

APA Psychologist Locator: Language Recommendations for CNM and Kink/Diverse Sexualities

March 7, 2019

Dear members of the APA Psychologist Locator leadership team:

Thank you for your willingness to receive our proposal regarding how to make the APA Psychologist Locator tool more inclusive. We understand that this request may require time from your team. As fellow affiliates with the American Psychological Association, we know that issues of diversity and inclusion are core values shared among us all, and we are hopeful that these recommendations will improve the usability of and traffic to your locator tool. In light of this, we have included our suggested recommendations as well as a summary of current research addressing the discrimination and clinical treatment of individuals engaged in consensual non-monogamy (CNM) and kink/diverse sexualities justifying our proposal.



A couple months ago we started a [petition to support relationship diversity](#) in range of domains. Although we have not started formally marketing this petition, more than 500 individuals have endorsed their support for including consensual non-monogamy on healthcare provider directories. Bree Zimmerman and Deanna Richards recently joined the Task Force and are leading our Healthcare Provider Locator Campaign, which is designed to bring attention to this issue and advocate for inclusion on healthcare provider locator directories. We also recently brought on a Marketing team that will be promoting this and other issues and anticipate that once we start our awareness campaigns, support will continue to grow.

In the 1970s, during the early stages of the LGBTQ movement, individuals were provided opportunities to take a stand for justice and compassion by supporting a community that was misunderstood and unjustly stigmatized. Similar opportunities with regard to consensual non-monogamy and kink/diverse sexualities are presented today. [APA Division 44](#) endorsed the legitimacy of the diverse relationship and sexualities movement through formally sanctioning the Consensual Non-monogamy Task Force. We see this as a historic opportunity for the APA Psychologist Locator to join APA Division 44 and the Consensual Non-monogamy Task Force by saying yes to being inclusive of CNM and kink/diverse sexualities by creating new categories for therapist/client matching.

We also look forward to learning how we may be able to support you in promoting your site as an inclusive space for our constituents. Below, we have included our two recommended updates and justification.

Suggested Changes to the APA Therapist Locator:

1) Under the current 'Practice Areas/All Practice Areas,' we recommend adding two new searchable checkboxes:

-Consensual Non-Monogamies/Open Relationships

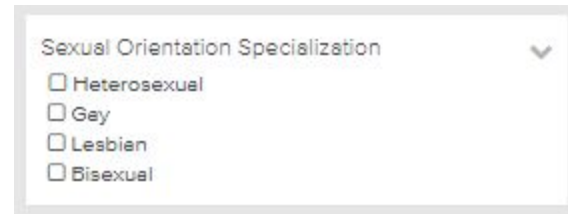
-Kink/Diverse Sexualities

We are also recommending *either* of the following:

2A) Modify ‘Sexual Orientation Specialization’ to either ‘Sexuality and Relationship Specialization’ or ‘Sexual Orientation, Sexuality, and Relationship Specialization’ with the following sub-categories:

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Consensual Non-monogamies/Open Relationships
- Kink/BDSM/Fetish Sexualities

or

A screenshot of a web interface showing a dropdown menu. The menu is titled "Sexual Orientation Specialization" and has a downward arrow on the right. Below the title, there are four checkboxes, each followed by a label: "Heterosexual", "Gay", "Lesbian", and "Bisexual". All checkboxes are currently unchecked.

2B) Leave the ‘Sexual Orientation Specialization’ category as is and add ‘Sexuality and Relationship Specialization’ as an additional searchable category with the following sub-categories:

- Consensual Non-monogamies/Open Relationships
- Kink/BDSM/Fetish Sexualities

Background and Justification

Finding love and intimacy is a big part of most people’s lives. Relationships are often the source of people’s most fulfilling moments, and, at times, most stressful moments. Intimate relationships are one of the most common topics addressed in therapy, and an increasing number of people are in or considering consensually non-monogamous relationships (e.g., Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017; Moors, 2017). Despite the growing interest, it is still very challenging to use the available resources to search for a therapist that is educated about consensually non-monogamous relationships. Here, we provide background information on consensually non-monogamous relationships and outline five points that illustrate the need to include consensual non-monogamy as a searchable term in the APA Therapist Locator interface.

