

Longevity and Intimacy in Polyamorous Relationships

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## Abstract

Cultural bias in favor of monogamy is pervasive, and there is evidence of significant therapist bias leading to discrimination against people who are in multiple concurrent relationships (Knapp, 1974; Hymer & Rubin, 1982). Very little is known about this population or the viability of open relationships, and little research exists addressing this deficit. The primary purpose of this study was to explore whether longevity and deep intimacy exist in polyamorous (consensual, non-monogamous) relationships. Using an on-line survey, we recruited 340 respondents over 18 years of age who reported current involvement in at least one consensually open relationship. Respondents filled out the Holt Relationship Intimacy Questionnaire (HRIQ) measuring three different kinds of intimacy (emotional, physical and intellectual) (Holt et al., 2009). Participants also answered questions what influences the decision to be in polyamorous relationships, what polyamorous relationship structures look like, and demographics of this population. Each participant filled out the HRIQ for up to four current relationships, resulting in collection of intimacy data on a total of 721 relationships. We compared intimacy scores for the primary or longest standing relationship with intimacy scores for all other current relationships. Using an independent samples t-test, we found a statistically significant difference in emotional ( $t(719) = 12.68, p < .001$ ) and physical ( $t(719) = 6.32, p < .001$ ) intimacy between respondents' primary/longest relationship and all other relationships. This suggests having multiple consensual concurrent relationships neither creates nor results from low levels of intimacy in the original or primary relationship. Length of relationship described as primary or longest ( $n = 340$ ) ranged from .04-55 years, with a mean of 8 years. Length of all relationships total ( $n = 758$ ) ranged from .01-55 years, with a mean of 4.85. These findings suggest non-monogamous relationships, whether or not they are described as primary, have the capacity to be long-term. We hope presenting this information will help health and mental health care providers revise their assumptions and challenge cultural biases about polyamory, leading to improved care that respects the broad diversity of viable relationship structures.

## Longevity and Intimacy in Polyamorous Relationships

### **Introduction**

There is much disagreement in both the literature and popular culture about definitions of terms such as “polyamory”, “non-monogamy”, and “open relationship”. For the purposes of this study, we use the terms interchangeably, and define polyamory as an intimate relationships in which there exists a negotiated and consensual agreement that one, some, or all partners are free to engage in additional intimate and/or sexual relationships.

Monogamy is so embedded in our cultural understanding of relationships that most people are unaware of any other options; this leads to problems when confronted with a desire for an intimate or sexual relationship in addition to an existing relationship. Deliberate and consensual monogamy is one option, but the cultural ideal of monogamy may lead to far more people choosing the options of pushing down feelings and building resentment (and decreasing intimacy) with one’s partner; following one’s urges resulting in secret-keeping, lying and damaging trust in one’s relationship; or ending the old relationship in order to be free to participate in the new one (Taormino, 2008). Taormino notes that there are other relationship options, all involving building and maintaining relationships in which honest communication is valued and trust is nurtured, in which the couple openly discusses relationship expectations and needs, and come to a mutual understanding about whether the relationship rules will include monogamy. Taormino suggests that creating a consensually non-monogamous relationship can be a viable option for some couples (Taormino, 2008).

As therapists, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs can lead to biases that limit our ability to skillfully serve diverse populations. Furthermore populations of people who do not conform to our cultural norms often experience emotional and cognitive dissonance which skillful therapy could be of help in treating. For these reasons, we are exploring two commonly held cultural beliefs about open relationships. First, that true intimacy is only achievable through monogamous relationships, and second, that long term, stable, open relationships are a myth and do not really exist except in theory.

The research available on open relationships is very limited, and primarily qualitative and exploratory in nature, making it difficult for clinicians to educate themselves about this population.

Within our study, we explore the extent to which people report intimacy in polyamorous relationships. Additionally, we will look at relationship length in polyamorous relationships in order to assess the viability of this relationship style for those preferring long term, stable relationships.

### **Literature Review**

Is monogamy necessary for deep intimacy in long-term relationships? Extramarital sex (EMS) has been widely studied, but is generally assumed to refer to infidelity, which is categorically different from consensual polyamory with regard to honesty, secrecy, and trust. One study (Sharlin, Kaslow, & Hammerschmidt, 2000) identified the following essential ingredients for long-term satisfying marriages:

1. Good problem-solving and coping skills

2. Trust in each other including fidelity, integrity, and feeling “safe”
3. Permanent commitment to the marriage
4. Open, honest communication
5. Having fun together yet allowing some personal space
6. Shared value system, interests, and activities
7. Consideration, appreciation and reciprocity
8. Deep and abiding love

Given the lack of operationalized definitions for a number of these terms, the question of monogamy is not clearly addressed by the abovementioned study, nor by most studies on marital satisfaction, intimacy, or long term relationship success.

In the book *Hot Monogamy* (1994), Love & Robinson attribute increased fertility, overall physiological well-being, and fewer health problems to monogamy, along with higher levels of estrogen and testosterone in women and men respectively. This supposition has been more recently addressed in a study that demonstrated that men and women in polyamorous relationships actually had higher levels of testosterone (estrogen was not studied) than those in monogamous relationships (Van Anders, Hamilton, and Watson, 2007).

