An Exploration of the Impact of Social Institutions and Interpersonal Connections on the Sexual Expression and Identity of Dually Attracted and Bisexual Women

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ABSTRACT

Research about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) populations reveals a dearth of empirical knowledge about bisexual women. This study explores the experiences of eleven dually attracted/bisexual women between the ages of 25 and 42, with particular emphasis on communities and social institutions to which they belong. Although research demonstrates that community support plays a critical role in minority mental health, current data reveals that bisexuals experience significant degrees of biphobia and marginalization within LGBT and other communities. This qualitative study focuses on the thoughts and feelings that bisexual/dually attracted women have about their sexuality. Each 1.5 hour long interview probed about how participants' thoughts and feelings were influenced by experiences in schools, workplaces, religious settings, LGBT groups and families of origin. The semi-structured interview tool was designed to 1) gain a deeper understanding of the overall experience of dual attraction/bisexuality in adult women 2) identify themes that illustrate the core factors that influence how bisexual women choose to identify and participate in their social contexts. The results illustrate that, largely due to perceived social stigma within both heterosexual and homosexual communities, the choice to utilize the term bisexual is highly complicated and leads some women to refuse the identity altogether. Data also illustrates the complex ways in which families, religions and other identity groups influence how participants name their sexual identity. Interestingly, bisexual celebrities emerged as an unexpected and influential "community" for some subjects in this sample. In sum, the core overarching themes that emerged from interview data were 1) Naming (or choosing not-to name) sexual identity; 2) Coming out; 3) Religion and family – acceptance, rejection and the negotiation of

conflicting values and beliefs; 4) Workplace and school experiences; 5) Dual identity and other social minority experiences. The results of this study can be utilized to guide future research as well as inform clinicians and service providers who aim to gain a more nuanced understanding of the unique experiences and perspectives of this population.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the players of the Wesleyan University Women's Rugby Team (classes of 1997 & 1998), an incredible group of women who coached themselves, tackled without hesitation, re-wrote the old boys' songs and shared multiple, incredible, undefeated seasons. Thank you for showing me how much more was possible.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction and Statement of Purpose

Until 1980, in the field of psychology, homosexuality was classified as a disorder in the DSM. In general, from the time of Freud through the present, psychologists have at best, a mixed history in their efforts to help sexual minorities (Duberman, 1991; Murphy et al. 2002). In recent decades, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have fought for and received increased levels of visibility, social acceptance, psychological understanding and civil rights. However, there is still a great deal of work to be done before gay, lesbian and bisexual people enjoy the same freedoms, safety level and social visibility as heterosexuals; for psychologists who want to best serve their LGBT clients, it is imperative to continue the quest to understand more about human sexuality generally as well as the unique experiences, perceptions and needs of sexual minorities.

This study focuses specifically on the experiences of bisexual and dually attracted women. One important category of experience for this group involves the choice of language used to describe sexual difference. The researcher has intermittently included the term “dually attracted” because some women have had significant relationships with both sexes but do not necessarily refer to themselves as bisexual. The reasons for this choice vary but often relate to the issues of stigma, community/identity politics and/or discomfort with binary conceptualizations of sexuality - all which will be explored more deeply in the content analysis. There is currently no universally agreed upon assessment tool or definition of bisexuality in the empirical literature; research continues to utilize

varied models to investigate the many dimensions of what is broadly considered a bisexual identity (Diamond, 2008; Moore & Norris, 2005; Solorio et al., 2003; Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

Naming (or choosing not to name) a sexual identity for oneself is an inherently social act; it is through our interactions with others that we come to understand who we are and what makes us different from and similar to each other. For bisexual and dually attracted women, there are a variety of choices that must be made regarding not only determining whether or not to label oneself, but also with whom to share one's sexual identity with and how such information should be shared. Determinations must often be made about which communities one is most accepted within, as well as which communities are worth staying in despite feelings and experiences of rejection. Using both quantitative and qualitative measures, research has acknowledged and explored the critical role that community support and involvement plays in the well being of people from minority groups, including LGBT individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Frost & Meyer, 2000; Jorm et al., 2002; Oswald 2000).

