



Institute for
Relational Intimacy

WEBINAR
The Couples Institute
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Polyamory:

THERAPEUTIC CHALLENGES, CONFRONTATIONS, & SOLUTIONS

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Agenda:

- Information blast about polyamory
- Focus on a common clinical challenge: difference of opinion on opening up
- Q & A



Definition: Polyamory

An open relationship structure in which one, some, or all partners are free to engage in sexually intimate romantic relationships with others, with the consent of all concerned



Consensual Non-Monogamies

Swinging: A couple activity with casual sexual connections between couples, often at parties or events

Non-monogamy or “open”: Generally assumed no emotional connection between partners



Language is Evolving

Relationship Anarchy: No hierarchy, individual decisions about each relationship

Polyfidelity: An agreement not to further open a group for a period of time

Monogamish: Committed relationship with some form of open relationship behavior



Your Poly Client:



- Doesn't need you to be poly
- Doesn't need you to be experienced with poly
- Doesn't need you to know all about poly
- DOES need you to be ok with them being poly
- DOES need you not to blame poly for their problems
- DOES need you to know the difference between poly and infidelity

Why Work With Poly Clients?



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Therapist: Self-Assessment

Family belief systems

Cultural belief systems

Religious belief systems

Level of personal knowledge/awareness/experience
positive
negative



Is There an Up-Side to Polyamory?

How might polyamory serve everyone involved?



Theory of Polyamory:

- Abundance of love
- Monogamy may not be human nature
- Marital agreements are negotiated and negotiable



Marginalization:

Marginalization puts relationships in a pressure cooker without sufficient support, and overly high stakes



Overlapping Populations:

- Kink/BDSM
- LGBTQAI+
 - Many poly people are bisexual
 - Many gay men are monogamish or open
 - Many queer folx have non-hierarchal poly



Common Poly Relationship Styles*



* Infinite variety! These are Polycules

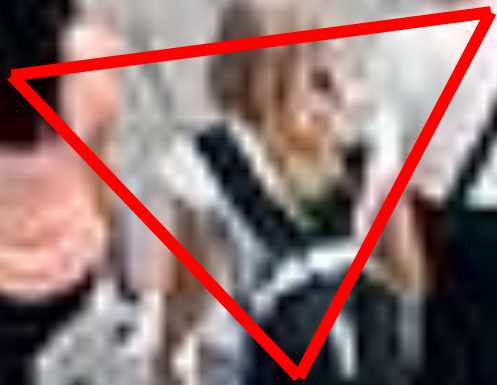






Asterisk

Triad



Quad





Network

Decision-Making Body



Dyad

Individual

Family

Community

Q: Who do I want to see in the first session?



A: The decision-making Body



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What the Research Shows:

- Happy
- Satisfied sexually and relationally
- Predominantly white
- Value personal growth
- Healthy
- Mentally healthy
- Securely attached
- Careful about safer sex practices



What the Research Shows:

- Kids take it in stride and do well in poly families, with the exception of some stress from marginalization



My Research:

- Long-term relationships (average for primary relationship was 8.3 years)
- Adding partners doesn't damage the intimacy in the original relationship, or end the initial relationship
- For many, it is an identity
- There are lots of reasons people choose poly
- Most have 2-3 relationships
- Most are primary/secondary in structure



Common Presentations:

- Decision-making about opening up/what is possible
- Making and keeping agreements
- Repair after broken agreements or poly gone amiss
- Relationship role challenges
- Unruly emotions/jealousy
- Issues related to marginalization/closeted status



Q: What do you do when one partner wants to open the relationship and the other does not?



Treatment strategy:

- Challenge both partners
- Evaluate and address
 - Attachment
 - Differentiation
 - Neuroscience
 - Knowledge base about poly
 - Making and keeping agreements
 - How can poly benefit you? How can monogamy benefit you?



Attachment:

Do they have secure functioning? If not, what is missing?

Are there attachment wounds that need to be addressed?