Love & Robinson (1994) also identify monogamy as the only source of extremely intimate sex fueled by love and emotional maturity, and a variety of emotional benefits including “a vast reservoir of peace and contentment (p. 14).” These conclusions are reached by equating monogamy with frequent intercourse, having a regular sex partner, being in a supportive love relationship, and being in a long-term relationship. We see no reason to conclude that monogamy

is the cause of these emotional benefits since all of these variables could theoretically exist in an open relationship as well.

Some kinds of conflict have been found to be quite functional in preserving relationship satisfaction over time, but conflict involving defensiveness, stubbornness, and withdrawal is likely to contribute to divorce over time (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Gottman identified a cascade of interactions: complaint/criticism leading to contempt, leading to defensiveness, and thence to stonewalling, as likely to result in divorce. He also established that couples who generally experience a ratio of five positive interactions to every negative one are likely to have successful relationships, whereas a higher proportion of negative interactions is linked to divorce (Gottman, 1994). Gottman's work suggests that the content of a disagreement (monogamy versus non-monogamy, for example) is less important to marital satisfaction and marital success than maintaining a 5:1 ratio of positive interactions and avoiding criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling in discussions. This provides some clues to how couples in successful, long-term polyamorous relationships might have achieved their success.

In order to examine any aspect of non-exclusive sexual relationships, it is clear that terms must be defined clearly and infidelity (which implies secret-keeping and broken trust) must be separated from polyamory (which implies consensual agreements about behavior). In an effort to clearly define fidelity and commitment, Anapol (2010) asserts that "faithfulness has more to do with honesty, respect, and loyalty than sexual exclusivity, and commitment is about keeping agreements (p. 13)." This definition separates process from content, suggesting that it is possible to have healthy relational processes in addition to a clear agreement about virtually any

configuration of relationship rules regarding sexual and intimate behavior. Of course, this leads to the conclusion that infidelity can occur not just in monogamous relationships, but also in polyamorous relationships (Anapol, 2010).

Two studies examining therapist's views of clients in non-monogamous relationships found significant negative bias. One study found that 17% of therapists stated they would directly attempt to influence their clients to abandon their lifestyle (Knapp, 1975). This study also found that polyamorous clients often fear that marriage counselors would condemn their sexual behavior as immoral and destructive. Another study found that therapists' negative bias overshadowed positive evaluations of their polyamorous clients, and also found that among clients who had previous therapy, 48-68% reported a perception of a non-supportive attitude in their previous therapist (Hymer & Rubin, 1982). Further, when asked about the potential psychopathology of people choosing open relationships, over one third of therapists polled believed such persons to be neurotic and to have personality disorders. Nearly one fifth stated such persons would be likely to have anti-social personalities (Knapp, 1975).

Peabody (1982) contends that although the general feeling amongst the public and a great number of therapists is negative toward open relationships, the limited existing research literature on polyamory casts open relationships in a much more positive light. Anapol (2010) suggests the following traits in people who have polyamorous relationships: a talent for intimate relating, high self-esteem, ability to multitask, a love for intensity, appreciation for diversity, good communication skills, an independent streak, team spirit, commitment to growth, sex positive outlook, flexibility, high intelligence, and accountability.

So, why then is there a disparity between the dominant cultural beliefs about polyamory and how polyamorists view themselves? Richtie and Barker (2006) argue that representations of romantic monogamous love serve the social function of maintaining monogamy as the dominant cultural construct. Language and culture appear to severely constrict relationship structure choice. Those people wishing to explore alternative relationship styles are not encouraged to feel they have any options. Even the term polyamory has only been in existence since the late 1980s, although the 'polyamorous lifestyle' has existed much longer (Anapol, 2010). Before the term polyamory, having multiple negotiated open relationships was often referred to as 'open marriage' or 'non-monogamy'. Studies on these relationship styles were few, but studies pointed to individuals in open marriages being just as well adjusted as those in traditional marriages (Peabody, 1982).

In a longitudinal study ) there were no statistically significant differences between individuals in sexually exclusive and sexually open marriages in terms of divorce and marital stability (Rubin & Adams, 1986). Public awareness and discussion of polyamory blossomed in the 1980's, recently enough that the research literature on polyamorous relationships is sparse and almost exclusively focused on qualitative studies (Anapol, 2010; Weitzman, Davidson, and Phillips Jr., 2009). Labriola (1999) produced an article on polyamorous relationship styles that has provided categorical criteria for further research. In this article the author describes four types of polyamorous relationships:

- primary/secondary in which secondary relationships revolve around the primary couple's needs



- multiple primary in which all partners are equal and decisions are made by the whole family
- multiple primary open in which all partners are free to do as they wish and decisions are made by each individual
- multiple non-primary in which individuals are essentially single and participate in multiple relationships with limited intimacy.

The only recent quantitative study in the area of non-monogamy involved the comparison of a group of non-monogamous gay men to a group of self-identified monogamous gay men (LaSala, 2004). Using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), LaSala found no differences between the two groups in relationship adjustment. Both groups of gay men were found to be within the functional range. This led LaSala to conclude that non-monogamy may be appropriate for some gay men. There is a glaring lack of further quantitative research regarding polyamorous relationships in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships. Establishing further research in this area could help polyamory be viewed as a viable relationship alternative for some people.