It is the author's hypothesis that many phenomena of community involvement and experience, including the choices mentioned previously, occur without significant dialogue or conscious reflection. Moreover, since decisions about self identification and coming out play such critical roles in community participation and mental health, it is important that clinicians and academics begin to understand and document the inherent complexities. A recent study, asserts:

> "Understanding the everyday experiences of sexual minority women as they construct and experience their communities is critical to an adequate assessment of community identification. A challenge for researchers is to investigate the scope

> and meaning of ‘‘LGBT community’’ rather than assume a universal definition.” (Lehavot et al., 2010)

In concert with this sentiment, the purpose of the study is to explore how bisexual women’s perceptions of and relationships with the significant communities in their life impact both their understanding and expression of their sexuality. The goal of this research is two-fold: 1) to analyze in-depth, one-on-one interviews to identify core themes related to the experience of bisexual women for the purpose of facilitating future research on the role of community in bisexual women’s levels of distress and well-being 2) to increase clinical understanding, through participant’s stories and themes, of the rich and complex interplay between social/community life and individual human sexuality and sexual identity.

CHAPTER II

Background and Literature Review

Sexual Diversity: The Importance of Building Greater Clinical Understanding

Sexuality is a highly complex and relatively understudied aspect of human experience. And, despite negative distortions and general under-representation of people with lesbian, gay, al, fluid or "dual-attraction" sexualities in popular media, there is an ever increasing base of scientific evidence showing that human sexual orientation, attitudes, behavior and identity are more highly diverse than has been commonly known (Hoburg et al., 2004; Kinsey et al., 1948). For psychologists and researchers who seek to influence and/or study human behavior, there is a great deal to be learned about "sexualities" that do not fit neatly into a binary construction of exclusively hetero or homosexual. Women whose sexual expression meets this criteria are the focus of this project and will be broadly referred to as having complex, bisexual and/or dually attracted sexual orientations.

For most people, sexuality is intricately linked to other core aspects of human experience such as intimate relationships, family roles and social status. In recent years, scholars in gender studies, psychology and sociology have found that gaining greater understanding about homosexual relationships "provides an opportunity to examine human relationship dynamics in the absence of differing sex role socialization" (Sandfort, 2000). Thus, developing a deeper understanding of sexual minority populations can

actually help to shed light on the complexities of majority populations and human sexuality as a whole.

A pioneer in the development of psychosexual theory, Freud did not believe that homosexual or bisexual people were so fundamentally different from or more pathologically deviant than heterosexuals. He believed that sexuality, in all its forms, was determined by multiple factors. As evident in his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), Freud was influenced by his discussions with Wilhelm Fleiss, who posited that all human beings were innately bisexual. To Freud, human beings were naturally predisposed to being bisexual but biological factors contributed mostly to the *strength* of the sexual drive (Gay, 1989). Freud believed that sexual object choice developed in the context of the early family environment and was driven largely by psychodynamic developmental factors (Erwin, 2002). For Freud, children (particularly boys) resolve the confusing matter of object choice through the successful resolution of the Oedipal Complex (Gay, 1989). Freud's heteronormative views about what sexual orientation outcome was optimal were undoubtedly influenced by the social mores of his time. However, his views were progressive in that they forwarded the idea that bisexuality and homosexuality were not terrible abnormalities but rather inversions or variants of the more common heterosexual object choice. Prominent psychoanalyst Dr. Joseph Merlino, Senior Editor of the book, *Freud at 150: 21st Century Essays on a Man of Genius* stated in an interview:

> Freud maintained that bisexuality was a normal part of development. That all of us went through a period of bisexuality and that, in the end, most of us came out heterosexual but that the bisexual phase we traversed remained on some unconscious level, and was dealt with in other ways...He did not consider it something that should be criminalized, or penalized.

