COMENIUS UNIVERSITY IN BRATISLAVA

FACULTY OF MATHEMATICS, PHYSICS AND INFORMATICS

LIVING WITH AND THROUGH JEALOUSY: RESEARCH ON JEALOUSY AMONG NON-MONOGAMOUS PEOPLE IN VIENNA

MASTER THESIS

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MASTER THESIS

Study Programme: Cognitive Science

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Department: Department of Applied Informatics

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Bratislava, 2025

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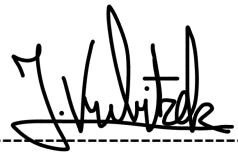
Declaration

I declare on my honour that the entire master thesis on the topic "Living with and through jealousy: research among non-monogamous people in Vienna", including all its appendices and figures, I have developed independently, using the literature listed in the attached list and artificial intelligence tools. I declare that I have used the AI tools in accordance with the relevant legislation, academic rights and freedoms, ethical and moral principles, while maintaining academic integrity, and that their use is appropriately indicated in the thesis.



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for challenging me and giving me the opportunity to exceed myself.

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and to stay curious and open to the richness of human experience.

Abstract

Jealousy has traditionally been framed as a threat to fidelity and a problem in relationships, something to be avoided, particularly in monogamous contexts. In non-monogamous relationships, however, jealousy is often acknowledged, expected, and actively addressed. This thesis explores how individuals who practise non-monogamy experience and navigate jealousy. Ten adults practising different variations of non-monogamous relationships living in Vienna were interviewed about their experiences of jealousy, emotional regulation, and relational dynamics. The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, within a qualitative, constructivist framework. The findings illustrate how non-monogamous individuals' engagement with themselves and their partner(s) is characterised by the struggle to reshape the learned role of jealousy in their lives, while balancing needs for personal agency and emotional security. This study contributes to a more situated and relational understanding of jealousy and offers insight into how individuals actively reshape emotional norms through reflection, communication, and intentional practice, highlighting the value of interdisciplinary, qualitative approaches to the study of emotions.

Keywords: jealousy, consensual non-monogamy, CNM, emotions, cognitive science

Abstrakt

Žiarlivosť bola tradične vnímaná ako ohrozenie vernosti a problém vo vzťahoch, niečo, čomu je potrebné sa vyhnúť, najmä v monogamných vzťahoch. V nemonogamných vzťahoch je však žiarlivosť často akceptovaná, očakávaná a aktívne riešená. Táto práca skúma, ako jednotlivci, ktorí praktizujú nemonogamiu, prežívajú a vyrovnávajú sa so žiarlivosťou. Urobili sme interview s desiatimi dospelými ľuďmi žijúcimi vo Viedni, ktorí praktizujú rôzne formy nemonogamných vzťahov, pričom témou boli ich skúsenosti so žiarlivosťou, reguláciou emócií a dynamikou vzťahov. Rozhovory boli analyzované pomocou reflexívnej tematickej analýzy v kvalitatívnom, konštruktivistický rámci. Zistenia ilustrujú, ako je vzťah nemonogamných jednotlivcov k sebe samým a k svojim partnerom charakterizovaný snahou preformulovať naučenú úlohu žiarlivosti v ich životoch a zároveň vyvážiť potreby osobnej autonómie a emocionálnej istoty. Táto štúdia prispieva k situovanejšiemu a vzťahovému chápaniu žiarlivosti a ponúka pohľad na to, ako jednotlivci aktívne preformulujú emocionálne normy prostredníctvom reflexie, komunikácie a zámernej praxe, čím zdôrazňuje hodnotu interdisciplinárnych kvalitatívnych prístupov k štúdiu emócií.

Kľúčové slová: žiarlivosť, konsenzuálna nemonogamia, CNM, emócie, kognití

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Názov: Living with and through jealousy: research on jealousy among non-monogamous people in Vienna

Anotácia: The literature on non-monogamy has persisted mostly from findings from relationship counselling, which, is helpful for the community, but lacking in scientific depth, and while there is more scientific research emerging now, there are still many gaps to fill. Jealousy, on the other hand, is one of the more complex emotions, while still being one of the less studied emotions.

Cieľ: 1. Perform semi-structured interviews analyzed with reflexive thematic analysis, with focus on phenomenological dimensions of the individual's lived experience and include cognitive appraisal theory.
2. Reflect on obtained findings, derive conclusions.

Literatúra:
Anderson, J. R. et al. (2025) Countering the Monogamy-Superiority Myth: A Meta-Analysis of the Differences in Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Satisfaction as a Function of Relationship Orientation. The Journal of Sex Research, pp. 1–13
Watstein, T. (2022) Therapeutic Considerations for the Polycule: A Qualitative Exploration of Consensual Non-Monogamy in Couples Treatment: Exploration of Consensual Non-Monogamy in Couples Treatment. CUNY Academic Works.
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Názov: Living with and through jealousy: research on jealousy among non-monogamous people in Vienna
Život so žiarlivosťou a jej prekonanie: výskum žiarlivosti medzi nemonogamnými ľuďmi vo Viedni

Anotácia: Literatúra o nemonogamii pretrváva prevažne na základe zistení z partnerského poradenstva, ktoré je síce pre komunitu užitočné, ale chýba mu vedecká hĺbka. Hoci sa v súčasnosti objavuje viac vedeckých výskumov, stále existuje veľa medzier, ktoré treba vyplniť. Žiarlivosť je na druhej strane jednou z komplexnejších emócií, pričom stále patrí medzi menej študované emócie.

Cieľ: 1. Vykonajte pološtruktúrované rozhovory analyzované reflexívnou tematickou analýzou so zameraním na fenomenologické dimenzie životnej skúsenosti jednotlivca a zahrňte teóriu kognitívneho hodnotenia.
2. Reflektujte na získané zistenia, vyvoďte závery.

Literatúra: Anderson, J. R. et al. (2025) Countering the Monogamy-Superiority Myth: A Meta-Analysis of the Differences in Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Satisfaction as a Function of Relationship Orientation. The Journal of Sex Research, pp. 1–13
Watstein, T. (2022) Therapeutic Considerations for the Polycule: A Qualitative Exploration of Consensual Non-Monogamy in Couples Treatment: Exploration of Consensual Non-Monogamy in Couples Treatment. CUNY Acad. Works.
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vedúci práce

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Introduction

Although jealousy has been an integral part of social connections and relationships throughout human history, the scientific study of jealousy is a comparatively recent development. Theories of emotion in general only began to be developed in more detail at the start of the 20th century, and jealousy was not at the forefront of these investigations. It was not until the 1980s that more in-depth scientific perspectives on jealousy emerged, and the Handbook of Jealousy was published in 2005. Since then, the topic has gained increasing attention and sparked discussions within psychological and anthropological communities.

However, there are still some difficulties in studying jealousy that seem hard to overcome. In monogamous relationships, situations that cause jealousy are usually seen as a threat to the relationship itself (e.g. infidelity), leading to an avoidant approach to jealousy in general and making it difficult to study. In non-monogamous contexts, however, these same situations, although they may also cause jealousy, do not necessarily indicate the end of the relationship nor are they necessarily avoided. Instead, non-monogamous individuals tend to expect to experience jealousy as part of their relationships and try to work with it rather than against it. This thesis therefore explores how jealousy is experienced and managed in the context of non-monogamy.

Ten individuals practising non-monogamy in Vienna were interviewed. The interviews focused on their subjective experiences and the role of jealousy in their relationships. Qualitative research is the most accurate way to capture the broad, individualised nature of this data, as it investigates why they willingly confront this unpleasant emotion rather than turning away.

This thesis aims to deepen understanding of the experience of jealousy and how individuals in non-monogamous relationships navigate and make sense of it. In doing so, insights into whether and how this emotion can be 'worked through' will contribute to the growing body of research on jealousy and non-monogamy, supporting the move towards more interdisciplinary approaches to scientific research.

1. Jealousy - situating a feeling into multidisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity, a core principle of cognitive science, forms the foundation of this thesis. The research topic, jealousy, is therefore, first situated within the wider context of different perspectives, with the guiding question: what is already known about this common yet complex emotion? In this first section, jealousy is defined and explored through a range of scientific lenses, laying the groundwork for later analysis. By drawing on existing research across multiple disciplines, the thesis builds a solid foundation for the interpretations and discussions that follow.

1.1 Defining Jealousy

Jealousy can occur in a variety of social contexts, including friendships, siblings and professional settings. However, within this research focuses on romantic and sexual jealousy within partnerships in a Western cultural context.

Formal definition and logical deduction

To reduce linguistic confusion as much as possible when talking about jealousy, the formal conditions of a jealousy evoking scenario will be illustrated first. Jealousy, while mostly referred to as a single emotion, presents itself as a more complex emotional phenomenon, which can include emotions like distress, fear, anger, and disgust. In the scientific literature numerous different definitions of jealousy were formulated, which focused on various aspects of the phenomenon. Some, that describe the emotion quite accurately include:

> the emergence of human jealousy is the existence of an established social bond that is threatened by the perceived intervention of a third party
> (Legerstee & Hart, 2010, p.102)

> Romantic jealousy may be defined as a complex of thoughts, feelings, and actions that follow threats to self-esteem and/or threats to the existence or quality of the relationship when those threats are generated by the perception of a real or potential romantic attraction between one's partner and a (perhaps imaginary) rival. (Legerstee & Hart, 2010, p.296)

In contrast to other emotional phenomena, jealousy can be understood as a deeply relational emotion, it involves at least 3 people. Following this, the basic logical structure of a jealousy triggering situation includes 4 conditions and presents as follows:

(I) There need to be 3 parties involved (A,B,C)
(II) of which 2 (A & B) have some kind of established relationship
(III) The third party (C) shows some kind of interest in A and/or A in C
(IV) B perceives C as a threat to their relationship

To get a better understanding of jealousy the four conditions will be discussed hereafter.

The first condition, stating that there need to be 3 parties involved for jealousy to occur, clarifies that three individual people need to be consciously or unconsciously involved in the situation. The jealous party is the only one, who needs to be aware of the constellation, whereas the other two can cause the third one to feel jealous with or without their knowledge. The second condition describes the relationship of A and B. This relationship can be romantic and/or sexual, it can be a specific friendship, they can be siblings or part of the same family even. A common constellation, where jealousy occurs is the arrival of a new child in a family, of which the older sibling feels threatened by the attention and relationship to a caregiver. Important here is only that the definition of this relationship, in the context of jealousy, is defined by the jealous party. For example:

> Lisa is in elementary school and thinks of Hannah as her best friend.
> Hannah however starts playing with a new classmate more often,
> Kathi, which causes Lisa to get jealous.

Lisa's jealousy is partly caused, because she prioritized the friendship with Hannah more than Hannah did, they did not invest the same level of attention into it.

The third condition concerns the shown interest of C in A. This can include behaviour, gestures and words and can vary depending on the kind of relationship A and C have at this point and where (if even) C wishes to change the relationship with the behaviour. Examples can range from active flirting with a future romantic relationship in mind to lending a classmate a pencil to simply being nice. As long as constellations and/or behavior of C an/or A are consciously or unconsciously evaluated as threatening to B, jealousy can be triggered.

Differences to Envy

Jealousy and Envy seem so similar that they are sometimes used interchangeably. Perhaps, because they both involve a longing for an object of desire, that another person seems to 'own', and can impact the involved social dynamics negatively (Dai *et al.,* 2024) However, there are a few key differences, which will now be briefly explained.

Firstly, and most importantly, the object of envy can be non-human and does not have to be physical; one can be envious of a talent or skill in the same way as one can be envious of a luxury item or collector's item. In contrast, jealousy always concerns another person or the relationship with another person. Another crucial difference between envy and jealousy is that the object of longing is not something that has already been 'possessed', but rather something that someone else 'owns'. Or in concrete terms:

I am *envious* of your relationship with Sarah
[because there are qualities in this relationship, I desire]

I am *envious* of your D&D[1] group
[because there are qualities in this activity, I desire]

e.g. *"You have something that I want and don't have, give it to me!"*

[1] Dungeons & Dragons: a pen & paper fantasy game

vs.

I am *jealous,* of your relationship with Sarah
[because I see qualities in this relationship, that I thought were exclusive to my relationship with her]

e.g. *"You have something that I feel like is mine, give it back!"*

This sense of entitlement is fundamental to jealousy and stems from the unique bond between the individuals involved. This feeling can arise from any kind of interaction, depending on how the person experiencing the longing evaluates it. This situation can also occur with physical objects, but jealousy only arises in response to the perceived "loss" of a person, which highlights the social nature of the phenomenon.