There is anecdotal evidence linking polyamorous relationships and intimacy. Authors such as Klesse (2006) and Anapol (2010) have described some of the basic tenets of polyamorous relationships in their experience. These factors include honesty, other directedness, and self-reflexivity. These factors have all been shown to be at the heart of intimacy (Klesse, 2006; Anapol, 2010). Eckstein and Goldman (2001) and Patrick et. al (2007) have found evidence linking intimacy to marital satisfaction and marital stability (as cited in Holt, Devlin,

Flamez, and Eckstein, 2009). Therefore, a relationship between intimacy and polyamorous relationships does seem to exist. With our study, we aim to quantitatively survey the degree to which intimacy is reported in polyamorous relationships. Additionally, we will look at relationship length in polyamorous relationships in order to assess the viability of this relationship style for those preferring long term, stable relationships. We will also seek to learn more about this population by gathering data on number of current relationships, factors influencing people to have polyamorous relationships, and which of Labriola's relationship structures are currently most common (Labriola, 1999).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited online by posting a recruitment message to various online groups (Fetlife.com and Polyamory.org) and sending a recruitment message to the list-serve for the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT). Participants were encouraged to spread word of our survey to other list-serves, news groups, friends, clients, etc. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and participants received no compensation but were invited to return to our blog for results of the study after January, 2012 ([www.polyamorystudy.wordpress.com](http://www.polyamorystudy.wordpress.com)).

Of the 496 people who responded, we excluded respondents under 18 years of age (n = 1), all incomplete surveys (n = 152) and any respondents not in at least one current polyamorous (here defined as an intimate relationship in which there exists a negotiated and consensual agreement that one, some, or all partners are free to engage in additional intimate and/or sexual

relationships) relationship (n = 3). This resulted in 340 total accepted respondents (see table 1 for basic demographic information).

**Table 1: Demographic Information**

N = 340

Age:

Range 18-71

Mean 34.07

Gender:

Male/Cis-Male 103

Female/Cis-Female 195

Transgender 6

Gender Fluid/Gender Queer 23

Other 2

No Answer 11

Race/Ethnicity:

White 318

White (Hispanic Origin) 12

Black or African American 13

American Indian or Alaska Native 23

Asian Indian 1

Filipino 1

Japanese 2

Korean 1

Other 18

Education Level:

High School/GED 82

Associates Degree	49
Bachelors Degree	127
Masters Degree	63
Doctoral Degree	19
Country of Residence:	
USA	261
Australia	13
Canada	20
United Kingdom	26
Finland	3
France	2
Germany	3
Ireland	6
New Zealand	2
Spain	1
Sweden	3

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## Procedures

Participants may have heard about our anonymous survey from any of the recruitment routes outlined above. Potential participants were directed to our webpage, [www.polyamorystudy.wordpress.com](http://www.polyamorystudy.wordpress.com), which was a free blog. The homepage of the blog had a description of our study and a link to the survey. The survey itself began with an informed consent page; those who wished to participate indicated consent by continuing on to the survey. The survey tool was [kwiksurveys.com](http://kwiksurveys.com) which enabled participants to leave the survey and return to it at a different time to prevent fatigue. There was no identifying information collected,

ensuring participant anonymity. After completing the survey, participants were advised they could access results of the survey by returning to the blog after January 1, 2012.

### **Instrumentation**

To measure intimacy we used the Holt Relationship Intimacy Questionnaire (HRIQ) (Holt et al, 2009). The HRIQ is a 33 item self-report inventory that concurrently measures facets of emotional, physical, and intellectual intimacy. Each question on the inventory asks respondents to answer on a 5-point likert type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). At the end of the measure each of the types of intimacy measured is scored on a scale from low to high (Holt et. al, 2009). The scale is very new, but attempts to capture a more robust picture of intimacy than previous measures. The measures of reliability (Guilford R coefficients) of each of the three scales are: physical .67, intellectual .79, and emotional .84 (M. Holt, personal communication, April 26, 2011). Although we acknowledge the reliability coefficients in this tool are lower than we would like, according to Richard Sprott, a representative of the community-academic consortium for research on alternative sexualities (personal communication, April 21,2011) a formal valid and reliable instrument that has been tested for the polyamorous population does not exist. Thus, we feel the HRIQ is an acceptable alternative. We modified the instrument to include basic demographic information including: age (self identified), gender identity (self identified), state/country of residence (self identified) and how many years identifying as polyamorous (with zero as an option). We also gathered information about highest level of education completed, and race/ethnicity.

Next, we asked participants to choose which of the following relationships styles most accurately describes their current situation:

- Primary/secondary polyamorous: in an intimate relationship with one partner, which includes an agreement enabling one or both partners to engage in sexual intimacy with other partners with the understanding that the original couple relationship is primary and any others revolve around the couple and the couple's needs
- Multiple primary polyamorous: in an intimate relationship with two or more partners in a primary relationship whereby all partners are considered to be equal or having the potential to become equal. Decisions are made by the entire family together, and all must agree.
- Multiple primary partners open polyamorous: all partners are given flexibility to develop any relationship they choose, and define those relationships on their own terms. Decisions are made by the individual.
- Multiple non-primary polyamorous: essentially single, but participating in multiple relationships with limited emotional intimacy.

Next, we asked participants how many relationships they currently are in, and for each, the length of the relationship and whether they consider that relationship to be primary.

Participants were able to give this basic information about up to 8 current relationships.