Connecting:

- Ability to connect intentionally
- Tolerate present moment/be with the one you're with
- Offer and tolerate vulnerability
- Sustain positive regard when disagreeing
- Steer towards the light



Soothing:

- Self-soothing
- Object constancy/feel connected when apart
- Co-regulation



Choosing:

- Strong self: “I will survive” opens the door to making choices about the relationship
- Empowerment to choose rather than reacting or taking a victim position



Differentiation:

1. Ability to look inside and identify thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, preferences
2. Hold steady when sharing this with someone else
3. Hold steady when they share something with you that it is hard for you to hear



Neuroscience:

1. De-pathologizing; this is how the brain works
2. Self-regulation and co-regulation in session
3. Experiential interventions to build the neuropathway



Knowledge Base about Poly:

- Well-functioning poly relationships do exist
- One can be poly, and the other can be mono
- Uncomfortable feelings are to be expected



Supports:

- Do they have role models?
- Community supports?
- Books and resources?



What about that Ultimatum?

- Some people are not interested in polyamory and that is their right
- Some people identify as poly and that is their right
- There is a fine line between differentiation and ultimatum



Making and Keeping Agreements:

Differentiation task

- Look inside
- Hold steady
- Speak up
- Access curiosity



Lying and Lie Inviting Behavior:

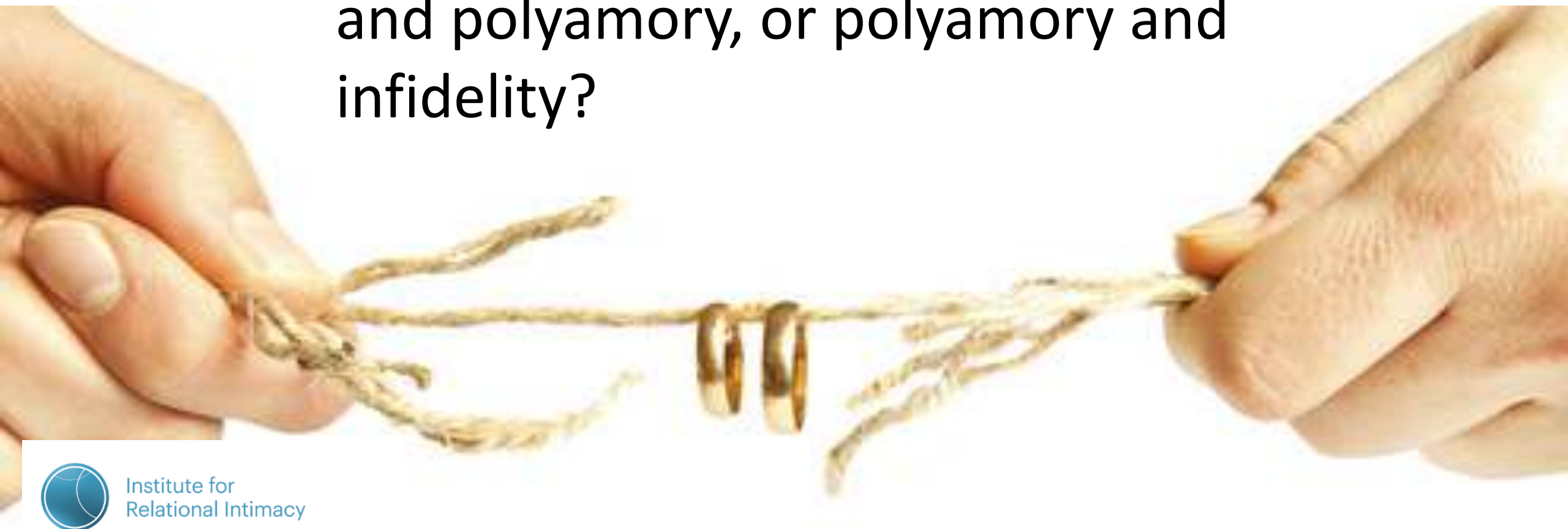
Conflict avoidant partner?

Hostile angry partner?



Polyamory vs Infidelity:

Is it a choice between monogamy and polyamory, or polyamory and infidelity?



Confrontations around Agreements:

- It is not reasonable to expect your partner to be happy about poly if you break agreements
- It is not reasonable to expect your partner to relax emotionally if you don't respond to them in a crisis



Confrontations around Agreements:

- It is not reasonable to expect your partner to feel good about giving you veto power if you use it every time they want to go on a date



Holding the Vision:

- No rule book: one size fits one, the sky is the limit
- Trying to be someone you are not doesn't usually work
- Everything is an experiment; try it, observe, discuss, try again



How Can Poly Benefit You?