1.2. Psychological and Developmental Lenses

To understand how jealousy is learned and taught this section outlines jealousy during the development of emotions in childhood and mentions first encounters with the feeling.

Development of Jealousy in Childhood

In the handbook of emotions jealousy is described as part of the "self-conscious exposed emotions", which a child develops in the second half of their second year of life. (Barrett *et al,* 2016, p.283) From a developmental standpoint a child needs to first acquire a sense of self-awareness, which is observable as self-referring behaviour (e.g., pointing at one-self). They also need to have an understanding of "other", separate entities with their own behaviour, and finally, be able to feel some kind of entitlement of the others' attention or love, to get jealous. Before development of these understandings behaviour similar to jealous behaviour can be shown, but is directed more towards the loss of attention and the connected positive feelings, for example when caretakers stop with soothing behaviour (Legerstee & Hart, 2010). Additionally, to study emotions beyond the methodical options of behaviourist approaches, language and self-awareness is needed to a certain degree.

“Since during much of the first 3 years the language of the child is quite limited, the study of emotional experience is difficult” (Barrett *et al,* 2016, p.281).

So, consequently, for a child to experience jealousy, they need to successfully form an attachment first. The first bond children make is with their primary caregiver (Sullivan, 2011). During their first years of life, and arguably until the children are grown up and financially independent, their attachment to their caregiver is also their most important tool for survival.

Most children are confronted with their first threat to this bond, and therefore with jealousy, in context with siblings, fighting for the attention of their caregivers. The resulting emotional and behavioral complex is described as sibling rivalry and grounds for much research. For example, it has been found that firstborns and only-borns display lower levels of jealousy than later-borns, which suggest that experiencing exclusive love from their caregivers is a supporting factor for lower jealousy tendencies (Buunk, 1997). How well caregivers handle this tension and if they are successful in reassuring their children strongly contributes to their cognitive and emotional development (Buunk, 1997).

Attachment Theory

The development of attachment in early childhood has been a central focus of psychological research since the 1960s, most notably through the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. (Ainsworth *et al*, 1978, Bowlby, 1969, Bowlby 1973) Together, they laid the foundation for attachment theory, identifying the key conditions for secure attachment as well as three distinct patterns of insecure attachment. As mentioned above children need to form attachment bonds with their caretakers to survive. How their attachment system develops depends on the rate of security and reliability the caretaker displays in the first two years of life, where the attachment system develops. Secure attachment, meaning: the child can be sure that alarming the caretaker of a perceived threat will result in removal of the threat and reassuring behaviour (Ainsworth *et al*, 1978). If during that period, the childs’ ‘bids for security” are not met at least 60–70% of the time, they develop insecure attachment styles.

Insecure attachment results often in either overactivation (anxious style) or underactivation (avoidant style) of the attachment system. Anxiously attached children tend to panic when distressed, resulting in difficulties being soothed, while avoidantly attached children learn not to signal distress, having internalized that help won't come. A third category, disorganized attachment, develops when the caregiver is simultaneously a source of comfort and fear, often due to inconsistent or frightening behavior stemming from issues such as anger, mental illness, or addiction(Main, 1986). These early attachment patterns shape children's ability to form and maintain close relationships, as they create internal beliefs about their self-worth, the nature of relationships and availability of others (Bowlby, 1973). This influences how individuals navigate intimacy, seek support, and experience jealousy in adulthood.

As adults, attachment bonds are usually not necessary for survival. However, close attachment bonds can still be formed, and still provide a base source for emotional regulation and social connection. Adults with secure attachment generally exhibit healthy levels of jealousy, as they have learned that emotional regulation is achievable. They are able to seek support from partners, and recover well from conflict. (Feeney & Noller, 1996)

Dismissively (formerly avoidant) attached adults value independence and struggle to form close relationships, as they often appear emotionally distant. While not overtly jealous, they are highly sensitive to rejection when emotionally invested. In contrast, preoccupied (formerly anxiously attached) adults display their intensified need for reassurance through controlling or hypervigilant behavior, resulting in higher levels of anxious jealousy. (Feeney & Noller, 1996) The fearful-avoidant (formerly disorganized) adults still struggle in adulthood, having internalized both priorly mentioned emotional mechanisms, they simultaneously crave and fear closeness. This leads to high jealousy and conflicting behavior, like demanding space one day and love-bombing the other. (Feeney & Noller, 1996)

Insecure attachment styles are strongly associated with heightened jealousy and rejection sensitivity, affecting all areas of social contact, even reflected on an individual’s attitude

towards and behaviour on their phone (Van Ouytsel *et al.,* 2019). For example, Facebook-related jealousy increases with higher attachment anxiety and lower avoidance(Hira & Bogal, 2022). Phubbing (phone snubbing) has also been shown to decrease relationship satisfaction, particularly among anxiously attached individuals. (David *et al.,* 2021). In general, anxiously attached adults are more likely to experience distrust, jealousy, intrusive behavior (e.g.checking phones), and psychological reactivity during stress and conflict in relationships (Rodriguez, 2015; Van Ouytsel *et al.,* 2019).

Different interventions can help individuals struggling with insecure attachment styles and resulting relational problems. In therapeutic approaches there are specific Attachment-focused (AF) interventions, like Attachment-based therapy, AF Group Intervention and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which continuously show positive results in the patients interpersonal relationships, both family and romantic, and less anxiety and more secure attachment patterns. (Kilmann *et al.,* 1999)

Additionally, there has been a rise in research on intranasal Oxytocin as an intervention to help with symptoms in Schizophrenia, OCD and other conditions. Oxytocin has been tested for jealousy related problems and shown to improve attachment in existing pair-bonds resulting in greater attraction to partners, while reducing curiosity of provocative strangers, which is associated with enhanced activation in the striatum and ventral tegmentum regions of the reward system. (Scheele *et al.,* 2012; Bernaerts *et al.,* 2017)

Attachment theory not only explains needs behind some relational problems, but can also be understood as a base for jealousy types and behaviour patterns. Distinguishing between types of jealousy provides a more nuanced understanding of how this emotion affects romantic relationships.

Types of Jealousy

Within the research surrounding jealousy several attempts have been made to distinguish between different types and levels of jealousy. For the setting of this thesis a distinction will only be made between reactive jealousy and anxious jealousy. (Barelds &

Barelds-Dijkst, 2007) The former describes the feeling, which occurs when a triggering scenario happens (or is consciously imagined), while the latter describes the feeling, which occurs in expectation of the triggering scenario, without it now (or never) happening. Anxious jealousy can become pathological under certain circumstances. (Legerstee & Hart, 2010, Dolan & Bishay, 1996)

In societies that are primarily monogamous, jealousy is often seen as a sign of love. It is a sign that a person cares 'enough' about their partner, the relationship, or its stability to feel jealous and activate their protective mechanisms. (Fernandez et al., 2023) When looking at the two types of jealousy, it has been found that reactive jealousy actually positively correlates with relationship satisfaction (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkst, 2007, p, 183) and, therefore confirms this popular opinion.

In contrast people who are anxiously jealous tend to be in less satisfying relationships, If the former causes the latter or vice versa has not been found yet. The correlation of jealousy type and relationship satisfaction even affects the partner: “Apparently, jealousy is not only triggered by jealousy-evoking situations, such as a mate kissing or flirting with someone else, but also by a mate’s inclination to express jealousy” (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkst, 2007, p. 184).

Different, often-used questionnaire paradigms have been developed to measure levels of jealousy. The IRS (Interpersonal Relations Scale) from Rusch & Huptka (1977) for example investigates 6 factors: Dependency, Sexual Possessiveness, Self-Deprecation/Envy, Trust, Threat to Exclusivity and Competition, while the SIR (Survey of Interpersonal Reactions) consists of 36 items within 5 stable factors (Anxious Attachment, Exclusivity-Beliefs, Exclusivity Feelings/Behaviour, Egoistic Suspicion, Individuation). Additionally, there is the MJS (Multidimensional Jealousy Scale) from Pfeiffer (1989), which was tested again in 2011 with an Australian sample with good results (Elphinston *et al.,* 2011).

1.3. Lenses of Anthropology and Evolutionary Psychology:

So the question still remains, why are humans getting jealous? It is worth asking about possible evolutionary mechanisms underlying jealousy.

From an evolutionary standpoint: emotions are adaptive responses to the environment that increase my chances of survival. (Gavrilets, 2012)

The emergence of strong pair bonds was a pivotal shift in human evolution. It encouraged increased paternal and relational investments of males, while redirecting them away from competition among themselves. (Chapais, 2008) This shift laid the groundwork for more stable family structures (Hawkes, 1993) that ultimately supported the development of modern social institutions and wider human cooperation. (Engels, 1972)

This section briefly introduces sex-dimorphic accounts as the most well researched perspective, critiques and relevant literature.

Sex-Dimorphic Accounts

One common approach to jealousy are sex dimorphic paradigms. Their main hypothesis is that women and men are evolutionarily inclined to have different mating strategies and jealousy reasons. Advocates for this account argue in numerous pieces of literature, that women are more romantically jealous, while men display more sexual mate-guarding behaviour. The former is hypothesized to be a result of women's need to "bind" the father of their children onto them, for that they receive the needed support in effort and resources to care for them. Men on the other hand are said to be more sexually jealous, since they want to minimize infidelity of their mate to make sure they only provide for children, that are biologically theirs (Edlund *et al.,* 2019; Harris, 2003a; Buss & Haselton, 2005). This view was first proposed by Buss *et al.* (1992) and continues to be supported in recent publications. Numerous studies over the past 30 years have found consistent sex differences, as evidenced by a 2012 meta-analysis that showed these differences to be highly robust, even when assessed using continuous measures (Sagarin *et al.,* 2012).

On the other handside, recent research found that more relationship experience results in both women and men being more stressed about emotional than sexual infidelity: “suggesting that any predispositions men may have to respond more strongly to sexual infidelity are outweighed by actual personal experience of relationships” (de Visser, 2020, p.503.) The same research also correlated more education with a bigger tendency to rate emotional infidelity worse than sexual infidelity. (de Visser, 2020, p.504).

Critiques and Alternatives

However, critics of this sex-dimorphic accounts have pointed out that many of the studies producing the above-mentioned results relied on a forced-choice design, requiring participants to choose whether sexual or emotional infidelity was more upsetting to them. Additionally, recent research has found that more relationship experience leads both women and men to report higher distress over emotional rather than sexual infidelity - “suggesting that any predispositions men may have to respond more strongly to sexual infidelity are outweighed by actual personal experience of relationships” (de Visser, 2020, p.503) The same study also found that higher levels of education were associated with a stronger tendency to view emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual infidelity . (de Visser, 2020, p.504)

Interestingly, current studies also suggest that the sex-dimorphic results are not as robust in non-monogamous relationships, where jealousy levels of both sexes are statistically speaking lower (Mogilski *et al.,* 2019; Valentova *et al.,* 2020) and the difference between the sexes reduced (Edlund *et al.,* 2022). People in homosexual relationships also do not display the same kind of jealousy-level-division between the sexes (Valentova *et al.,* 2020).

Apart from sex-differences, other research findings also contribute to the growing body of evidence for evolutionary underpinnings of jealousy. In 2009, Harmon-Jones and colleagues developed a clinical method for studying jealousy in a laboratory setting. Their research focused on brain activation during the active experience of jealousy and identified relative left frontal activity, which is associated with approach motivation, as well as a correlation between heightened jealousy and social aggression. This supports the

hypothesis that jealousy, as it stems from a survival instinct, always includes an action tendency related to strengthening existing bonds. Further supporting this view, another study has shown increased engagement of the basal ganglia, particularly the dorsal striatum and globus pallidum, which are involved in reward processing and emotional regulation. Interestingly, higher activation was found after a relationship was mutually formally committed to (Sun *et al.,* 2016).

Evolutionary models, like presented, give sufficient ground to support the thesis that jealousy is, at least partly, biologically wired into humans as a mechanism to strengthen pair-bonds. In the next part we are gonna shift our investigative focus on the other side of the nature vs. nurture debate of jealousy.

1.4 Sociocultural lenses

Still, it is undeniable that the lived reality of jealousy is deeply socially constructed. In fact, humans are not the only animals that exhibit jealous behaviour. It has been found in animals with more complex social structures like different forms of primates (Webb *et al.,* 2020) and particularly in dogs in regards to their relationships with humans (Harris & Prouvost, 2014). This underlies the relevance of sociocultural considerations in regards to understanding jealousy.