Demographics also included reasons participants identified as important in why they have open relationships. First, participants chose all options that were applicable, and then they were asked which one option they would choose as the most important. The options were:

- It's just the way I am
- It just happened and I went with it
- Desire for more sex
- Desire for other kinds of sex/sex practices
- Desire for more variety in partners
- Freedom/independence
- Desire for more intimacy/closeness
- Religious reasons
- Philosophical reasons
- Desire for sex with another gender
- My partner wanted to explore polyamory
- Protection from being alone

Participants were then asked to fill out the HRIQ survey itself, first for their primary relationship, or if they did not identify a primary relationship, for their relationship of longest duration. Thereafter participants were asked to complete the HRIQ questions again, for up to three more of their current relationships, in descending order of length of relationship for a total of up to four.

### **Analysis**

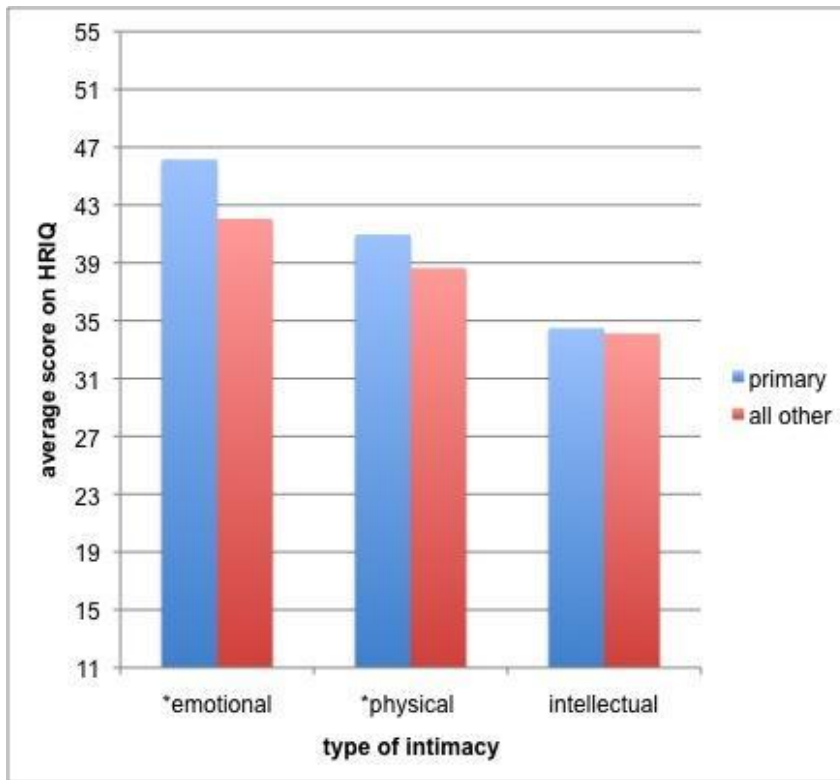
We performed an independent samples t-test to assess intimacy levels (emotional, physical, and intellectual) in respondents' primary relationship/relationship of longest duration compared to all other relationships reported. To describe levels of intimacy, we used Holt's scale

for low (11-25), middle (26-40), and high (41-55). We also used descriptive to report on relationship length, self-identified reasons for being in a polyamorous relationship, number of current relationships, as well as the type of open relationship structure.

### **Results**

Levels of emotional intimacy fell within the high range (41-55) for both primary/longest relationship and all other relationships. The independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in emotional intimacy between respondents primary relationship/relationship of longest duration and all other relationships reported ( $*t(719) = 12.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (see figure 1). Levels of physical intimacy fell within the high range (41-55) for primary/longest relationship and within the midrange (26-40) for all other relationships. The independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in physical intimacy between respondents primary relationship/relationship of longest duration and all other relationships reported ( $*t(719) = 6.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (see figure 1). Levels of intellectual intimacy fell within the midrange (26-40) for both primary/longest relationship and all other relationships. The independent samples t-test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in intellectual intimacy between respondents primary/relationship of longest duration and all other relationships reported ( $t(719) = 1.73$ ,  $p = ns$ ) (see figure 1).



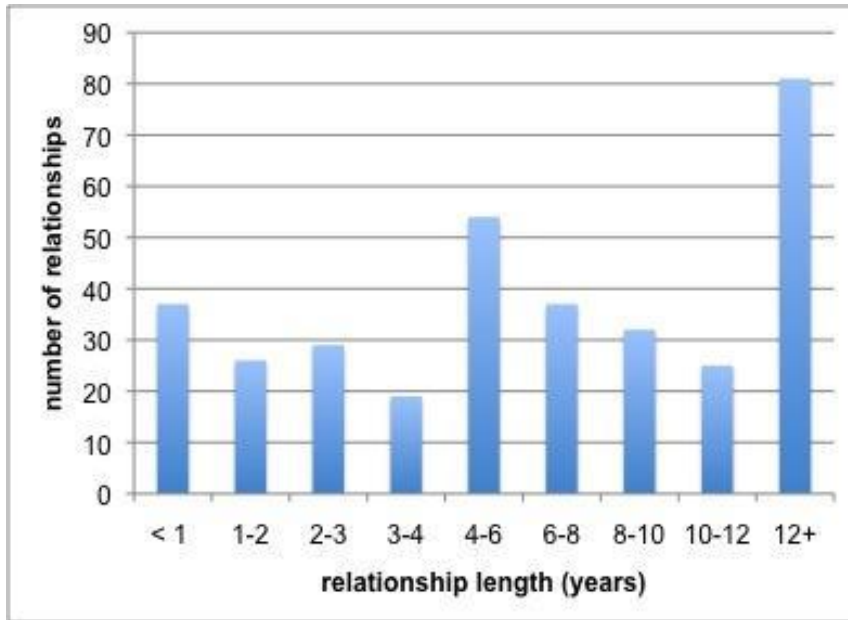


**Figure 1. Intimacy Levels in Primary/Longest Relationship and All Other Relationships (n = 721)**

When asked how many years respondents identified as polyamorous, answers ranged from 0 - 55 years. The study required that respondents currently be in a polyamorous relationship, not that they identify as polyamorous. Fifteen respondents indicated 0 years; the mean number of years people identified as polyamorous was 7.83 years, with a standard deviation of 8.89 years.