- Benefits of poly
- Benefits of mono
- Meanings made about both
- Help partners access empathy and address fears realistically, not with magical thinking



Challenge Both Partners*:

- What kind of partner do you aspire to be?
- How far away from that are you now?
- What are your partner's top complaints about you?
- Is there a grain of truth to any of them?
- What do you do that makes it hard for your partner to give you what you want?

*Thank you to Pete Pearson and Ellyn Bader!

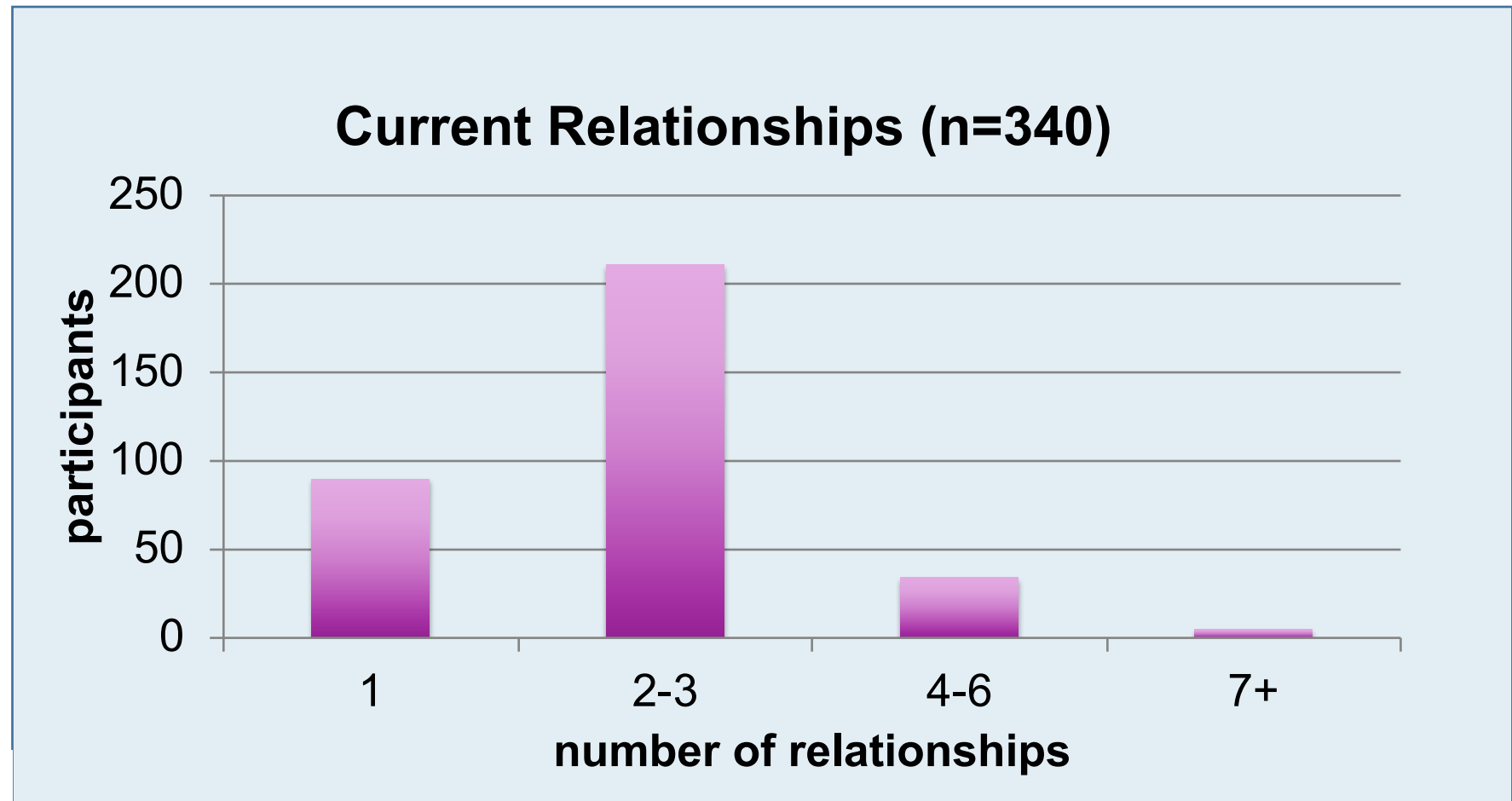


Stay out of the Middle:

