages as the indicator of success and achievement. Throughout the book, *The Ethical Slut* [4], the authors dismantle many myths and misconceptions about the mono-normative culture and its perceptions of CMN. The achievement within CNM spaces is not to simply get married and have a long term committed relationship, but rather the achievement is within the visibility and satisfaction of the relationship itself. Cultural beliefs about relationships are embedded within literature, law, and social systems, and the achievement to move beyond a starvation-based economy is a progressive approach to dismantling those prescribed limitations of intimacy, sexual activity, and relationships [4]. Persons involved in CNM relationships reflect and acknowledge that one human simply cannot meet every single need of another, as Taormino [6] alludes to in her book that instead of suppressing our needs to conform to the relational needs, CNM seeks to achieve their needs being met from a variety of sources. In fact, recent research from Wood et al. [16] identifies that being in a CNM relationship provided the opportunity and ability to manage the every-day demands of work and family life, in order to fully to participate in more meaningful relationships. Engaging in a CNM relationship structure requires an individual to develop their communication and relationship skills that not only meets their needs, but also reflects the needs of the relationship. And, in order to do so, one must be able to not only compartmentalize the goals of discussions and needs assessments, but also effectively navigate any sort of conflict that may arise [6]. This conflict navigation ability brings us into our next motivation, power.

B. The Need for Power

The second motivation of McClelland's work is the desire for power [12]. The demand for power is rooted in agreement and compliance, with limited need for recognition and approval. According to McClelland [12], there can be harmful forms of power, such as those seeking personal power, which resides within the power over people, to control them and cause others to behave in a manner that is conducive to their own personal needs, not for the betterment of a group. There can also be positive forms of personal power, especially when it comes to asserting ones needs in a space that is not listening. On the flip side, there is power from institutional or social positions whose power goals reside in the ability to assemble and propel an organization to meet said goals that benefit the collective unit. There can also be a harmful aspect to social and institutional powers, when those in positions of privilege and power have their needs taken into consideration, and prioritized, before

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other identities. Within both the harmful and beneficial needs for power is the ability to influence and guide groups of people to a successful outcome [12].

It is inevitable that conflict will arise within any relationship structure, but it could be said that there is more opportunity for conflict to arise in a CNM relational structure due to the balancing act of more emotions, physical and sexual desires, and work schedules involved in the relationship(s). The power motivation embraces conflict in order to meet a group's goal, and it is vital that within a CNM relationship, there is the ability to recognize and communicate your emotions, wants, needs, and or desires. Having this power motivation allows you to affirm your own personal needs, while taking into consideration the needs of other people. Hardy & Easton [4] speak to the personal forms of harmful power, as well as the institutional or social power motivations throughout their chapter on jealousy. Those involved in CNM relationships must realize that consent is integral to a successful relationship [4], and that there is a fine line between asserting what your needs are, while not influencing others to shift their needs to solely meet yours while excluding theirs. Taormino [6] also speaks to this delicate balancing act when describing various CNM relationships and how the folks involved had to not limit their own imaginations and possibilities because their partner wanted them to. The power motivation in CNM must also come from a creative space of customizing and restructuring your relationship to involve everyone's influence in the decision-making process, because the reality is, we still live in a culture that prioritizes and role models monogamous relationships, within a patriarchal culture, insinuating that women needs are less than that of a man's needs. This adventure in navigating conflict and creating a harmonious group moves us into the next motivation of affiliation.

C. The Need for Affiliation

The third motivational driver in McClelland's theory is the need for affiliation [12]. This motivational driver has its roots in the need to create, and sustain social and interpersonal connections with others, and thrive working in groups or collaboration spaces. For this drive, comfort and consistency is the key areas of focus, to not move into high-risk situations that could insight conflict and negatively impact group dynamics. The power of affiliation prides oneself to create a space where people feel emotionally supported with positive reinforcements, and ultimately valued without the threat of competitiveness and tension [12].

With one of the main premises of CNM being rooted in having multiple connections in a variety of structures, it should be clear to see that group cohesion, in whatever relational structure you are a part of, is vital to the satisfaction of those relationships. While the affiliation motivation tends to lean away from any conflict, the basis of a satisfied relationship is one in which everyone feels comfortable, listen to, and acknowledged as a vital link in the relational chain. Of course, in any group setting conflict is going to arise, that's where the power motivation comes into play, but there needs to be a motivational factor of group cohesion and overall satisfaction

in order to make a relational structure work for those involved. Wood et al. [16] note that CNM, "afforded [the participants] the ability to develop and maintain friendships, build community, and create their own families… that reflected their ethics and allowed for relational integrity," (p.1261). These facets of relationality uphold the motivational components of affiliation due to the myriad of relationships and validation that are felt within those relationships. Communication, honesty, boundaries, faithfulness, and knowing and owning your truth are all important components of what make a successful affiliation in a CNM relationship, many of these are important indicators of what makes an affiliation successful [4]. Of course, success can hold different meanings, as we saw in the achievement motivational section, as the main indicator of success in the current marriage law, which is not something that is fathomable in CNM spaces. Another aspect that is powerful within CNM relationships is the ability to connect with other like-minded folks in creating a sense of community within the larger systems of mono normativity. Taormino [6] asserts that finding likeminded people is not just important for the coming out process, but also to feel less isolated and alone, in a space where you can receive validation and support without having to justify your relationship in the first place (p.239). With this, it is clear to see that the affiliation motivation is very much apparent in CNM relationships, beyond the relationship itself and into community.

IV. CONCLUSION

Human motivations simply do not operate within a single facet, but rather interact with a variety of motivations from internal and external processes. Due to there being little known about the motivations in which why folks engage in CNM relationships, it is important to explore the different theoretical components of motivation. David McClelland's HMT positioned achievement, power, and affiliation as the main drivers of our actions. Each of these motivations contributes to the next when discussing CNM relationships, in such that, someone being able to identify and live out their CNM identity is an achievement-based motivation but recognizing that identity and needs within a relational structure comes from a power-based motivation. As we are in relational structures, the need for affiliation becomes apparent when maintaining a level of satisfaction that upholds everyone's needs. This interplay of motivation is vital for CNM structures because one cannot simply avoid conflict, and expect effortless group cohesion, or relational identity in a culture that has yet to fully recognize it as a valid and lawful form of connection.

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