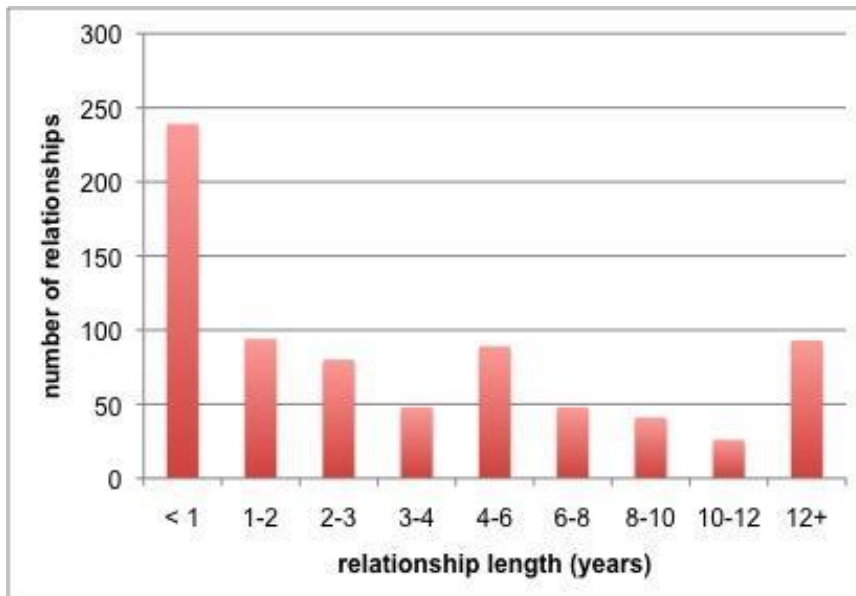
Relationship length was another factor of polyamorous relationships that we assessed. For respondents' primary relationship/relationship of longest duration (n=340) we found a mean relationship length of 8 years (SD = 7.59, range from .04 years to 55 years). We grouped primary/longest relationship into nine categories: Less than 1 year, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-6 years, 6-8 years, 8-10 years, 10-12 years, and more than 12 years. The category with the most respondents was 12 or more years (see figure 2).



**Figure 2. Distribution of Relationship length in Primary/Longest Relationship (n = 340).**

We also assessed relationship length for all relationships reported (n=758), and found a mean relationship length of 4.85 years (SD = 6.84, range from .01 years to 55 years). When grouping relationship lengths into the same nine categories listed above we found the category with the most respondents was less than one year (see figure 3).



**Figure 3. Distribution of Relationship Length (n = 758).**

We asked two questions regarding respondents' reasons for being in polyamorous relationships; in the first, we asked them to indicate all possible choices that applied to their current situation, and in the second, we forced them to choose only the one most applicable reason.

There were 1,564 total responses to the first question (choose all that apply), which broke down as follows: 237 for "It's just the way I am," 93 for "It just happened and I went with it," 96 for "Desire for more sex," 135 for "Desire for other kinds of sex/sex practices," 179 for "Desire for more variety in partners," 186 for "Freedom/independence," 214 for "Desire for more intimacy/closeness," 5 for "Religious reasons," 149 for "Philosophical reasons," 114 for "Desire for sex with another gender," 69 for "My partner wanted to explore polyamory," 20 for "Protection from being alone," and 67 for "Other" (see figure 4).

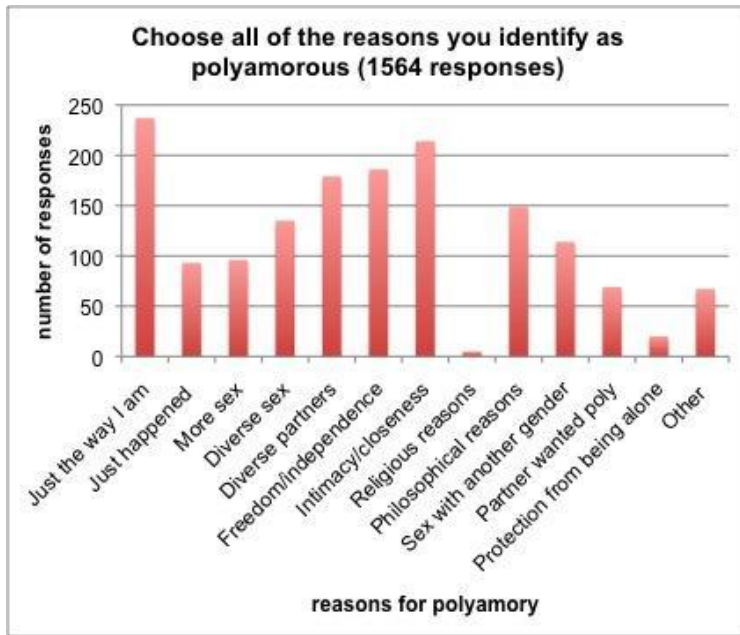


Figure 4.