Social Structures

The social structures in which people live influence the expression of jealousy in numerous ways. Examining the evolution of events that trigger jealousy and jealous behaviour over time highlights the significant influence of social and cultural norms on jealousy. Take, for instance, the evolution of courtship and pairing rituals in Western societies. In eras where the stages from encountering a potential partner to matrimony were clearly defined and mostly supervised, the likelihood of developing romantic feelings for someone while another person was courting them was reduced. (Legerstee & Hart, 2010 p. 22) In societies where polygyny, polyandry or some form of commune-living is the norm, different

behaviour triggers a jealousy reaction in comparison to predominantly monogamous societies (Madhavan, 2002).

Entitlement and the "Extended Self"

As social beings, most human emotions include some social aspect or social context influencing its display. One of the most socially embedded aspects of jealousy is the sense of entitlement that individuals feel towards the attention, affection, or exclusivity of another. This entitlement is central to the cause and amplification of jealous feelings. As Legerstee & Hart (2010) note, jealousy is "a personal emotion, but one that concerns not only the person experiencing it - the "object" of jealousy counts as an extended part of the self within this context." This wording highlights the tension that arises from jealousy. The distinction is between internal and external elements, not isolated from the values and norms of the sociocultural context.

In this framework, jealousy arises when the person experiencing it perceives the other's attention as something to which they are entitled - as an extension of their own self. Even in everyday language loved ones are often described as "part of each other" or a couple might be said to "belong together", supporting this understanding of extended self. Consequently, a perceived threat to this connection, as a rival presents itself, opposes a threat to the self's integrity, since, "If my partner is part of my extended self, then losing this part may hurt me, and losing her to another person may humiliate me and thus increase my pain." (Legerstee & Hart, 2010 p. 47).

1.6 Researching Jealousy: Methodological Considerations

The empirical research on jealousy presents a challenge for the scope of available methods. Firstly, in the context of all the classic emotion theories, jealousy is hard to categorize, since it displays more as a multifaceted phenomenon, which can include a variety of emotions such as anger, fear or distress. Discrete emotion theories are therefore less practical to describe jealousy.

Empirically jealousy in the context of partnerships has been most often studied using the aforementioned sexually dimorphic models (SDEMs). But even here, a central difficulty remains, triggering strength. As scenarios that evoke jealousy are difficult to construct and generally avoided in monogamous cultures, the clinical study of jealousy has largely been indirect. Participants have been asked to imagine scenarios (e.g. their partner cheating) and their brain activity has been measured, or they have been asked about their attitudes towards the scenario and whether or not the relationship would be continued. One of the most popular approaches is the forced choice design, in which participants decide which would be worse for them: emotional or sexual infidelity. This approach has since been expanded, with some studies using more continuous measures.

A few qualitative accounts could be found researching jealousy. In a grounded theory study Adams & Williams (2014) found how inter-social dynamics were a mediator for jealous behaviour patterns and connected intersocial aggression.

Within the limited time scientific research on jealousy has been done, a lot has been found. The material compiled here illustrates the development of jealousy both in the evolutionary history of humans as well as within one lifetime beginning with first attachment in childhood. Accounts have been presented on nature vs. nurture elements of jealousy comparing evolutionary and sociocultural influence.

The picture of jealousy created through the gathered lenses is one of a reasonable, even necessary, reaction to the possible loss of a partner. However, it is also a picture in which agency and individuality seem to be lost along the way. The reason for this lies significantly in the ways in which the research is conducted and the methods and underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions used. While scientific research provides tools and a framework for curiosity, it also shapes the nature of possible findings. This highlights the growing need for new methods. and more contextual, meaning-based approaches. Especially in research of experience related phenomena like emotions.

This is why the present research uses a qualitative approach to examine the depth of people's lived experience of jealousy. Here, curiosity is directed at an individualistic and

somatically grounded version of jealousy, highlighting the reflective processes involved in handling it.

2. Non-Monogamy: A little Introduction

The attempt to trace back the steps that humanity has taken from communal living to the nuclear family and on to individualized family arrangements will not be undertaken here. The present research concerns jealousy, specifically the type experienced by non-monogamous people. For this reason, this section will introduce relevant accounts regarding this topic. It will explain the different types of non-monogamy relationships, the reasons for choosing non-monogamy, and the common challenges. For context, the current accounts of jealousy in non-monogamy will be mentioned, as well as its prevalence.

2.1 Definition and Variants

Non-monogamy, polyamory or more often used “Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM)” or “Ethical Non-Monogamy (ENM)”, describes any consensually agreed-to relationship structure which has the possibility to include more than two individual people, sexually and/or romantically. (Scoats & Campbell, 2022; Fern, 2020)

The most common relationship variants are being explained hereafter. It is important to note, however, that those do not form an exhaustive list, especially, because people starting to reflect on their individual relationship needs tend to then, in result, also individualize those approaches. (Scoats & Campbell, 2022) Figure 1, adapted from Fern (2020), shows that relationship exclusivity can be mapped along two dimensions, romantic and sexual.

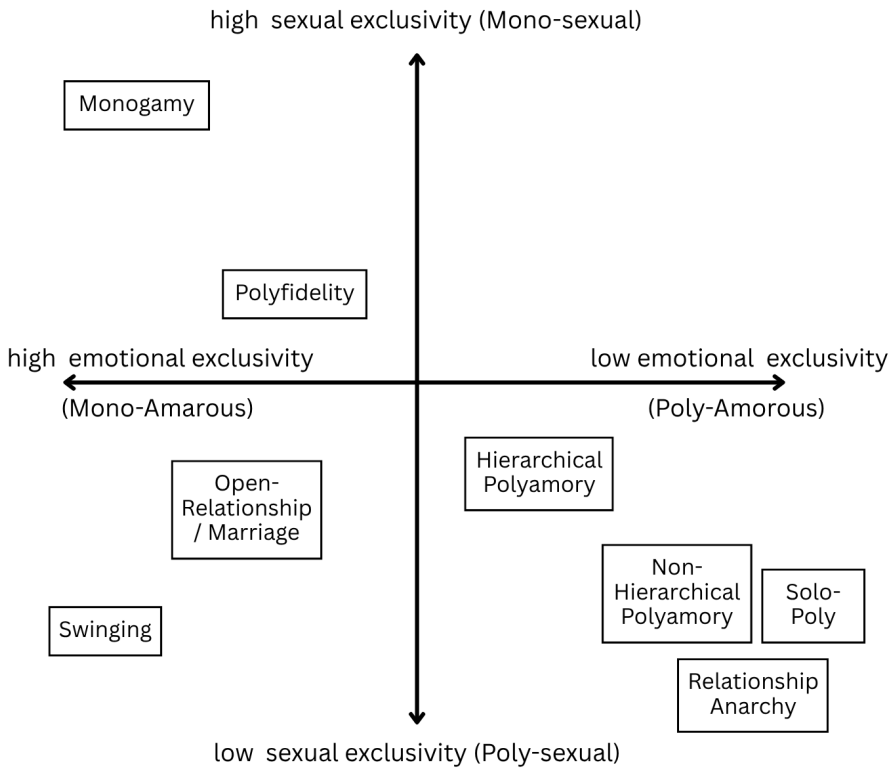

Figure 1: Adapted from Fern (2020), p.110, Different types of relationships according to their exclusivity.

For reference, *monogamous* relationships aim for exclusivity in both dimensions, romantic and sexual. Within the CNM umbrella some people want to close their relationships at a certain point to new connections: the term *polyfidelity* refers to relationship constructs involving three or more people, which do not engage in further exploration with people they are not currently in a relationship with. This includes for example closed triads or quads, where all involved are in a relationship with each other, but also other constellations of polycoules, where all involved agree on not pursuing anything new for the time being. (Fern, 2020)

In *open relationships* sexual encounters outside of the relationship are allowed, either together with the partner or separate, but there is an expectation of emotional exclusivity.

Swingers take a similar approach, but agree on certain scenarios where sexual encounters can happen, like at swinger-parties. (Wdowiak 2024)

Polyamorous relationships are centred around the belief that one can love multiple people. Central here is the role of consent: in polyamory, all involved people are aware and consent to the specific arrangement. (Fern, 202, p.112)There is no expectation of emotional or sexual exclusivity. But even with the option for multiple romantic relationships , it's not unusual that partners organize this *hierarchically*, meaning there is one "main" or "primary" relationship, which gets prioritized. This can look like one partner asking before setting up dates or the partner getting "veto power", meaning they get to have a vote in what goes on within other relationships and can even terminate them. People engaging in this system usually still aim to cohabitate and centralize their relationship in their lives more than their non-hierarchical counterparts. In *non-hierarchical polyamory* however, people involved believe that every relationship and connection should not be viewed in terms of a ranking system and should not have influence over each other. Non-hierarchical polyamorists focus on letting each relationship and connection grow to where it naturally moves to. Some polyamorists want to de-centralize relationships in their lives and focus on their own agency. Those *Solo-polyamorists* may reject traditional aspects of a partnership like cohabitation or shared finances, but still commit romantically. (Fern, 2020)

Lastly, relationship anarchy challenges the binary division between romantic/sexual and platonic relationships, rejecting the idea that the heteronormative, reproductive couple is the natural model of intimacy, and instead promotes individualized connections that resist social hierarchies and normative expectations around gender, sexuality, and intimacy. (Perez-Cortez, 2020) Stemming from the anarchist belief system, relationship anarchists believe that all aspects of relationships should be individualized and actively engage in discussion formalising those boundaries for every one of their relationships. This includes romantic and sexual aspects, as well as caregiving for animals or children, forms and frequency of communication, emotional support and many more with sexual and romantic exclusivity being only one of them. (Perez-Cortez, 2020)

It is not uncommon for ENM people in one city or community to start varying degrees of relationships with each other resulting in relationship constellations called polycoules. The partner of one's partner is referred to as *metamour* and people have different approaches of organizing their relationships and communication between them. (Fern, 2020)

Which specific arrangement applies for who is usually priorly negotiated by the people involved. Hereby a person can label themselves as non-monogamous, referring to a relationship orientation or part of their identity, or a relationship can be labelled as non-monogamous, which then more descriptively refers to the pre-negotiated bounds of the relationship itself. People self-identifying with polyamory tend to be unhappy in monogamous relationships, and having a hard time staying in them - just like many monogamous people cannot imagine themselves being happy in any non-monogamous structure. If one does not self-identify with any relationship structure or can be happy either way, depending on circumstances, they are called *ambiamorous*. (Gillig, 2024)

There are different approaches on how involvement in each other's relationships can look like. Some partners tell each other every little detail about their other relationships, while others prefer the *don't ask, don't tell* approach, where details about dates or meet-ups exterior to the relationship are not shared. In between those ends of the spectrum partners usually communicate about how much they want to share and the other person is comfortable hearing. Generally prefer some people to keep their relationships more separated, while others wish for all of their partners and metamours to be knowing of and friendly with each other. (Fern, 2020)

2.2 Diverging from the Norm & challenges

Since the CNM lifestyle represents a deviation from the social norm, it has always faced difficulties. Firstly, because of limited exposure to positive and successful examples of CNM either through media or social environments, people are less likely to start questioning their preferred relationship style. Even if it's realised, there is still a stigma around CNM, it's not always safe to live it. It's not uncommon to receive negative feedback in social situations (e.g., a partner shaming someone for "wanting more"), which

then only increases the anxiety or fear to explore this further. Leading to many CNM people never outing themselves. (Conley et al., 2013)

Public opinion and media portrayals of non-monogamy remain mostly negative. Unethical monogamy, i.e. cheating, is a significantly more common point of reference for most people than CNM, reinforcing the belief that extradyadic sex is a consequence of relationship problems. (Rubel & Bogart 2015) The negative stigmatisation of CNM people is researched. (Conley *et al.,* 2013) For example, in a study from 2021 non-monogamous partners are perceived to be: “more promiscuous, less moral, less sexually satisfied and less commited [when compared to monogamous partners]”, (Rodriguez *et al.,* 2021 p.1588) In Contrast, a recent ground-breaking meta-analysis has underlined that non-monogamous people are equally satisfied with their relationships romantically as sexually as their monogamous counterparts. (Anderson *et al.,* 2025) Additionally, research has shown that unfaithful individuals are less likely to practice safer sex than openly non-monogamous individuals. (Conley *et al.,* 2012)

However, more representation of CNM has recently started to emerge as the CNM community has grown and become more proactive. This is most apparent through the rise of polyamory guidebooks like p*olysecure* (Fern, 2020) *Opening Up* (Taormino, 2007) or *The Smart Girl's Guide to Polyamory* (Winston, 2017), and the best selling non-fiction book *The Ethical Slut*, (Easton & Hardy, 2017) which has sold over 200,000 copies since 1997 and is often called "the poly bible". More media has surfaced, portraying CNM relationships, like the netflix-series *You Me Her* (G, 2017) and the dating-show-format *Couple to throuple*. (Cole, 2024) In 2024 then, an international survey was held to decide on a new polyamory flag, receiving over 30,000 votes in a month and demonstrating the polyamorous community's active online engagement. (Brand, 2024) The debate if Polyamory should be added to the LGBTQIA+ community grows louder as supporters claim, relationship orientation is similarly part of one’s identity as sexuality. This change could protect CNM people by anti-discrimination laws. (Griffith, 2024)