Consensual non-monogamy is a rising issue in the field of Psychology, as highlighted by the Division 44 of the American Psychological Association establishing the first ever Consensual Non-monogamy Task Force, the entity on whose behalf we write to you. We are dedicated to addressing issues of inclusion, with improving access to culturally competent mental health services being one of our top priorities.

1. Consensual Non-monogamy is a Large and Growing Practice/Population

[More than one in five](#) people in the United States have engaged in a consensually non-monogamous relationship at some point in their life and approximately 4-5% of people are currently in this type of relationship, which is roughly the [size of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities combined](#) (Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017; Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Conley, 2014). Interest in polyamory and open relationships (two types of consensually non-monogamous relationships) have also markedly increased [over the past 10 years](#) (Moors, 2017).

2. Consensual Non-monogamy is Highly Stigmatized

Despite the prevalence of consensually non-monogamous relationships, people who challenge the monogamous status quo are looked down upon. [Recent](#) experimental research point to how consensually non-monogamous relationships are judged negatively in a number of ways, such as being perceived as being less trusting, less meaningful, and less satisfying compared to monogamous relationships (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013). People in consensually non-monogamous relationships are even judged more harshly on arbitrary characteristics such as how likely they are to walk their dog or pay their taxes on time. Notably, this stigma appears to be based on stereotypes, as research looking into presumed differences in relationship quality between people engaged in consensual non-monogamy and monogamy has generally found that people in both types of relationships report similar levels of relationship quality (e.g., trust, commitment) and well-being (e.g., [Conley, Matsick, Moors, & Ziegler, 2017](#); [Rubel & Bogaert, 2015](#); [Wood, Desmarais, Burleigh, Milhausen, 2018](#)).

3. Minority Stress and Psychological Distress

People who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual are [disproportionately exposed to rejection, discrimination, and victimization](#) compared to heterosexually identified individuals (e.g., Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005). As a consequence, these individuals tend to [experience mental health](#) issues (Cochran, 2001) and as a result, [utilize mental health services more frequently](#) (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003). The process in which stigma and discrimination create a hostile environment that leads to increased mental health problems is known as [minority stress](#) (Meyer, 2003). Forthcoming [research](#) indicates that more than one-half of consensually non-monogamous identified individuals have experienced discrimination based on their relationship status in some form, despite frequently concealing their relationship (Witherspoon, submitted for publication). [Recent research](#) has also shown that people engaged in consensually non-monogamous relationship experience minority stress, which was positively related to psychological distress (e.g., self-reported depression and anxiety; Witherspoon, 2018).

4. Most Therapists Do Not Receive Training for Consensually Non-monogamous Relationships

Mental health providers are uniquely positioned to either help relieve or compound the impact of stigma experienced by their clients. Ideally, therapists would be trained on how to effectively recognize and counteract stigma associated with consensually non-monogamous relationships. Unfortunately, individuals engaged in consensual non-monogamy who seek psychotherapy frequently [encounter discriminatory or microaggressive attitudes](#) and [practices by mental health clinicians](#) (Witherspoon, 2012; Schechinger, Sakaluk, & Moors, 2018). Thus, it is important that for those therapists who have education and experience working with people engaged in consensually non-monogamous have the ability to identify themselves. Likewise, people engaged in these stigmatized relationships are then able to connect with mental health professionals who are inclusive of and trained on consensually non-monogamous relationships.

5. Searching for a Consensual Non-monogamy-affirming Therapist is Linked to Better Therapy Outcomes

In the [largest study to date on consensual non-monogamy therapy](#), members of this Task Force found that nearly one-half of people engaged in consensual non-monogamy specifically looked for a therapist who was consensual non-monogamy-affirming, highlighting how important finding a consensual non-monogamy-affirming therapist was to them (Schechinger, Sakaluk, & Moors, 2018). Those who did search for a consensual non-monogamy-affirming therapist had better treatment outcomes than those who did not search. Despite half our sample looking for a consensual non-monogamy-affirming therapist, one-fifth rated their therapist as lacking the basic knowledge of consensual non-monogamy issues necessary to be effective. These findings highlight the importance of therapist education and creating avenues for consensually non-monogamous clients to find therapists who have been adequately educated about consensual non-monogamy. Thus, one way to improve visibility of therapists who are knowledgeable and affirming of consensual non-monogamy is to allow therapists to indicate consensual non-monogamy (e.g., polyamory, open relationships) as a type of relationship/expression of sexuality they specialize in on popular therapist locator websites, such as the APA Psychologist Locator. In February 2019, *Psychology Today* added “Open Relationships Non-monogamy” and “Sex-Positive, Kink Allied” as searchable criteria in their Therapist Locator.