In the second question (choose only one), the breakdown of the 340 responses was as follows: 128 for “It’s just the way I am,” 33 for “It just happened and I went with it,” 3 for “Desire for more sex,” 8 for “Desire for other kinds of sex/sex practices,” 24 for “Desire for more variety in partners,” 27 for “Freedom/independence,” 43 for “Desire for more intimacy/closeness,” 2 for “Religious reasons,” 23 for “Philosophical reasons,” 14 for “Desire for sex with another gender,” 14 for “My partner wanted to explore polyamory,” 2 for “Protection from being alone,” and 19 for “Other” (see figure 5).

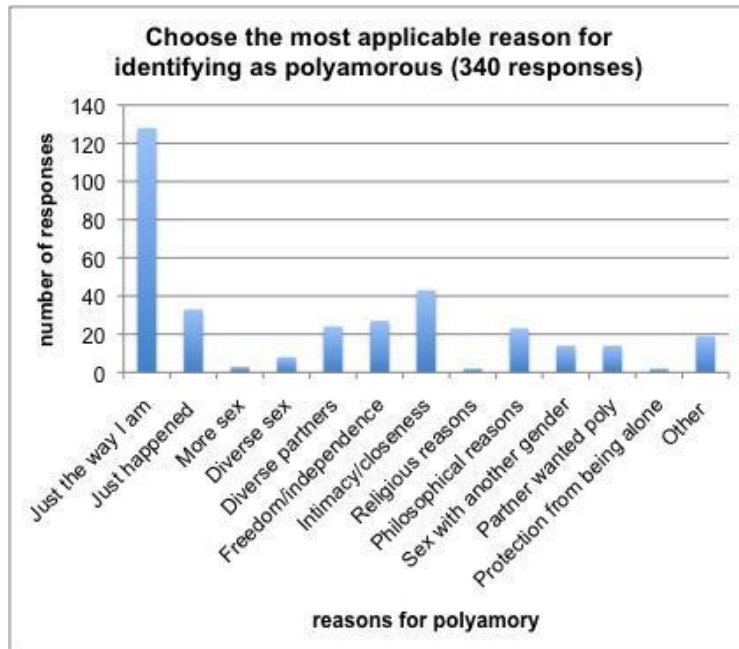
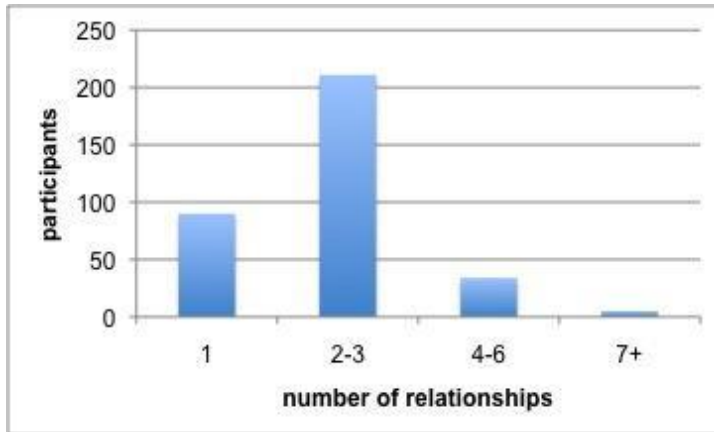


Figure 5.

Reasons for polyamory	Please choose all that apply	Please choose the ONE reason that is most applicable to your situation
It's just the way I am	15.15%	37.65%
It just happened and I went with it	5.95%	9.71%
Desire for more sex	6.14%	0.88%
Desire for other kinds of sex/sex practices	8.63%	2.35%
Desire for more variety in partners	11.45%	7.06%

Freedom/independence	11.89%	7.94%
Desire for more intimacy/closeness	13.68%	12.65%
Religious reasons	0.32%	0.59%
Philosophical reasons	9.53%	6.76%
Desire for sex with another gender	7.29%	4.12%
My partner wanted to explore polyamory	4.41%	4.12%
Protection from being alone	1.28%	0.59%
Other	4.28%	5.59%

The mean number of relationships reported was 2.29 (SD= 1.78, range from 1 current relationship to 26 current relationships (see figure 6).



**Figure 6. Number of Current Relationships (n = 340)**

Finally, we looked at which category of open relationship our respondents fell into. Respondents were asked to identify which of Labriola's (1999) four open relationship structures best fit their current situation. Of the 338 responses 153 indicated they were in an primary/secondary style relationship in which secondary relationships revolve around the primary couple's needs. Fifty-nine identified being in a multiple primary style relationship, in which all partners are equal and decisions are made by the whole family. One hundred fifteen indicated being in a multiple primary (open) style relationship in which all partners are free to do as they wish and decisions are made by each individual, and 11 indicated they were in a multiple non-primary style relationship in which individuals are essentially single and participate in multiple relationships with limited intimacy. 2 people chose to not respond to this question on the survey. (See figure 7).