So it is no surprise that more and more people interested in CNM dare to try, often gradually. Reasons for living CNM can vary - from simple curiosity to the beliefs of

polyamory being part of one's identity with an intense need for freedom and autonomy at its centre. (Griffith, 2024) One study investigating reasons for choosing CNM found four major themes: alignment with internal values, like engaging in one relationship not affecting possibility to explore romantic interest with others; relationship factor, specifically being unhappy in current relationships or feeling like something is 'off' or missing; External triggers, including developing romantic interest in someone, while being partnered and being exposed to non-monogamous relationships in their social circle; and lastly: Sexuality: wanting to date people of different genders. (Tatum *et al.,* 2023)

As this excerpt from Barker, illustrates, this is often a process of *realizing* rather than *deciding*:

> At first they thought it was only themselves who had different ideas about relationships but then they realised, often through exploring the internet, that other people lived this way and called it polyamory. At first they couldn't help cheating but then they realised there was an honest way of having multiple relationships. (Barker, 2005 p. 9)

Current findings underlie the thesis that the most common way of exploring CNM ist, to open up a previously monogamous relationship. (Murphy *et al.* 2020) When transitioning from monogamy to CNM a whole internal paradigm shift is set in motion. Since there are no or few references for how CNM relationships could be lived. This leads to non-monogamous relationships often starting off without clear guidelines and unsituated expectations, since most monogamous norms are not applicable. With a need to feel secure in their relationship, couples often approach this by defining rules and boundaries according to their needs. However, these are not yet grounded in experience so through a back and forth between encountering experiences and reshaping communication and rules, couples learn to navigate and shape their relationship over time.

Nevertheless, mononormativity remains influential. The social constructivist approach highlights the social hierarchy of relationships with the heterosexual monogamous reproductive couple as its center (Rothschild, 2018). Exposure to these ideals can lead to

internalised conflict, stress and harm. According to the minority stress model (Meyer, 1995), individuals with marginalised relational identities may internalise negativity from dominant norms, resulting in adverse effects on health and well-being (Riggle *et al.*, 2017; Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2020). Through this, people starting to engage with CNM can find problems in questioning these "ideals" and their own behaviour and thought patterns, stemming from these beliefs. Compulsory monogamy can make the steps mentioned above more difficult, leading CNM practitioners to pour i n a lot of work to disengage the structures of compulsory monogamy. Recognizing the influence of existence and availability of concepts can be understood as a key step towards more agency in relational shaping. (Emens, 2004).

Additionally, many leading psychological theories (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1982) assuming that monogamous couples are the end goal of healthy adult development contribute to that notion. CNM individuals are often overlooked in popular theories of close relationships, such as attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver; 1987; Shaver & Hazan, 1988, Bowlby, 1969 & 1973, Ainsworth et al, 1978). Romantic love is frequently still framed through monogamous lenses. (Ryan & Jethá, 2010; Conley et al., 2013).
Still, a general shift can be observed, regarding active shaping of relational constructs: "from the story of 'traditional nuclear family values' to the 'postmodern family' (p. 153) where family members are chosen rather than biologically given." (Barker, 2005, p.8)

2.3 Jealousy in Consensual Non-monogamy

Whichever variation of limited exclusivity may apply, regarding jealousy the focal point lies in the mutual agreement and commitment to the rules negotiated by the involved partners, respectively. Since: "People who accept a limited type of exclusivity may nevertheless be somewhat jealous of keeping this exclusivity intact." (Legerstee & Hart, 2010, p.50)

Generally there is an agreement across multiple studies, that CNM individuals have lower levels of emotional jealousy than their monogamous counterparts (Edlund *et al.,* 2022; Moors 2021; Mogilski & Welling, 2017) However, there is also indication, that

people engaging in CNM have higher cognitive jealousy, which has been theorized of Mogliski as follows: “CNM individuals may spend more time processing a partner’s extra-pair relationships (i.e., higher cognitive jealousy), but experience less distress about these thoughts (i.e., lower emotional jealousy) as a result. “ (Mogilski & Welling, 2017 p. 11) In hierarchical versions of CNM relationships, individuals have been shown to exhibit higher levels of jealousy with their primary versus secondary partner(s). (Mogliski *et al.,* 2019) Furthermore, a recent study by Murphy and colleagues (2020) tracked 155 individuals through their process of opening their relationship and found significant increases in sexual satisfaction, suggesting that the common fear of increased jealousy with CNM might be unjustified.

2.4 Compersion

When researching jealousy among CNM people, the concept of compersion must be addressed. Compersion is defined as a positive emotional reaction of joy or excitement in response to a partner’s other romantic and/or intimate connections. (Flicker, *et al.,* 2021) Often described as the opposite of jealousy, People in the CNM community aim to cultivate compersion as way to tune into the needs of their partner, confront their urge to entitlement and thus also alleviate their feelings of jealousy. (Brunning, 2020) Contributing factors for the emergence of Compersion have been researched by Flicker & Sancier-Barbosa in two studies from 2022 and 2024. They reported that a close and positive relationship with the metamour, secure attachment style, clear communication and a stable sense of self-worth all contribute to individuals experience of compersion (Flicker *et al.* 2022, Flicker & Sancier-Barbosa, 2024)

2.5 Prevalence

Although research on non-monogamy is increasing, it is still difficult to find reliable statistics on the number of people practising non-monogamy in Western countries. One study from 2012 surveyed over two thousand Americans and found that 4% identified as non-monogamous, while over 20% reported having experienced consensual

non-monogamy at some point in their lives. A more recent study updated these numbers stating that 1 out of 6 people (16.8%) in the states desire to engage in, while 1 out of 9 people (10.7%) have engaged in polyamory at some point in their life. (Moors, et al., 2021)

A 2019 Canadian study revealed similar results: 2.4% of the 2,000-plus participants were in non-monogamous relationships at the time of the study, with lifetime engagement closer to 19.6%. (Fairbrother, *et al.,* 2019).

The only statistical survey from around Austria that could be found at the time of this research was conducted in Germany by the market research company Fittkau and Maaß. Here, 14% of respondents said that they had previously been in an open relationship. The most comprehensive Austrian research comes from Stefan Ossmann's 2021 doctoral dissertation at the University of Vienna. This included 33 autobiographical interviews from 14 polycules in Vienna. (Ossman, 2021)

It is also useful to consider the social gatherings used by the CNM community in Austria. Several groups meet up regularly, ranging from once a month to once every few months, with 10–40 participants. Most of these groups are located in Vienna, but there is also a PolyTisch in Graz, which usually has 40 or more attendees, as well as smaller meetups in Innsbruck, Klagenfurt, Linz, St. Pölten and Salzburg, with 7–15 attendees. (Sky, n.d.) The unlabelled telegram channel, a discussion group in Vienna which was also used to recruit participants for this study, currently has over 300 members and is growing. Therefore, even though there are no representative numbers, focusing solely on the active part of the non-monogamous community in Austria provides a comprehensive picture.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm

For the present research we adopt an contextualized experiential and constructivist approach within an interpretivist framework. We acknowledge normative societal structures and their influence on both the participants and the researcher. However, this thesis centers around the agency of the participants in creating their own realities, while being in active engagement with those structures.

This means we presume the nature of the discussed phenomenon - jealousy - to be relative and constructed through an individual's interaction with themselves and their normative and social environment. The interview-format and an interpretivist approach are seen as tools that enable us to access the subjective lived experience of the participants and how they navigate, interpret and, most centrally, reconstruct the emotional norms they face. We firmly believe that participants have the narrative power to meaningfully access and describe their world. The researcher is recognised as an element that co-constructs the narrative, while seeking to give voice to the participants. Language is viewed as both not entirely able to fully convey the richness of experience and ultimately a practical and sufficient tool for conveying the meaning of the participant's narrative.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity was an integral part of the research process, aligning closely with both reflexive thematic analysis and my personal constructivist stance. I practised reflexivity by writing down my own assumptions and beliefs in regard to jealousy, before I started analysis. During the interview process and later coding I kept a reflexive journal, where I documented my process and emerging personal problems that potentially reflected on it as well as my changing relationship to the topic and the participants.

I approached the subject of non-monogamy from a personal perspective, as I have been non-monogamous for over 10 years- first in the form of an open relationship, later as part of polyamorous constellations. I consider it a part of my identity; it shapes how I relate to others and how I understand community. Within this context, navigating jealousy has been a central and sometimes challenging experience- one I share, in different forms, with my participants. In conversations with participants, I was not only a researcher but also a peer - someone with shared experiences and overlapping contexts. This dual role influenced both my prior understanding of the topic and my ability to connect with participants during interviews. When crafting the interview questions and analysing the data, I drew on my own knowledge as well as my literature research, resulting in a constructed, interpretive lens.

As an autistic researcher, I sometimes found it difficult to interpret subtext in participants' statements, and the transcription and coding process presented emotionally and cognitively challenging at times. However, my tendency toward black-and-white thinking and strong pattern recognition supported a focused and detail-oriented approach to coding and theme development. I was cautious when drawing conclusions, especially in areas where I felt there wasn't enough direct evidence, which helped me stay open and avoid forcing a specific interpretive direction onto the data.

Rather than aiming for neutrality, I embraced the interpretive nature of this work. I remained aware of how my standpoint, as an insider to the community and as a autistic researcher exploring it academically, contributed to how meaning was produced throughout the research.

3.2 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The focus of this research is an attempt to capture the complexity and richness of the participants' lived experience of jealousy and their behaviour in relation to it within non-monogamous contexts. Adopting a constructivist approach, I acknowledge my own influence on the interpretation while emphasising the participants' agency in relation to the topic. This is why I chose reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as outlined by Braun and

Clarke (2022), as it provided the flexibility required to focus on the subjective, emotionally charged nature of the data. This flexibility allowed me to engage inductively with the data while remaining reflexive about my role in the meaning-making process. Rather than aiming to 'discover' themes hidden in the data, I understood them as something I actively developed through repeated engagement, reflection, and decision-making. Overall, RTA allowed me to stay connected to both the participants and my own role in the research. It provided me with the tools to work with the complexity of the topic while remaining grounded in the experiences shared with me.

3.3 Participants and Recruitment

Participants for this research were recruited via the 'Unlabelled Group' on Telegram, where people interested in non-monogamy in Vienna connect and regularly meet to discuss topics relevant to this alternative lifestyle.Throughout the recruitment period, the group had around 300 members. Some members reposted the pre-questionnaire in related groups within the community, introducing a snowball effect. A pre-questionnaire was created for recruitment purposes and posted to the group at regular intervals. Participants were selected from the responses to this form and 47 people were invited for an interview, of which 10 were completed successfully.

Inclusion criteria required participants to have been actively practicing non-monogamy for at least one year and to be currently involved in one or more romantic or sexual relationships. The other criteria asked in the pre-questionnaire (age, sexuality, gender, relationship style, cohabitating with one or more partners, experience in a relationship, where children were involved) were relevant in trying to create a participant-group that included the broadest variability.

The final sample (n=10) included participants between the ages of 28 and 44 years. Sexual orientations included bisexual or pansexual (n=7), straight (n=1), queer (n=1), and heteroflexible/gynosexual (n=1). Educational backgrounds included A-levels (n=1), bachelor's degrees (n=4), and master's degrees (n=5). Participants had between 1.5 and 17 years of experience in non-monogamy. The relationship styles the sample included: open

relationship (n=1), polyamory (n=3), relationship anarchy (n=3), solo polyamory (n=1), polyfidelity (n=1) and mixed (n=1). Half of the participants currently or in the past had been living with a partner, while being non-monogamous (n=5) and half do not (n=5). Five participants were currently in relationships where one of the involved parties had children, two had past experiences of this kind, and three had not had such experiences.

The interviews then were conducted in the researcher's apartment, all under the same conditions and recorded with an audio-recorder on a tripod. All participants were given a consent form before the interview to sign, which included cause of the interview, name of the university, study program and researcher, as well as boxes to tick, stating, they agree that the transcripts of the interview will be used for this research and if they want to be notified of the finished thesis. The full consent form is added as an appendix. All names in this thesis referencing the interview are changed to ensure the participants privacy rights.