In naming bisexuality as a normative, if still transient, phenomenon, Freud created new space for discussion about the inherent complexity of human sexuality. He further aided in this process in his theorizing about the rich and multi-gendered space of sexual fantasy and thus suggested that bisexuality could live on in a person's intrapsychic world, even when behavior had become exclusively heterosexual. His elaboration of the multiple components of sexuality, including behavior, fantasy, internalization of social norms and early interpersonal experience continues to provide fertile ground for contemporary theorizing about sexuality.

For practicing clinicians, the importance of continually enhancing one's understanding of complex sexual identities, behaviors and attitudes cannot be underemphasized. Since clinicians of all sexual orientations are raised within a hetero-normative culture, it is virtually impossible to avoid the influence of underlying heterosexist biases and gaps in knowledge about gay, lesbian and bisexual experience. And, since gay/lesbian/bisexual//transgender people experience a range of prejudicial treatment including physical violence, legal discrimination, familial rejection and other, more subtle forms of social devaluation, it is important that clinicians understand the impact that this "psychological heterosexism" (Herek, 1990) may have in case formulation and treatment. Thus, this project is designed to gather information about bisexual women and women with complex sexual identities for the purposes of augmenting clinical understanding and locating key areas for further research.

Despite Freud's arguably open-minded mentality about sexual difference, clients with complex and/or non-heterosexual orientations have not always received psychological care that is accepting and adequately informed; in fact, despite its rejection

as an ethical treatment by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association, the practice of conversion therapy (where the therapist works to help the client shift to a heterosexual sexual orientation) still occurs today (Haldeman, 2002). Yet, in simultaneous contrast, some clinical researchers have begun to investigate and push for the existence of specialized training for therapists who work with LGBT clients (Biaggio, 2003; Murphy et al., 2002). And, since most clinicians are "situated in a culture that privileges a dichotomous understanding of sexual orientation", there is a dearth of clinical knowledge about the experiences and nuanced psychological phenomena of clients whose sexuality does not fit neatly into a binary system of hetero and homosexual categorization. The internal experience of a fluid sexuality is important for clinicians to consider. If a given clinician feels their own sexuality to be singularly focused on one sex or fixed in any way, it is necessary for the therapist to consider the uniqueness of the bisexual/dually attracted patient's experience and remain mindful of the impact of automatic assumptions of sexual fixedness. The issue is further clarified by the following insightful quote by Michel:

> Theorists on bisexuality have noted that, unlike a coming out story, which has a clear telos, and unlike a lifelong unquestioned heterosexuality, a bisexual narrative is an ongoing construction. (1996)

In sum, it seems that the cultural reality of hetero-normativity as well as the hegemonic nature of binary constructions of sexuality in general mean that most clinicians (who have not received training or thought deeply about these issues) are likely lacking the ability to mentalize (Fonagy, 2001) about the experiences and internal worlds of their clients with complex and/or dually-attracted sexual identities. However, increasing visibility of diverse sexual populations has also led to an ever rising demand

for clinical discussion, literature and treatment frameworks that address the particular needs of this often hidden or overlooked population (Guidry, 1999).

Minority Stress: Risks and Vulnerability of LGBT Populations

Beside gaps in specific knowledge about bisexual women, there is a basic dearth of research on the physical and mental health of LGBT people as a general population. In a MEDLINE literature review from 1980-1999, Boehmer found that only 0.1% of the articles indexed related to LGBT health (2002). And, moreover, 56% of those studies focused on HIV and sexually transmitted diseases mainly among bisexual and gay *men* (Boehmer, 2002). Likely due to the changeability and relative risk vulnerability of their life stage, adolescents are also a more heavily studied group within LGBT literature. Most theories of adolescent development assert that bisexual, lesbian, gay and transgender youth who consciously and publicly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender should have more positive health outcomes than LGBT youth who do not embrace an identity (Morris et al., 2001, Rosario et al., 2001; Saphira et al., 2001). However, regardless of whether youth claim an LGBT identity or not, research consistently shows poor health outcomes as compared to heterosexual youth.