BDSM/Diverse Sexualities

Much of the same issues indicated above for consensual non-monogamy also apply to kink sexualities. Kink is an umbrella term that covers esoteric erotic interests, behaviors, practices, relationships, and identities. Aspects of kink include eroticizing intense sensations (including but not limited to “pain”), eroticizing power dynamics and differences, enduring fascination with specific sensory stimuli (including specific body parts or inanimate objects “fetish”), role play or dramatizing erotic scenarios, and erotic activities that induce heightened or altered states of consciousness.

More specifically, there is also evidence of enacted stigma, discrimination, and prejudice against people practicing kink/BDSM behaviors and identities. A 2008 survey conducted by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom of kink- and poly-identified people found that 37.5% of over 3,000 respondents reported being discriminated against or had

experienced some form of harassment or violence, once their alternative sexuality behaviors or identities were made known (Wright, 2008). Within this study, 4.5% of participants reported discrimination from mental health providers. As one respondent wrote: "The therapist refused to continue to see me until I acknowledge that I was being 'Abused'" (Wright, 2008, p. 11). Consistent with results of Kolmes et al. (2006), Hoff and Sprott's (2009) qualitative study of heterosexual couples involved in BDSM and their therapy experiences found mental health clinician bias in treatment. More specifically, Hoff and Sprott (2009) found that therapists sometimes terminated psychotherapy because they held a pathologizing view of BDSM interests and behaviors, and assumed that BDSM is associated with an unhealthy relationship dynamic.

An Opportunity

In conclusion, people engaged in diverse expressions of relationships and sexuality (consensual non-monogamy, kink, BDSM) represent a sizable portion of adults in the U.S. Moreover, people engaged in consensually non-monogamous relationship and practice kink/BDSM frequently experience discriminatory or microaggressive practices by therapists (who typically are not trained on these issues), and appear to have better outcomes when working with therapists who are affirming of their identities (e.g., Schechinger et al., 2018; Hoff & Sprott, 2009). Without clear avenues to find therapists that are inclusive of consensually non-monogamous relationship, kink, BDSM, and other diverse aspects of human sexuality, it can be incredibly challenging for people with these interests and identities to find the mental healthcare they may be seeking. Restricting these categories as search terms on healthcare provider locator directories (whether intentional or not), functionally becomes a tangible form of discrimination because it reinforces a harmful erasure of these identities and creates a barrier for these stigmatized populations from accessing the health care providers that are best equipped to support them. Healthcare locator directories such as APA Psychologist Locator play a key role as gatekeepers, and have an opportunity to help alleviate some of the additional burden this community has to go through in order to find the culturally competent care they need and deserve.

We recognize that providing education is an important first step to promoting equity and inclusion. In light of these points, we hope we have provided ample evidence to clarify how we believe it is important to add *consensual non-monogamies* and *kink/diverse sexualities* as search terms on therapist locator websites. Thank you again for your interest in creating avenues for these stigmatized populations to access therapists who can effectively support them. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions you may have about our recommendations.

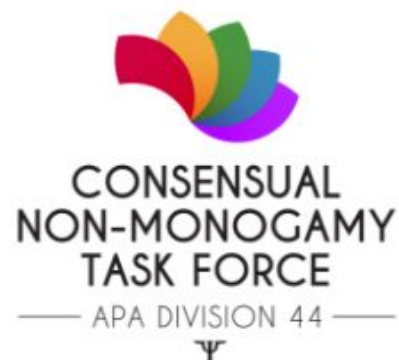
We are also happy to collaborate in promoting the APA Psychologist Locator and to our expanding networks of psychologists as well as the consensual non-monogamy and kink communities. We know that many individuals we represent feel very passionate about this issue and would be delighted to see this step toward inclusivity.

Highest regards,

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