Before every interview the context of this study was explained as well as the structure of the interview to further ensure the participants safety. An oral explanation was chosen to avoid a longer (potentially awkward) pause in the beginning of the conversation as they read through it and to start building up rapport with the participants as soon as they sat down.

3.4 Application

This research was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework, which, due to its flexibility, provided a fitting structure for the deep and rich data collected. Transcription and familiarization started as a joint process. I transcribed all interviews manually using *f4transcript*, which was lengthy and tiring. The sensory overload made it difficult to stay engaged for long periods, which was frustrating. On one hand, I was excited to work on the thesis, but on the other, I was confronted with my own limits. This shaped how I related to the material. Trying out different working environments helped me stay focused and improved my process.

I decided to postpone coding and analysis when I was informed of an internal deadline just as I was finishing transcription. I wanted to complete that stage without any distractions, so as not to compromise the integrity of the findings. Instead, I returned to researching literature and explored possible theoretical frameworks for deductive coding, which we later discarded. During this pause, I continued to familiarise myself with the material by re-listening to it, editing the transcripts and discussing them. This repeated, brief contact leads to the content feeling more tangible and less foreign.

Initial coding was both motivating and confusing. Working inductively with *MAXQDA* across ten lengthy interviews without a system and under time pressure, I ended up with over 900 codes. I often questioned whether I could do justice to the participants' experiences. That said, the process taught me to stay close to the language and meaning of the participants. My earlier transcription work and journaling helped. I already knew the material well, which helped me to stay grounded throughout the chaotic first round of coding. After finishing this round, I was overwhelmed and took a few days to rest. On returning, I slowed down and used MAXQDA's creative coding tool, which helped me visually map and group codes. This re-engagement improved my relationship with the data. I reviewed the codes several times, removed weaker ones, and began a more systematic second round of coding based on emerging theme ideas. This round felt easier—I could now contextualize codes within themes and develop them more intentionally.

Theme development was intellectually rewarding but also mentally demanding. Conversations with my partner (a philosopher) were especially helpful in connecting abstract ideas and refining themes. Feedback from my supervisors further clarified priorities. I spent a few more days with the thematic maps, letting things settle mentally before finalizing decisions. After a short break, I returned refreshed and started the write-up. Surprisingly, this part was enjoyable - the themes felt familiar, and I could clearly see the connections. I conceptualized distinct ideas for each theme and selected diverse, rich quotes to illustrate them. Following Braun & Clarke's recommendation, I returned to

the literature at this stage. Now that I better understood what mattered in the data, it was easier to integrate relevant work on jealousy and non-monogamy.

Finally, I revised the analysis chapter, developed subthemes, and focused on building clear narrative descriptions supported by quotes. This second round of writing felt more confident, as I was now able to bring together the data and literature in a meaningful way.

4 Findings

Research question: How is jealousy experienced and made sense of in the relational lives of non-monogamous people in Vienna?

In the analytic process four themes were constructed through thorough engagement with the dataset. (1) *Individualized relationships & Joy of Agency:* explains the need of participants for agency in constructing their own relationships and how this shapes their approach of jealousy; (2) *Jealousy as perceived relationship insecurity:* emphasizes loss of security as reason behind jealousy and locates the taught behaviour involved and need for reflection; (3*) Journey with/through Jealousy:* shows the process participants go through in their involvement with jealousy and their effort to change the learned behaviour to a closer alignment with their beliefs; and finally (4) *Jealousy Toolbox:* summarizes the mental perspectives and active behaviour approaches participants use to understand and regulate their jealous feelings.

4.1. Theme 1:

Need for Individualized Relationships & Joy of Agency:

Why can't it be accepted, that the heart grows and is not limited?

This theme summarises the participants' need for agency and individualised relationships as central and basic elements of their lives, and as a base for their engagement with jealousy. While not all participants describe non-monogamy as part of their identity, they all agree that love is not finite, and that being able to love multiple people enriches their inner and outer lives.

One participant, Sophia, articulates it like this:

> It is super positive if you can fully experience it and if you overcome these milestones that this whole process has and all these burdens that it has. But if you manage to, for me it was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. Like

> having this sharedness, having this overflow of love or having this idea that love is not let's say finite in some ways. (Sophia, Pos. 130)

The shown acknowledgement here of the challenges of living CNM, while simultaneously emphasizing how rewarding and worth it is, encompass well the joined notion of the participants. Being able to actively customise their relationships, rather than being restricted by societal norms, is described as leading not only to their non-monogamous connections feeling more honest and closer, but also to them feeling more self-reliant and benefiting from not being dependent on one partner.

This excerpt from Natascha shows this well:

> That I managed to get through it – to endure it and realise that it doesn't take anything away from me, that it has no downside for me. I'm not dependent on being the only person for him – that has given me such freedom, really – I have this feeling of freedom because I know that this relationship is based on us wanting to be together, not because one of us can't be alone, [...] And I also think that's what I mean by freedom, the feeling that I'm no longer dependent on him when it comes to my needs, whether it's that I'm feeling down and want someone to talk to, or that I need more sex or more physical contact. I want more cuddling, I don't have to get it only from him - just like the other way around, I don't have to - I don't have to do everything with him (Natascha, Pos. 37-40)

As Natascha describes, she feels liberated from needing to meet all of her partner's needs - or having all of hers met by one person. Instead, she finds joy in knowing their relationship is chosen freely, not shaped by social expectation.

Subtheme: Monogamy as not enough

Monogamy is described as not sufficient for the participants' lives, in a two-fold way: first, participants describe how limiting the idea of love being finite is and how they desire deep boundless connections. Needing to separate relationships into platonic friends "just friends" and romantic interest is described as creating an artificial barrier, or even hierarchy, where participants don't feel they should be one. This then leads to frustration

about the monogamous, strict norms and a generally negative view of unreflexive relationships, as most monogamous or monogamous-like relationships are sometimes titled.

> For me, it's really important to have relationships with people, and I find it really weird to put up artificial barriers, and for me, monogamy is an artificial barrier, and it's not so much about sex. It's just about the idea that a person isn't allowed to do something if they don't want to. That's a completely different thing, but *laughs* that they're not allowed to do something because they already have someone who only does that with them [...] I felt very hurt by friends who suddenly didn't get in touch as much or didn't go on vacation with me anymore because they now have a boyfriend or girlfriend and only go on vacation with them. (Paul, pos. 29)

This shows clearly that entering a monogamous relationship is not only often characterized by a sexual exclusivity, but also commonly involves exclusivity in other areas, as illustrated here through vacation plans. This systematic reprioritisation of unreflexive relationships leads to resentment among participants who have spent a lot of time reflecting on relationship norms and aim to make conscious choices.

The participants make clear that for them, the journey out of these norms was mostly drive by necessity, because living with them made them unhappy and was partly impossible, leading to cheating for some of them. This creates a conflict, as they wish to be truthful in their relationship, but trying to be monogamous makes them feel untrue to themselves.
As one participant, Katharina, put it:

> So it was actually a thing, I always had this feeling that something was wrong with me because [Monogamy] was never – never quite enough. In the past, before we opened up our relationship, it was unfortunately often the case that I cheated on her, which I'm not proud of. And I couldn't really explain to myself why it wasn't enough, and feelings just kept coming up, and I just didn't understand why it was so bad. Why I have feelings for other people and why that can't be accepted, that the heart grows and is not limited" (Katharina, Pos. 25).

Here it is clearly illustrated the inner conflict of not fitting into a norm, and fearing possible social punishment, but not being able to stay untrue to oneself, because it is painful to limit what feels like the heart's expression. This process of realizing that monogamy is not fulfilling for the participants is described differently.

One participant, Lara explained, how the realisation hit her, that there was exclusivity expected of her and the reasoning behind it did not seem logical to her:

> [...] I just can't deal with what's being forced on me. And somehow it didn't make any sense to me. I thought, okay, fine, I have a boyfriend now and I like him and I don't know what else, and then there was maybe someone else who I thought, ah yes, very exciting. But it was completely logical to me that this other person I found exciting had nothing to do with my original friend, partner, person. And that just because I found this guy exciting right now, it didn't mean that I didn't like my boyfriend anymore. (Lara, pos. 17)

This underlies clearly the base-belief of polyamorous people, that being interested in a person, does not lead to all other relationships automatically being less important, or changed at all. Lara also expresses her frustration about the feeling this expectation was being forced on her, and her refusal to live by ‘rules’, which she did not agree with.

Subtheme: Agency & customizing relationships

Ultimately, normative relationship frameworks are described as distracting from genuine human connection. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of agency and freedom, partly in response to times when they were unable to fully live non-monogamously, and partly because letting go of predefined relationship structures is seen as a way to focus more deeply on the actual experience of being with someone.

This is beautifully phrased by Elias, who explains his shift from monogamy to relationship anarchy over time:

> Well, I see it quite radically, um, more or less everything, both the supposedly good and the supposedly bad, all the ideas we have about how we should relate to each

> other, um, distract us again and again from who we really are and who is sitting opposite us and, um, how we actually feel about this person in concrete terms. Of course, this is never completely free of assumptions that resonate in the background, experiences and so on (Elias: Pos. 35)

This freedom is described as more important than the control over a partner or possible triggers a monogamous relationship would offer.

As Markus describes ist:

> Um, I don't know, there were definitely phases where there was a little less security, because more freedom can also mean less security. Or feeling less secure, because it's possible that [your partner] suddenly loves someone else more. That can also be scary. (Markus, pos. 45)

Hence, relationship norms and surrounding language are also described as not sufficient for describing the participants' lives. Early non-monogamus tendencies, even before learning any language about the topic are described often and so language, like relationship labels, was customised, to avoid built-in expectations of external categorizations.
As Katharina describes here visually, when asked about her ‘relationship status”:

> Well, a few years ago, I created the term “Schnukiversum[2]” for myself [which I] defined for myself as a kind of large universe, where there is a big sun, I am the sun *laughs* and there are lots of planets orbiting around it, some closer than others, some far away, some closer again. Some just buzz past quickly, but nothing is more or less important in the grand scheme of things (Katharina, pos. 29-37)

This is her approach to avoid hierarchical constructs, and emphasize the value each individual connection has for her. Expectations, like needing to do everything with the partner, friendships to be secondary to the romantic relationship or that a strong romantic love for one person leading to less interest in other people, were not congruent with the participants feelings and beliefs, so they had a growing need to adapt these ‘rules’.

As one participant, Paul describes:

[2] Schnucki is a viennese endearment term, used in different contexts; similar to Sweety or Cutie.

> Fully, yes, fully. I think I can just be myself. I believe the main advantage is that people don't treat me based on, um, other categorisations they have for me. So, it's not because I'm a friend that I'm treated a certain way, but rather, I'm treated based on whether they like me at the moment, and not based on how it fits into their lives or not. We're just friends because of that. (Paul, Pos. 35-36)

This is ultimately described as freeing also from external assumptions about one-self, and a more honest voluntary approach to relationships. But reaching that point is described as difficult, with few or none CNM role-models or other successful examples presented. As Natascha describes, having a friend who went non-monogamous before her led to her working up the courage to try it too:

> I was also familiar with open relationships through my friend, who got together with her boyfriend at around the same time – and they were open right from the start – otherwise I don't think I would have had any contact with this topic at all – i.e. I just followed her over the years and saw that she could have both – a committed relationship, yes, but she could also go on dates and have sex with other people, and I thought to myself that that was actually the ultimate ideal
> (Natascha, pos. 11).

4.2 Theme 2:

Jealousy as Perceived Relationship Insecurity:

Frustration of taught patterns

This theme captures jealousy as a sign of relationship insecurity, framing it as a disruptive, uncontrolled mechanism that leads to frustration and is approached with empathy. When asked to define jealousy for themselves, participants stated that it can manifest as a range of feelings, from sadness to anger to fear. They also agreed that it is triggered by perceived relationship insecurity:

> When you're unsure. Yes. So it could also be for reasons other than commitment, but if you're unsure about your relationship, (Lara, Pos. 69)

> I think jealousy is actually a combination of several emotions. When I'm jealous, I often react with anger, but the truth is that there's really just sadness or insecurity behind it, but that's just how it is – that's how it comes out for me. Exactly (Natascha, pos. 51)

This insecurity is mostly triggered in some form by unmet needs, which the following excerpts illustrate:

> Is it because I feel neglected, because I want more attention from my partner, because I'm feeling bad for some other reason and I'm just projecting that, and once I've figured out what the reason is, I communicate it and discuss it (Anna, Pos. 6)

> Dishonesty, yes, I think that's actually the main reason - dishonesty and thus - my needs for whatever, in that context - simply being completely overridden and not being seen as important (Katharina, pos. 61).