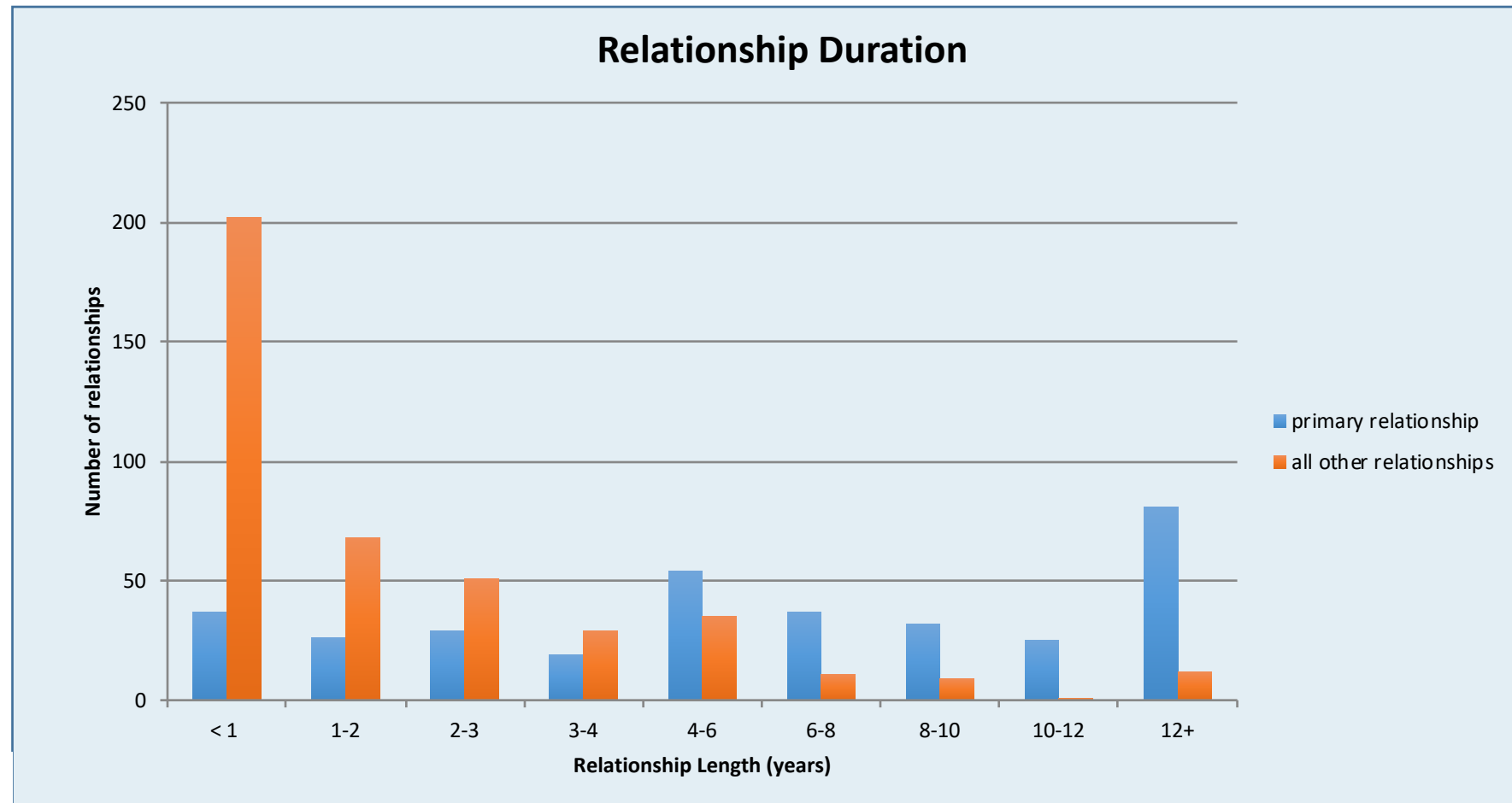
- Initiator/Inquirer process
- 2 chair work
- Warm confrontations and challenges
- Tell Me No Lies



