Longevity and Intimacy in Polyamorous Relationships

Martha Kauppi & Nick Wittwer
Ferrinne Spector, PhD, Faculty Mentor

Introduction
- Monogamy is embedded in our cultural understanding of relationships; people wanting multiple intimate relationships are often unaware of options other than lying, secret-keeping, or ending one relationship to participate in another (Taormino, 2008).
- There is evidence of negative therapist bias toward individual and couple clients who are in non-monogamous relationships (Knapp, 1974; Hymer & Rubin, 1982).
- Anecdotal evidence supports the existence of intimacy in polyamorous (non-monogamous) relationships (Anapol, 2010; Klesse, 2006).

Purpose
- Investigate intimacy level (emotional, physical, and intellectual) and relationship length in consensually open relationships
- Learn what we can about this population from demographic data collected:
  - How many relationships are our participants currently in?
  - What are some of the reasons people choose open relationships structures?
  - Which of Labriola’s four different open relationship structures are most common (Labriola, 1999)?
    - Primary/secondary: secondary relationship(s) revolve around the primary couple’s needs
    - Multiple Primary: All partners equal, decisions made by family
    - Multiple primary open: all partners free to do as they wish; decisions made by each individual
    - Multiple non-primary: essentially single with multiple relationships with limited intimacy

Participants
- 496 individuals responded to online recruitment
  - 4 Polyamory and fetish lifestyle listerves
  - American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, & Therapists listserve
- Word of mouth
- Excluded those under 18, incomplete surveys, and any not in at least one current polyamorous relationship; n = 340.
- Polyamory was defined, for the purposes of this study, 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.”

Measures
- Online anonymous survey included:
  - Demographics including limited information on up to 8 current relationships
  - Intimacy Assessment; Holt Relationship Intimacy Questionnaire (HRIQ; Holt et al., 2009), measuring emotional, physical and intellectual intimacy, filled out on up to 4 current relationships

Results
- Mean relationship length in primary or longest relationship was 8 years, and ranged from .04 to 55 years. The largest category was 12 years and over.
- Mean relationship length in all relationships combined was 4.85 years, and ranged from .01 to 55 years. The largest category was less than one year.

Conclusions
- People in consensual, negotiated polyamorous relationships have both high levels of intimacy and long term relationships.
- Only a small minority of people in polyamorous relationships indicate desire for more sex as a significant motivating factor in their relationship structure.
- Primary/Secondary relationship structure currently appears to be the most common, but not the only viable relationship structure for polyamory.
- It is essential that therapists and health care providers set aside their personal and cultural biases and provide care that respects the broad diversity of viable relationship structures. A better understanding of open relationships will improve quality of care to people currently in open relationships, people considering polyamory, and those who have never thought of it as a viable option.

Limitations
- Sampling bias due to reliance of snowball sampling.
- Survey research can only point out directions for further study; results are often murky due to inconsistencies in filling out the survey.
- This population indicated in many ways their reluctance to being categorized; this may further limit the effectiveness of survey research.
- HRIQ is a new measure with only moderate reliability for assessing intellectual intimacy (Holt et al., 2009).

References