Through this I noticed how well thought through the participants described their experience of jealousy, even with a matter of course-attitude, indicating their active engagement with the phenomenon, which also confirmed my belief further; that it played a relevant part in their lives.

Sub-theme 1: Jealousy as an Automatic, Uncontrollable Reaction

Unreflected or sudden triggers often spark intense stress responses, revealing jealousy as a deeply embodied and automatic reaction. Participants describe it as emerging without warning - emotional, irrational, and hard to control.

As Sophia describes here, it can feel existential:

> For me there are two types there, or two different levels. So the jealousy that I cannot stand and I feel extremely upset, when I feel is this jealousy that makes me lose sense of control. I experience this moment that I'm losing everything. I'm

> losing my partner. It is a little bit of abandonment, maybe triggered there that someone other is better and my partner will leave me and this can lead me to irrationality. (Sophia, Pos. 34)

Elias described a similar pattern of loss of control, marked by complex emotional layering:

> I had this classic version of jealousy, which manifested itself in a kind of triple... well, hatred is a very strong word, but it manifested itself in a triple anger, namely anger towards myself, towards the person I loved, and towards the person who 'steals my love interest' (Elias, Pos. 105).

These reactions often came as a surprise to the participants themselves, who felt thrown off by their intensity and suddenness. They described this form of jealousy as dysregulating and difficult to reconcile with their reflective, communicative values.

Sub-theme: Frustration and Empathy in Response to Jealousy

While jealousy serves the role of alarming one to potential relationship threats, and in monogamy can be even seen as a welcoming sign that someone cares enough, non-monogamous individuals don't tend to view it that way. When asked about their view about it, the participants described a frustration about noticing that they are jealous and behaving according to that feeling, since it seems to be in contrast with their beliefs. This quote from Paul illustrates this:

> I'm usually really annoyed by it. - Um, and I'm also annoyed with myself [...]- I feel like it's a bit like heartbreak, it's such a very intense feeling and it's totally destructive and it's actually really... well, it doesn't get me anywhere... um, and then I'm just like, ugh, really a bit defiant, um... it depends on how bad it is, like, how bad, like, what the person did, so you can already tell that I'm projecting my jealousy onto the other person (Paul, pos. 89)

This frustration of not being able to act and feel according to their beliefs was tangible in the interaction with the participants. Anna also explains, how it hinders her to communicate unemotionally and makes seeking needed closeness difficult:

> A feeling of rejection, of being rejected - um, where I can also withdraw very quickly - where it's also very difficult not to communicate it emotionally - yes. So it's also a very, very consuming feeling, it kind of hangs around permanently and hangs over everything, so if there are certain situations or people that this relates to, then I can't always approach them without prejudice, even if there's no reason for it, I still notice it [...] and that's very difficult (Anna, Pos. 41-43)

In conversations, a tension became clear: participants felt the urge to address jealousy openly, since communication was central, but also wanted to support their partners' connections, even when it was hard. I resonated with this deep empathy for both self and partner, which seemed key to navigating that tension.

> I think he's similar to me in that he sometimes can't necessarily say, 'I'm jealous because,' but rather, you just take what triggered the unpleasant feeling, what your partner did, and use that as, um, 'I feel bad because you did this and that and not that,' and that's completely understandable because I experience it the same way, it's just that he sees me as the aggressor at that moment and vice versa, when I'm not feeling centred, and when you can see that and remain open, then I can respond to him well, but sometimes that doesn't work because when I don't recognise it well but just find the accusation or whatever it is that comes up unfair, then there's often a conflict. (Natascha, pos. 101)

4.3 Theme 3:

Journey with/through Jealousy: Breaking the cycle

This theme includes aspects indicating a journey through jealousy. I noticed it two-fold: First, through the participants themselves, sharing what they have already learned and what their current struggles are, and secondly, in my perspective interacting with all of them I clearly saw that depending on their experience with non-monogamy participants were on different points of a journey. Struggles and solution approaches, described by participants in the first two years of an open relationship showed up as past learnings in stories from participants who have been polyamorous for 10+ years. Crucial for this development is

also knowing that jealousy is a temporary emotion, the ability to give space to it, when it arises, reflect and self-regulate, which are all described as skills learned over the time of their experience with non-monogamy.

As Sophia explains here:

> So, I was very surprised [about the jealousy feeling] and at the same time very devastated, very sad, very mad. I think I went through the whole range of emotions apart from happiness. So, but then it got gradually better and better.
> (Sophia, Pos. 80)

Subtheme: Habituation of previously triggering situations

This seems obvious, at least in terms of noticing patterns, thinking of behaviour approaches, that are then improved over time, but change also was noticed in terms of emotional triggers. Specifically, participants describe that the triggering situations, like a partner going on a date or doing something specific with someone else gets easier to handle over time, so there seems to be habituation happening.

As Paul describes

> At the very beginning, I was jealous about a lot of things - um - because I was just very insecure a lot of the time - and so - the first time, um - meeting a partner, the first time - being in a group of three or something where the two of them were kissing or, or the two of them went home, I didn't go home with them or anything like that, um, and that was a lot at the beginning, there was a lot of pain and jealousy (Paul, Pos. 95).

This seemed logical to me, knowing about how habituation can help the brain understand that something - in this case the jealousy evoking situations - are not actually a threat. So one situation at a time participants describe they are getting less jealous and more emotionally aligned with their beliefs.

Here, Elias explains, how he could re-shape his view on jealousy at some point

> And I myself have experienced going through jealousy as very, very beneficial and very reassuring, and I think that's also very much the case when we can let go of jealo usy together, step by step. Then it's deeply connected, and I think it's good to see that as an opportunity - but I really don't want to say that it often works, and certainly not always. - it's really hard (Elias, pos. 137).

Subtheme: Communication

An aspect that goes through development and is central for this process is communication. Here, Natasche describes that opening up the relationship leads to an increased need to communicate:

> In general, when you open up a relationship, you have to talk to each other a lot more. That means our relationship has become deeper in terms of trust and communication. we've both learned a lot about how we communicate and where we make mistakes, and bringing other people into our lives is a huge enrichment for me, because I take something from every relationship, no matter how long it lasts, or every encounter, I take something with me, and every person has inspired me in some way to deal with a topic (Natascha, pos. 37)

Participants emphasize the importance of communication with their partner(s), on one hand to clear up misunderstandings and correct internal beliefs about the situation or the partners objectives, but also to make sure everyone feels heard and understood in their wants and needs, even when they do not match sometimes.
Anna describes how she appreciates the open approach to communication she has in her relationship:

> [...] what I really appreciate about my current relationship is that we can just communicate things without there having to be any consequences. That means I can just say, “I felt bad in that situation, I felt that because...” and the other person just knows
>
> [...] just as a piece of information, so to speak - often also with regard to the fact that I sometimes act differently and that the other person then knows right away why, and that it's not something negative, but rather that I felt that way at that

> moment, and now I'm perhaps reacting a little differently, and that's all there is to it. (Anna, Pos. 69-71)

Within this context honesty and a sensible approach are important and the ability to recognize that communication can still not account for experience. Meaning, even if prior to a triggering situation a conversation was held talking through options of approach, in the moment, needs can change and the solutions devised may turn out to be less effective or more difficult to implement in practice than envisioned.

As Gabriel put it:

> I would say communication is really the key to manage every relationship. Especially, non-monogamous relationships, because it triggers a lot of things. I would say that A year ago, we spent maybe between two and three hours a day speaking about what do we want, how do we want it, what are the reasons, what are the limits? [...] And first experiences showed that we had almost everything wrong. [...] So we had to iterate on. Now, our rules, and I speak mostly with my wife, rules are more fuzzy, not as precise as at the beginning. It's more guidelines than really strict rules. (Gabriel, Pos. 90-94)

Subtheme: Non-monogamy as intentional effortful practise:

As mentioned, participants described jealousy in their relationships not merely as a disruptive emotion, but as a recurring signal that pointed them toward unresolved needs, insecurities, or internalized monogamous norms. They acknowledge that living CNM results in a heightened necessity to reflect on and confront monogamous structures and their internal beliefs , which is a lot of work.

As Markus points out,

> Well, it's just so time-consuming and draining, emotionally speaking, and you have to communicate a lot, and at some point I thought it was kind of like a hobby, so you have to really want to do it because it takes a lot of time and a lot of talking with each other (Markus, Pos. 51).

Rather than attempting to suppress it, many approached it as a site of reflection and emotional labor - something to “work through” rather than “against” .

As Sophia illustrates here understanding the monogamous possessive nature of jealousy is a key factor:

> I think that jealousy comes from this idea that the other person is mine. Mm -hmm and Like if I realize that this other person is not mine I cannot control to them or share them that they get into this downward spiral I have also been and since the exclusivity is not happening phenomenon me. [...] you realize that the other person does not belong to you, that it is absolutely normal that your partner will have desire over other people while being with you. So you have to disintegrate these basic beliefs of monogamy in order to be able to not experience jealousy for me. As soon as you keep and hold on to them of course you will be jealous because you are possessive. (Sophia, Pos. 124)

The described heightened effort includes, self-reflection, practising detachment of self-worth of partner’s action, prioritizing loved one’s benefit and coping with the frustration that not all needs are met immediately.

Elias emphasized how he practises his internal stability through experience with the disruptive nature of jealousy:

> Specifically, it helped me a lot to allow myself to feel those emotions while also trying to see, step by step, that most of it wasn't directly related to me, but that I was involved and also meant by it. You don't have to sugarcoat it, but... To the extent that I am involved, there is a very large part that simply takes place in them for whatever reasons - and what helped me was to see that I can be okay with the feeling in a very concrete way - and still have a good time and still - yes, in a sense, remain sane and alive (Elias, pos. 125).

A prominent factor here, which almost everyone seems to agree with, is also time-management, since there is an honest effort to include more people into busy work weeks. Because, even if love is not finite, time is. This all being said, doing the work is not necessarily described as a bad thing, as Natascha shows here:

> It does take more energy, personally speaking. As I said, you have to communicate more, and I have to say that we also have more conflicts than before, because there are many more points of friction. For me, that's not a bad thing, because I think that if you learn to deal with conflicts well, you end up closer than before. You always learn something, but yes, it does take more energy. (Natascha, Pos. 47)

All participants agree that to engage in non-monogamy means more confrontation with own attachment wounds, insecurities and communication issues, therefore, in order to get a better understanding of these concepts, it is common to engage with the involved topics by reading literature or listening to podcasts from the community Additionally multiple participants describe, seeking therapeutic help, for themselves, but also couples counseling to help with the relationship opening process and arising issues.

> So what always helps me when I'm going through a difficult phase are podcasts on the subject. Well, theoretical engagement with the subject always helps me somehow. The couples therapy we're doing also helps me (Natascha, pos. 91-93)

Some participants, who have been non-monogamous for many years, as Hannah for example, even expect potential partners to be educated about it or send them literature:

> And if you can somehow put it into words, and I can usually do that quite well, what it is about this dynamic between this person and me that is so important to me then, um... yes, there is this fear that another dynamic with different characteristics could replace it, mostly - yes, controllable - and otherwise I always say, give me your email address and then I'll send you all the literature: the jealousy workbook, polysecure, ethical slut - I always send them all the literature and they can do their homework a bit (Hannah, Pos. 109)

4.4 Theme 4:

Jealousy Toolbox:

“you don't have to be afraid, but you are allowed to feel afraid”

In this theme all codes are gathered regarding specific behaviour and mental perspectives adapted to regulate jealousy. Central elements include: a solution-oriented attitude, a first step of self-reflection, where the emotional activation is noticed and is classified as jealousy, before going into communication, followed by a “talk” with the partner, where a retelling of the triggering event, surrounding circumstances and perspectives of both are included, and then some kind of regulation, either self-regulation or co-regulation with the partner.

Subtheme: Solution oriented about Jealousy

A key to handling jealousy in a non-monogamous relationship is realizing that society’s view of jealousy focuses on blame, not solutions. Jealousy is seen as being the partners fault for acting in a way that triggers the emotion and therefore the partner is supposed to “fix it” e.g. apologise, re-assure, and most importantly: not do it again. Since, in the non-monogamous contexts of the participants, jealousy evoking situations are not avoidable, they adopt a more solution-oriented approach about it. Participants describe being on different points of realizing and changing this pattern. They learn to identify the unmet need or internal factors contributing to the specific situations faster, and start regulating the emotion, even before talking to their partner(s) about it.