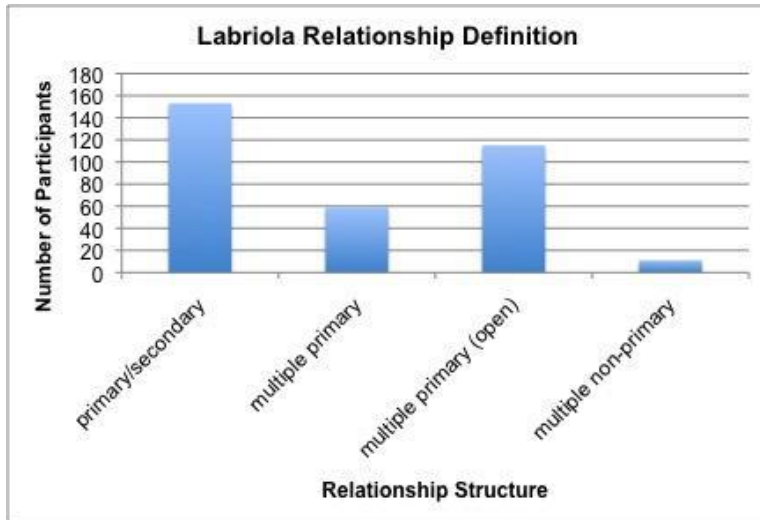


Figure 7.

	Primary/Secondary	Multiple Primary	Multiple Primary (Open)	Multiple Non-Primary
Number of participants	153	59	115	11

**Discussion**

Emotional intimacy levels in both the primary/longest relationship group and the group of all other relationships both fell into the high range on the HRIQ. Physical intimacy levels in the primary/longest relationship group fell into the high range on the HRIQ, but into the midrange for the group of all other relationships. Intellectual intimacy levels fell into the midrange for both groups. For both emotional and physical intimacy, there was a statistically higher level of intimacy in the primary/longest relationship group when compared to the group of all other concurrent relationships. For intellectual intimacy there was no statistical difference between groups. These findings seem to indicate that having multiple concurrent relationships is neither



caused by low intimacy nor does it create low intimacy, particularly in the originally existing (primary or longest) relationship.

The reliability coefficients of the HRIQ are lower than we would like, which may have decreased the sensitivity with which we are drawing out differences. However, we chose it because it measured different types of intimacy, and the limitation of its newness also imparted a contemporary flavor.

Much of the interesting information gained from this survey lies in the detailed demographics gathered about length of polyamorous relationships, polyamorous relationship structures, reasons for polyamory, and number of concurrent relationships in our study population.

Of all the relationships we gathered information on, the mean length was 4.85 years. When looking at only primary/longest relationships, the mean length was 8 years, showing most primary/longest relationships are longer than 12 years. However when looking at all reported relationships, we see most are less than 1 year in length.

The most frequently referenced reason for being polyamorous, regardless if asked to choose only one or to indicate all that apply, was “that’s just the way I am”. This suggests many people in polyamorous relationships may feel polyamory is more of a relational orientation, or a part of personal identity, than a behavioral choice driven by specific needs/desires. We wonder if more LGBTQ people are in polyamorous relationships? If so, this finding may be due to dovetailing of two different communities, e.g. LGBTQ and polyamorous, but we did not collect information about sexual orientation.

Another interesting finding regarding reasons people are polyamorous was that when choosing all that apply, 96 people indicated “more sex”, whereas when asked to choose only the most applicable answer, only 3 people chose “more sex”. This seems to challenge a cultural assumption that people choose to have multiple relationships primarily due to a desire discrepancy with their partner.

As therapists, we are concerned there may be people who are in polyamorous relationships only because their partner wants to have other concurrent relationships; are these people happy with their relationship structure and intimacy levels? Our findings show that of 340 respondents only 14 reported their main reason for being in a polyamorous relationship was “my partner wanted to explore polyamory”. We looked at the intimacy scores for these 14 people’s primary/longest relationship, and found emotional and physical intimacy scores were both in the high range, and intellectual intimacy scores fell in the midrange. This is in line with our other findings, and indicates no clear link between this reason for being in a polyamorous relationship and intimacy levels. Our findings also suggest that for every person who is in a polyamorous relationship only because their partner wants non-exclusivity, there are many more who either originally had their own reasons for being polyamorous, or later developed their own reasons independent from their partners’ preferences. It may be that people who are in polyamorous relationships only because their partners want to might not be active participants on the websites we notified about our survey. However we had direct communication from people in this subgroup through polyamory.org where there is a community of people who identify as monogamous while being in poly relationships; this contributes to our belief that some people in

this population were reached by our survey and had the opportunity to spread the word about our study via word-of-mouth.

It is also possible that the respondents to our survey are all in healthy, happy relationships, and that therapists see only those who are having relationship difficulties, which could create a biased sample. Another related possibility is that therapists who have biases against open relationships only see couples who have relational problems which are directly related to their open relationship, whereas couples who want to focus on other relational difficulties in therapy choose therapists through word-of-mouth referral, and may intentionally seek therapists who have shown themselves to be unbiased in this regard. Also, couples in polyamorous relationships may choose not to reveal their true relationship configuration when they want to focus on problems not related to polyamory.

The mean number of relationships our survey respondents reported currently having was 2.29. A vast majority of people reported being in 2-3 relationships, with the next largest group reporting being in only one current relationship. We thought it was interesting that 90 of our respondents are currently in only one relationship, even though that relationship is consensually polyamorous. One way this finding is significant is that therapists and other helping professionals may be making a mistaken assumption that couples are in monogamous relationships when in fact they are not.