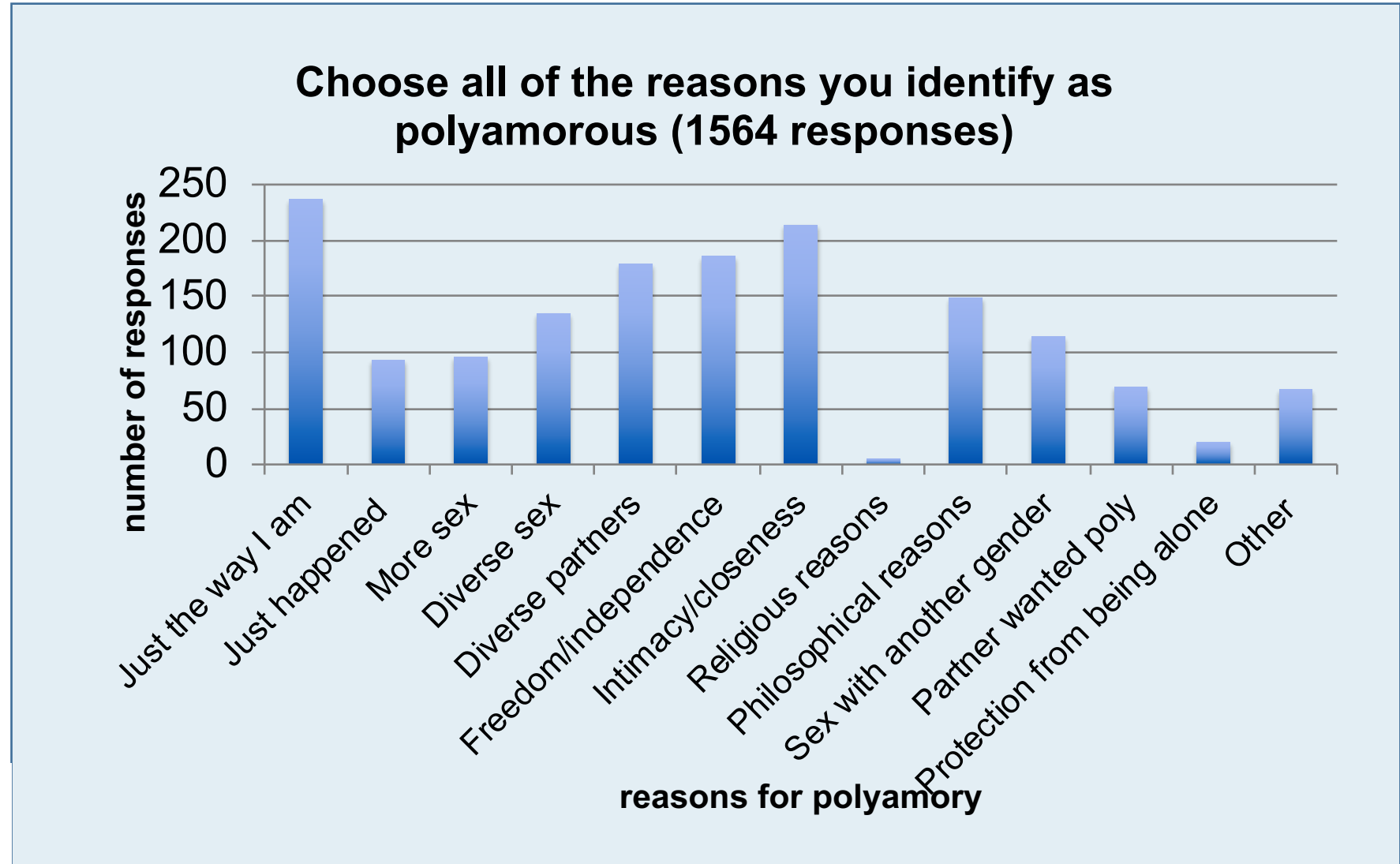
Myth: Polyamory = Promiscuity



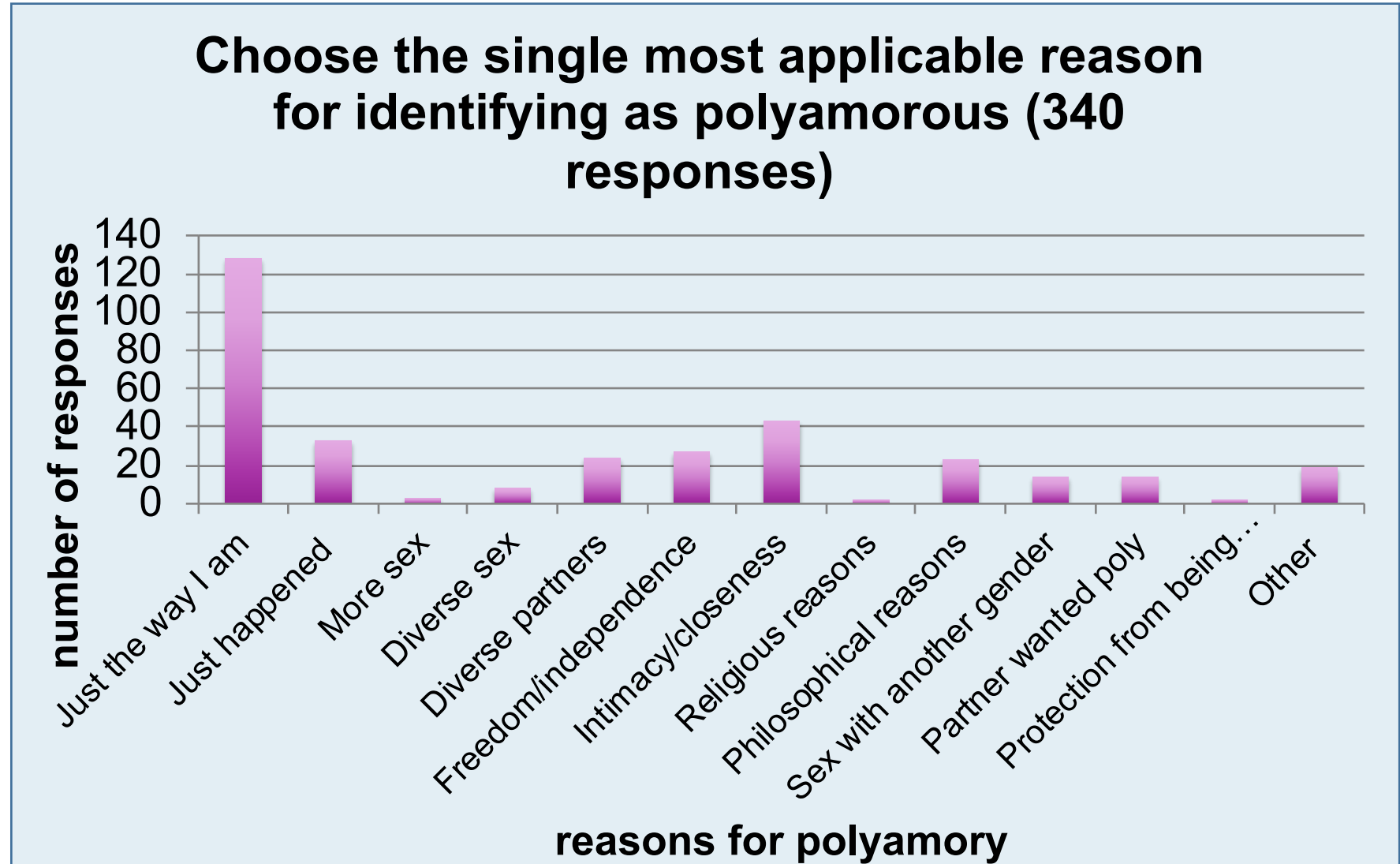
Myth: Poly Relationships Don't Last



Why Poly? Pick All That Apply



Why Poly? Pick One



Myth: Additional Relationships Destroy Intimacy in the Initial Relationship