> And nowadays, I can more anticipate the situations where I think that I will be jealous. I'm also able to more... It's not perfect, but it's easier for me to dissociate Between the part of me that is feeling fearful or angry, jealous, and the caring part of me that is seeing just Let time, take time. It's not real. It's just a bad moment. In a few minutes, in a few hours, it will be better. (Gabriel, Pos. 108)

Important here is the realization that in non-monogamy, there is a much bigger expectation of being responsible for one's own emotions and facing your own triggers without the

distraction of a co-regulation discussion can be very scary. Participants are all aware that there is a natural tendency to avoid or push away this negative emotion, but emphasize the much higher gain of being able to regulate yourself and not "burdening" their partner(s) with the entirety of that feeling and possibly intervening a good connection for them. So in terms of solution-orientation, the goal is not necessarily to not be jealousy, but to know how to regulate the feeling and use communication with partner(s) more as an additional resource not the main one.

ADD

Subtheme: the 1x1 of Regulating Emotions

Participants' approaches to jealousy varied mainly in two ways: some preferred self-regulation, while others leaned on co-regulation with their partners.

Markus describes, he uses various resources to regulate:

> Yes, and I deal with myself quite a lot now, or by myself I also mean that I go to psychotherapy or talk to other people close to me, whatever, it doesn't always have to be sorted out in the relationship where the jealousy arises. (Markus, pos. 89)

This seemed shaped by experience, mutual support, and prior negotiation of needs. Additionally, many described a learning curve, gradually becoming better at managing jealousy internally rather than blaming their partner. It also does help to practise not taking jealousy too seriously, especially when the feeling gets triggered in a situation that one knows logically is not threatening to the relationship, like seeing their partner sharing a kiss with someone, while they are with them.

As Hannah explained here:

> Well, that's just how it is – it's an annoying emotion that you don't like to have because it always reflects your own insecurity – but at the same time, you can also make fun of yourself a little bit, in the best case, like, 'Oh come on, girl, just because she's hitting on him now, you don't have to be afraid that he'll fall for her' (Hannah, Pos. 85)

Recognizing that the emotion, which needs regulation, and the potential underlying triggers, need different forms of attention: the feeling first, needs space to pass through, breathing, grounding oneself, and potentially a physical/somatic element to release and regulate, like crying, screaming or whatever one's favourite workout is.
Gabriel, explained his processing as follows:

> How I evaluate it? It's very simple. At the very moment, I'm feeling it. [...] my heart rate goes up. Mostly, that's what I physically experience. I would try to moderate it by. Breathing. Breathing. Grounding myself to the situation. Physically. Looking at some specific things, trying to be more conscious of the reality of the world around me, dissociating between the emotions I can't stop. But the reasoning part, which is at this moment, I feel like I'm disconnected, but also I can't recline control of emotions, At least I can try to talk with the caring part of me. It's also going out of the situation. For instance, going out of the room, having a shower, having a walk. Walking is... I feel like walking is very calming. (Gabriel, Pos. 110)

Subtheme: The “talk”

Despite various methods to cope with jealousy, the most prominent need for everyone is to , talk about it with their partner(s) and feel understood. Underlying there is the belief, their partner would not want to do something to hurt them, so the assumption is there that explaining oneself will help. Recognizing that jealousy stems from a wrong assumption, like xyz happens, which “must” mean, a threat to the relationship. These internal beliefs, which the participants don’t even support logically, can be resolved, by catching the feeling early, before their minds create an entire story about it.
Elias illustrates it as follows:

> I often find it relatively easy to respond to it, because when you immediately share, ‘Hey, I'm feeling this or that,’ then it's often relatively easy to see it as an emerging feeling and explore it together – but if it has already become a motive for action, or if it's positive or negative, so, [...] , well, once this feeling manifests itself, become too, um, fixed – hmm, yes, then unfortunately it becomes what I dislike so much, these pseudo causal chains, and then you believe that one thing led to another, and

> in the end it's more or less just emotional dispositions that create certain areas of tension, but that doesn't mean that one thing necessarily leads to the other, and exploring and acknowledging that together is something we try to do very directly" (Elias, Pos. 141-145)

In these conversations, participants typically express the emotional impact of the situation to help their partner understand where the feeling is coming from. Hearing their partner's perspective often provides context that eases the jealousy, as both feel more understood. Simply being asked what they need - rather than assumptions being made-is described as especially calming. If co-regulation is possible at the moment, it often involves verbal reassurance (e.g., "Me going on a date with someone else doesn't negate my feelings for you") and physical gestures like hugging, kissing, or breathing together. Participants also noted that making concrete future plans, like scheduling a date night, can serve as a grounding reminder of commitment and care, both before a triggering event and during its aftermath.

Hannah, who has an additional background in psychotherapy but also practises non-monogamy and relationship anarchy for the longest of the participants, 17 years, explained her steps, when supporting a jealous partner:

> So, I usually just let it be for a moment and listen to what the person wants to say. Depending on how emotionally distant the person is from me at that moment, if they are able to communicate immediately, then I offer physical contact, and then it's usually resolved through physical contact and saying something like, 'Hey, I love you, [...] and then we cuddle a bit and then we kiss briefly and then security is usually restored. If the person only communicates once they have already distanced themselves emotionally, it naturally takes longer for me to offer physical contact. Then I try to be rational[...]: look, I totally understand that jealousy comes up, it's unavoidable in this relationship concept that I live, it's completely normal, and none of us are immune to jealousy, but at the same time, look at the relationship we have, it has so many beautiful things, I'm so grateful for it in my life, I'm so happy about it and I don't know, tomorrow we'll see each other again, or next Tuesday we've

> already planned our cute date, I'm looking forward to that too – um – and I also understand that the dynamic with Hinz irritates you a bit, because it's completely different from the one with you, but that's exactly the beauty of it, that I get to experience many different dynamics and I wouldn't want to miss the one with you (Hannah, Pos. 1079

This illustrates beautifully how many CNM people gain a deep understanding of emotional regulation and empathy for their partner, which helps them navigate the unsettling feeling of jealousy.

5. Discussion

5.1 Brief Recap of Aims & Key Findings

The aim of this research was to investigate how jealousy is experienced and made sense of in the relational lives of non-monogamous people in Vienna. Through the application of reflexive thematic analysis of ten interviews with CNM people from Vienna, we identified four themes. Theme 1 (Need for Individualized Relationships & Joy of Agency) illustrated that the participants' ability to construct their relationships according to their own standards was fundamental to their unique level of engagement with jealousy. Theme 2 (Jealousy as Perceived Relationship Insecurity) explored jealousy as an involuntary and disruptive response to perceived relationship insecurity. This was perceived as frustrating by the participants due to its contradictory nature to their belief system, and was managed through self- and partner-empathy. Theme 3 (Journey with/through Jealousy) established how participants' intentional and proactive practice of CNM through communication provided a base to stabilize their relationships through the process of habituation of jealousy. Finally, Theme 4 (Jealousy Toolbox) explored how participants' solution-oriented approach to jealousy leads to the development of individualized, effective tools for its regulation.

Our analysis showed participants were able to improve their relationship containing jealousy through heightened skills of self-reflection and the ability to resist and deconstruct normative structures, learned through engagement in CNM.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings with Literature

The present dataset included 10 rich interviews, which provided valuable insight into the lived reality of CNM individuals and their relation to jealousy. The research compiled in the literature review will now be referenced to situate the present finding within the wider context of research.

Jealousy Literature:

Participants frequently described working through avoidant attachment patterns, something they found more manageable within their CNM structure, which they characterized by clear, empathetic communication. Other forms of insecure attachment were not mentioned, which may suggest that individuals with anxious attachment and heightened jealousy find it more difficult to engage in the kinds of CNM structures presented. This aligns with Bowlby and later research by Feeney & Noller (1996). The two jealousy types reported by Barelds & Barelds-Dijkst (2007) were partly shown in the participants. None of the participants mentioned anxious jealousy. However, reactive jealousy was throughout discussed, but framed negatively, as the reaction also occurred, when no relationship-threatening situation happened. Due to the individualized and constructed nature of the CNM relationships discussed, it was shown that these jealousy definitions are not sufficient to describe the participants' reshaped version of jealousy.

The view of jealousy as a pair-bonding survival mechanism (Chapais, 2008; Hawkes, 1993) is partially supported. Participants did describe intense emotional reactions that could be interpreted as existential stress responses, indicating that an attachment bond had been formed (Feeney & Noller, 1996). However, they explicitly rejected this biological "information" as useful. Participants emphasized that they did not rely on exclusive bonds for survival and had actively worked to rewire these responses. This finding supports research on amygdala activation in response to jealousy but adds that participants tend to *downregulate* the seriousness of their reaction when recognizing there is no real relational threat. Triggers occur without the actual risk of loss. This framing of jealousy as an *irrational but learned behavior* was a central and novel theme, especially its perceived conflict with non-monogamous values and fulfillment. Harmon-Jones' findings on basal ganglia and approach motivation offer a helpful lens. Participants' descriptions of frustration and reactivity suggest internal conflict: the urge to act versus the value of self-regulation and relational empathy. Lastly, in line with Legerstee & Hart (2010), participants actively rejected the notion of a partner as an extension of themselves,

emphasizing their values of agency and freedom. This strong need for autonomy in the design of CNM relationships is consistent with previous research (Griffith, 2024).

CNM Literature

While one participant briefly mentioned a negative reaction to disclosing their relationship structure, this was not a central topic. The common stereotypes of CNM individuals being more promiscuous, less moral, or less committed (Rodriguez et al., 2021) were clearly *not* supported. On the contrary, participants emphasized how demanding CNM is, emotionally and practically, and how much commitment it requires to continuously confront insecurities, attachment wounds, and communication difficulties. The motivations for exploring CNM identified by Tatum et al. (2023) were reproduced by the participants. Bisexuality and the desire to explore connections across genders while partnered, as well as curiosity, exposure to CNM though mutuals, were common themes.

The belief that love is not finite was also prevalent and well aligned with existing literature. Early non-monogamous tendencies, such as not being able to stay monogamous, were mentioned. The common trajectory of beginning with an open relationship (Murphy et al., 2020) was confirmed. Mononormativity (Rothschild 2018) was acknowledged and aimed to deconstruct by the participants. Their struggle with the external construct of monogamy and the taught behaviour pattern related to jealousy was a central part of the present study. A lack of non-monogamous media representation, especially of healthy, committed CNM relationships, was also named as a hindrance to normalization and identity development. Regarding jealousy levels, (Edlund *et al.,* 2022; Moors 2021; Mogilski & Welling, 2017) we have limited discussion power, since the participants were all CNM. However, all monogamous relationships mentioned included a heightened jealousy, from which the participants tried to distance themselves from. Additionally, the differentiation between emotional and cognitive jealousy as researched by Mogilski and Welling (2017) was harder to support, since there were no monogamous baseline to compare.

However, some Participants did describe that they experienced increased levels of jealousy when starting with CNM, but this was temporary. As they began reflecting and discussing

insecurities and triggers with their partners and developing regulation-tools, and the habituation took in effect the jealousy could be improved over the time. Interestingly, most participants described themselves as not jealousy at all, before opening up their relationship constructs, suggesting that for more jealousy individuals, the process of CNM and learning to navigate jealousy would be harder. We would also like to add that, the research of jealousy in terms of levels, with the underlying assumption that less is better and even a conclusion that jealousy hinders people from trying CNM stems from a monogamous perspective, which is both not sufficient to study jealousy in CNM. The empathic attitude about recognizing that jealousy is part of the CNM journey and the effort into cultivating compersion instead shows this clearly.

5.3 Novel contributions

The present research revealed several findings that extend the scope of existing literature. We found support for ambiamorous orientation, as not all participants agreed, that being CNM was part of their identity. Additionally, it was extended on the notion that there is an overall benefit of not being dependent on one's partner: participants actively constructed larger support systems and encouraged more reliance on community than romantic partners in a classic sense. Jealousy's role as a mechanism against relationship-security was rejected by the participants, as they reconstructed the feeling to fit their relationships better. The strategic use of rules and boundary-setting to regain security, destabilised through jealousy, was confirmed. However, the idea of jealousy as a response that can weaken through habituation brought insight that only a cognitive science angle could provide. Likewise, the importance of communication to navigate jealousy was confirmed, but expanded with the addition of emphasis on the timing: talking before the emotional trigger turns into action. That detail added nuance to what's already well-researched.

A major finding was around regulating jealousy. The skills the participants gained through their engagement in CNM provided them with the base of developing regulating strategies that were based on the idea of jealousy not as something to be avoided, but as a natural part of the CNM experience that can be incorporated. This angle added depth to the view of jealousy in both monogamous and CNM relationships, as both communities often aim to

reduce the space jealousy takes up. In monogamy, by avoiding triggers; in CNM, by chasing an ideal of being above jealousy. This tension made the regulation-first approach especially relevant.