Despite the reluctance of our study population to categorize themselves or their relationships, we got fairly clear data on relationship structure by using Labriola's precise if not universally accepted descriptions of open relationship configurations (1999). Close to half (n = 153)

identified primary/secondary in which secondary relationships revolve around the primary couple's needs as best describing their relationship structure. The second most frequent choice (n = 115) was multiple primary/open polyamorous, in which all partners are given flexibility to develop any relationship they choose, define those relationships on their own terms, and decisions are made by the individual.

There appear to be two fairly distinct groups of polyamorous relationships; one in which the needs of the primary or original couple take precedence, and another in which every individual is responsible for, and expected to, make their own relational decisions independent of the needs of the original couple. Many people who gave us feedback about the survey via our blog indicated dissatisfaction with the primary/secondary model which some see as indicative of a culturally monogamous viewpoint. The primary/secondary model may indeed be most frequent at this historical point in time because it is easiest to conceptualize in our mostly-monogamous cultural view, or the people who gave us feedback may have been a vocal minority. We are inclined to think the relative prevalence of multiple primary/open is an indication of a cultural shift, although possibly only in the polyamorous community, away from the primarily monogamous mindset.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of inherent drawbacks to survey research. We gathered this study sample through methods of snowball sampling, in which one participant recommends several other qualifying participants, causing the sample to grow in a manner that is not random. This creates the likelihood that our study sample is not representative of the polyamorous population

as a whole, calling into question the generalizability of our results. We fully acknowledge this as a shortcoming of the present study, but studying marginalized populations usually involves the use of snowball sampling in order to access to a more robust sample. Our results are not meant to be definitive, but rather should be viewed as a foundation to inform further quantitative research in the area of polyamory and open relationships. This problem with generalizability inherent in our study can be neutralized through replication of our results and further research in the area.

Another limiting factor of our study was the survey tool we used. Kwiksurveys.com is a free online survey tool, and is fairly limited in terms of user interface. We were unable to program the software to give each participant the number of intimacy surveys corresponding to the number of relationships they indicated they were currently in. Therefore all participants had access to four intimacy surveys, regardless of the number of relationships they are in. We received a great deal of feedback that this created confusion about how to fill out the survey; this confusion may have contributed to the relatively large number of people whose data had to be excluded due to incorrectly filled-out surveys. A combination of a more sophisticated survey tool and more explicit directions may have yielded a larger usable sample size.

One thing we learned as we worked on this research study is that the polyamorous community is wary of being labeled, categorized, or pigeon-holed. This made structuring some of the demographic questions on our survey very challenging as we tried to make them as inclusive as possible, while not giving so much latitude that interpreting the data would be nearly impossible. For example, when asking about gender we let respondents report their gender

identity rather than forcing them to choose from a predefined list. This led to a vast array of answers, which we then grouped into six different categories. If we had not left this question open ended it was our fear that potential respondents would have seen this study as limiting and not valuable, causing them to not participate. This nonconformist attitude and desire to define aspects of their lives according to their own terms makes trying to quantitatively study this population very difficult. This may be why a majority of previous research on polyamory has been qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is valuable, but needs to be balanced out by more quantitative research to give a well-rounded picture of polyamory.

Another limitation of our study was lack of agreement within the polyamorous community about the meaning of the terms “polyamorous”, “non-monogamy” and “open relationships”, all of which meant different things to different people. For some people these terms are synonymous and for others they mean very different and very specific things. Although we defined the terms for the purposes of the study and tried to be as inclusive as possible, we got a considerable amount of feedback from people who did not agree with our definitions or felt we had a monogamy-centric cultural viewpoint ourselves; many of these people were reluctant to participate in the study because they felt misunderstood and/or marginalized at the outset. This raises the possibility that we only surveyed the portion of the polyamorous community that found the language we used acceptable enough, used the same definitions we did, or who were willing to work with our study definitions for research purposes, without needing to agree with them. Perhaps diversity within the polyamorous community is even greater than what our sample indicates.

### **Future Directions**

This study has demonstrated there is a glaring need for further research in the area of polyamory. We found no studies done in the last twenty-five years which surveyed mental health practitioners' attitudes toward polyamory and open relationships. Anecdotal evidence in current literature and general impressions within the polyamory community suggest a bias against polyamory still exists, but demonstrating this scientifically could be very useful.

Another interesting area for further study is to look at relationships in which the motivating factor is that one partner wants to explore polyamory while the other partner does not. In our study, we demonstrated there was a similar level of intimacy in the primary relationship of those people who were in polyamorous relationships because their partner wanted to, and the primary relationships of all other participants in the study. These interesting results indicate a need for further study in this area, with a larger sample size and more stringent inclusion criteria. Are people who do not identify as polyamorous but are in polyamorous relationships happy with their current relationships, and do they have similar levels of intimacy as people who identify as polyamorous and are in polyamorous relationships? Can being in a polyamorous relationship because your partner wants to be create a stable relationship over time? How is this negotiated? How does it change over time?

This survey only collected data on current relationships. Future research may be well served to gather data not only on current relationships, but also past relationships. This may allow researchers to see how attitudes about polyamory and open relationships in each individual

have evolved over time. Were a person's first polyamorous relationships structured the same as their current relationships, were the motivations similar, what if anything has changed over time?

In our current study, we found interesting data about why people choose polyamory. The category with the most responses was "it's just the way I am". Exploring this phenomenon in more detail could be very helpful in better understanding polyamory. Do people feel polyamory is an inherent feature of their identity from birth, or did people in our survey have a difficult time identifying a motivation for polyamory and thus defaulted to that option? This would likely best be studied using qualitative methods such as interviewing or case study design.



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