5.5 Reflexivity and Researcher Role

In the present research, my analysis and interpretation of the data were influenced by my role as a peer of the non-monogamous participants. My familiarity with the non-monogamous community in Vienna, as well as my own prior development in engaging with jealousy, contributed to the depth of my analysis. However, this closeness may also have led me to focus more on aspects with positive valence, like agency and community, rather than on more ambivalent or distressing elements. A different researcher, coming from a different background, would likely have focused on other parts of the data and constructed different themes. The themes developed here should therefore not be viewed as universal claims but as co-constructed through my interaction with the participant group.

That said, there were also multiple occasions in which I encountered perspectives that challenged my prior beliefs, such as the usefulness of reassuring phrases, or the tension between the need for freedom and the desire for commitment. These insights led me to broaden my view on jealousy and non-monogamous relationships. Interestingly, when I began this research, I was not particularly drawn to jealousy as a topic. Yet, placing the emotion in both anthropological and contemporary societal contexts surprised me with its depth, relevance, and scope of influence.

In particular, I came to understand how strongly the concept of (in)security underpins experiences of jealousy, more than I had initially anticipated. I also began to question the overall usefulness of "jealousy" as a concept itself, given that the modern society me and the participants live in, does not lead to the monogamous pair-bound being the most reliable support of survival. Lastly, I became more aware of how deeply embedded the cultural belief is that one’s life should be centered around a single partner, something I hadn’t critically reflected on to this extent before.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research directions

While this research does not claim to produce generalizable findings in a statistical sense, it offers rich, experiential insights into how individuals in non-monogamous relationships construct and reframe jealousy. The themes identified may resonate with others navigating similar relational contexts and offer conceptual tools to support reflection, dialogue, or emotional self-understanding. In this way, the study aims to contribute to wider conversations around emotional diversity, relationship ethics, and alternative models of intimacy.

However, the diversity or missing thereof in different aspects affects the transferability of the results. For example, the participant pool formed a mixed group concerning relationship type and non-monogamy experience, results would be more homogeneous regarding certain directions, if the participant pool had only included for example new couples only starting out with an open relationship, who all were concerned with more similar struggles. However, the participant group was consciously created this way, and multiple findings, including aspects like the journey through jealousy can only be found when looking at a diverse group like used here.

Likewise, there was no aim for inter-coder agreement, as the role of the researcher is defined here as a co-constructing element of the results of this research and is embraced. For future research on the topic, a researcher with a different scientific background, like clinical psychology or neuroscience, studying a similar dataset would produce different results and could widen the scope of qualitative analysis possibilities in this field.

In regards to the struggles the participants face as a marginalized group with limited resources and community availability, there can also be drawn intersectional generalisability. The researcher-participant dynamics contributes to the potential limitations of the results: I built an easy rapport with some participants, while others found it more difficult to open up about the personal topic of this study for various reasons. One of these reasons is that the two interviews conducted in English were neither the participants' nor the researcher's native language, so the answers were more considered and less spontaneous, which affected their emotional and linguistic depth.

Methodologically, a prolonged cooperation with the participants would have benefited the results. A later check-up or the incorporation of a diary assignment, at a time when the participant actively experiences jealousy could have led to more illustrative accounts of jealousy. Additionally, because the results were contextualized with findings from different disciplines and this research is conducted as part of the cognitive science department, this line of research would benefit from using different scientific methods, like neuroimaging software, testing out the previously mentioned intranasal-Oxytocin on non-monogamous participants or modelling jealous behaviour in multi-agent systems.

Furthermore, a more embodied interview approach might have deepened the emotional resonance of participants' accounts. Beginning interviews with grounding exercise, such as closing the eyes, connecting to the body, and recalling a moment of jealousy-could help participants articulate their experiences more viscerally and "from the heart." Finally, asking at the outset how relevant jealousy is to their lives, and checking back in with some participants after the analysis phase, could have added further depth and clarity to the findings.

5.7 Conclusions

This research was aimed at exploring the lived experience of non-monogamous participants diverging from the societally taught approach of jealousy and integrating the feeling into their lives. Analysis showed participants were able to improve their relationship with jealousy through the heightened skills of self-reflection and ability to resist and deconstruct normative structures, learned through the engagement in CNM.

By focusing on a participant group that actively engages with jealousy rather than avoiding it, this research contributes novel insights to the field of cognitive science and emotions research. It highlights the value of CNM communities as participants in emotion-related studies, given their ongoing and intentional work with jealousy as a social and cognitive construct. Situating jealousy through interdisciplinary lenses, including attachment theory,

evolutionary biology, and affective neuroscience, allowed for a richer and more grounded analysis that could expand the scope of emotions research.

Through the use of reflexive thematic analysis within this study we were able to highlight the depth and complexity of non-monogamous people's struggles to break societal norms regarding relationships and their approach to jealousy. The flexibility of reflexive TA provided the framework for working with the data set to create the resulting nuanced picture

Practically, these findings can inform therapists and clinicians working with CNM clients or those with attachment-related challenges, offering a more nuanced understanding of jealousy and its regulation. They may also support individuals beginning their own CNM journeys, providing validation and tools for reflection. Additionally, this work may serve as a scientific backbone for CNM Influencers (Social Media, CNM-Event Organizers and hosts of community Events), which can act as role models, as well as a groundwork for journalists.

On a broader level, the study adds to the growing body of work challenging mononormativity and invites society and individuals to reconsider jealousy not as a reason for conflict and blame, but as a way to actively engage with one-self, practising curiosity and empathy.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Interview Guide

Hi, thanks for taking the time to talk with me about relationships. Let's get right into it:

1. **Relationship**
   - 1.1. How long have you been non-monogamous? What led you to the decision and what were the main reasons for it?
   - 1.2. How would you title/describe your relationship style (open relationship, polyamory, relationship anarchy, etc.) and what is your current relationship status? (Single, solo poly, one partner, multiple partners, dating, etc.)
   - 1.3. What aspects of [insert relationship style]do you particularly enjoy/what gives you the most?
   - 1.4. What aspects are particularly difficult? (Is jealousy one of them?)

2. **Jealousy**
   - 2.1. How do you define jealousy in your own experience?
   - 2.2. Do you experience jealousy?
   - 2.3. What are situations that trigger jealousy for you?
     - 2.3.1. What factors contribute to it?
     - 2.3.2. Has this changed since being non-monogamous?
   - 2.4. When you notice that you are jealous:
     - 2.4.1. How do you feel about it/how do you evaluate it?
     - 2.4.2. What does your handling of it typically look like, both for you yourself and with your partner? (what is your reaction? What steps do you take?)
     - 2.4.3. Did this change? Did you try different things?
   - 2.5. When your partner gets jealous:
     - 2.5.1. How do you feel about it/how do you evaluate it?
     - 2.5.2. How do you typically handle it

2.6. (If there is a conversation) How does that conversation go?

2.6.1. What (if any) regulation techniques are discussed?

2.6.2. (else) How do you talk about such situations within relationships? How do you handle it?

2.6.3. What has worked for you in the past?

2.7. Have you talked about jealousy with other non-monogamous people?

2.7.1. How do they view/handle jealousy? (Similar to you/different?)

2.8. Have you talked to monogamous people about jealousy?

2.8.1. How do they view/handle jealousy? (similar to you/different?)

2.9. Do you want to add important points regarding your relationship- and non-monogamy-journey?

7.2 Translation of the consent form for participants

Declaration of consent to the collection and processing of of personal interview data

Research project: Master's thesis: *Living With and Through Jealousy: Qualitative Research on Jealousy Among Non-Monogamous People*

Executing institution: Comenius University Bratislava

Project management: Jennifer Kubitzek

Interviewer: Jennifer Kubitzek

Interview date: _____

Description of the research project: ☐ Oral explanation ☐ Written explanation

The interviews are recorded with a recording device and written down by the project management. For the further scientific evaluation of the interview texts, all information that could lead to the identification of the person is changed or removed from the text. In scientific publications, interviews are only quoted in excerpts in order to ensure that the overall context of events cannot lead to the identification of the person. Personal contact details are stored separately from interview data and are not accessible to third parties. After completion of the research project, your contact data will be automatically deleted unless you expressly consent to further storage for the purpose of contacting you for related research projects. Of course, you can object to longer storage at any time.

Participation in the interviews is voluntary. You have the option of cancelling an interview at any time, refusing further interviews and withdrawing your consent to the recording and transcription of the interview(s) without incurring any disadvantages.

I agree to take part in the following interview(s) as part of the above-mentioned research project ☐ yes☐ no

I would like to receive information about the completed Master's thesis. You will be contacted again after completion of the project. ☐ yes☐ no

_____ _____

First name; surname Signature

7.3 List of codes

Note: Jealousy in some codes listed as “J” for practicality

Theme 1: Need for Individualized Relationships & Joy of Agency: Why can't be accepted, that the heart grows and is not limited?

- Jealousy needed for good relationship (+)
- J in monogamy (+)
- Monogamy as not enough (+) (+) (+)
- assigned seat for J in relationship-construct
- being able to love multiple people (+) (+)/love not finite
- customizing and challenging pre-defined norms (+) (+) (+) (+)
- customizing/creating language
- deep wish for boundless connection (+)
- difficulty understanding relationship norms (+)
- early non-monogamous tendencies (+) (+) (+)
- easy when social bubble is alike
- expectation of partner to self-regulate
- fluid approach to relationships (+) (+)
- freedom > control (+) (+) (+)
- frustration about monogamy as norm (+)
- label "relationship" comes with expectations
- multitude of connections (+)
- need for non-monogamous role models/examples
- negative tone around unreflexive relationships
- perception without judgement (der war vorher hier noch nicht drinne.

Theme 2:Jealousy as Perceived Relationship Insecurity: Frustration of taught patterns

- definition J (+)
- exclusion as trigger of J (+) (+)
- fight-flight reaction to insecurity feeling

- J as anger-driven /accusatory (+)
- possessiveness over partner (+)
- J as loss of control (+) (+)
- J trigger as responsibility
- toxic manipulative jealousy (+) (+)
- insecurity/jealousy as reason against non-monogamy (+) (+) (+)
- J as loss of security
- J as multitude of feelings (+) (+) (+)
- J as perceived threat (+) (+) (+)
- J as trigger of abandonment issues
- J as wanting this connection to be special (+)
- J because of unmet needs (+) (+)
- J irrational (+)
- rules for security (+)
- cheating in non-monogamy possible
- comparing as negative reaction
- factors for higher J (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+)
- insecurity and fear around perceived rival in love
- methods to ensure security
- need to stay in control (+)
- negative attitude around J (+)
- proactive reassurance can avoid J/insecurity
- promises/expectability

Theme 3:Journey with/through Jealousy: Breaking the cycle

- Communication (+) (+) (+) (+)
- perception without judgement cannot control for experience
- communication needs different for every relationship
- conversation as ongoing solution
- honesty as basing need (+)

- recognizing productive communication difficult, when emotional
- relationship needs individualised as base line (+)
- sensible communication
- Learnings (+)
- Non-monogamy as intentional effortful practice (+) (+)
- detachment of self-worth from partner's actions
- empathically of unspoken feelings of partner
- non-monogamy as additional stress/work factor
- prioritizing loved ones benefit
- time management
- understanding of individual perspectives (ToM) (+)
- valuing different characters of different relationships/connections (+)
- Process
- habituation of previously triggering situations (+) (+) (+)
- focus on shared positive time
- learning curve while gaining experience in non-monogamy (+) (+) (+) (+)
- learnings through non-monogamy help with all relationships
- relationship becomes safe and calm over time
- rewarding
- worth it
- Solution oriented J(+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+)
- boundaries setting (+)
- confronting
- facing own fears
- reflective about own pattern (+)

Theme 4: Jealousy Toolbox: "you don't have to be afraid, but you are allowed to feel afraid"

- J feeling temporarily
- first, self-reflection (+)
- the 'talk' when a triggering situation occurred

- awareness of emotional activation
- seeking connection with emotional ‘rival’
- allowing space for emotion
- naming and expressing emotional impact
- asking what they need
- attachment theory
- co-regulation with partner (+)
- communication as key
- community as resource to regulate
- couples therapy
- expectation to communicate feelings
- first feel, reason and discussion later
- future plans as giving security (+)
- getting infos can ease J
- liking rival makes J handling easier
- literature about non-monogamy etc .
- not solving situation for partner
- not taking J too serious because irrational
- physical contact to regulate
- reassurance
- searching for reason of J
- self-regulation
- strategies for handling hard communication

9.4 schematic representation of the themes