A range of research has demonstrated increased levels of mental and physical health problems in the adult bisexual population as compared to gay, lesbian, and heterosexual adults. Difficulties include elevated rates of depression, anxiety, negative affect and eating disorders, as well as higher rates of medical problems that are correlated with stress, such as ulcers and migraines (Cochran & Mays, 2007; Jorm et al., 2002; Koh & Ross, 2006). However, different bisexual individuals evince varying long term

outcomes in the area of health and stress; some ultimately fare more poorly while others showing evidence of successful adjustment (Koh & Ross, 2006). Using the lens of minority stress theory, Meyer analyzed the role that a hostile environment plays in increasing sexual minority distress and negative outcome (2003). Specifically, in this model, minority sexual populations internalize and endure a sense of non-acceptance and blatant hostility toward their sexuality - a core aspect of themselves. This then has a negative impact on their ongoing cognitions, behaviors and feelings and makes it less likely that they will actively engage in positive health-oriented behaviors (Meyer, 2003). Among public health and LGBT researchers, it is widely known that LGBT people regularly experience hostile treatment in health care environments and culturally insensitive treatment in workplaces and other public arenas (Harcourt, 2006; Saunders, 1999; Ungvarski & Grossman, 1999)

To attenuate these harsh realities, some theorists and researchers assert that active work must be done to change the level of care and respect communicated in the social and institutional environments. For adolescents who are dealing with stigma, systemic interventions at the level of family and school are recommended (Elias 2001; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). A comprehensive review of literature on LGBT adolescent experience in social and institutional settings is beyond the scope of this project. Rather, the subject is mentioned because of its general relevance to the focus of this research – which is to better understand the impact of social and institutional settings on adult bisexual women.

Beyond Binaries: Bisexual and Complex Sexual Identity in Women

There is a fair amount of evidence of biological differences in sexual arousal patterns between women and men, regardless of sexual orientation. Specifically, some studies have shown that women, in general, have greater flexibility in arousal patterns and require less category-specific stimuli for sexual arousal (Chivers et al., 2004; Lann et al., 1996). In two large empirical studies conducted with heterosexually identified college students in three regions of the United States, 29-32% of female students reported having sexual feelings and preferences for persons of the same *and* other sex (Hoburg et al., 2004). Genital arousal and same-sex attraction, however, are merely two facets of sexuality.

There are likely a host of reasons, yet to be understood and including biological and social factors, that explain why women seem to be more flexible in their capacity for same sex attraction. One theory commonly explored by feminist, gender studies and masculinity scholars includes the idea that sexist cultural mores place strict prohibitions on tenderness, affection and sensuality between males at a very young age – emphasizing competition, strength and toughness instead (Katz, 1995; Stoltenberg, 2000). In contrast with male socialization, women are generally more able to forge close connections and express a greater degree of same-sex sensuality. But, for those women who, beyond just having sensual feelings, exhibit strong sexual attraction for both sexes, questions of identity and acceptance (of self and from others) arise. Unfortunately, there is scant research about how women internally and externally negotiate having strong dual attractions, particularly when this facet of their humanity becomes evident after the onset of adulthood.

As adults, women have already undergone the process of adolescent identity development; from a traditional psychoanalytic perspective, it is ideal to have coped with and appropriately channeled one's sexual drives by then so that the type of internal conflict about sexuality (thought inherent to the adolescent stage of life) is long since resolved (Freud, 1923). And, for many bisexual women, this may well be the case. However, there is scant research on what role their minority experience plays in bisexual women's inner psychological worlds. For a variety of potential reasons – possibly including fear of stigma, internal conflict and/or basic practicality, bisexual and dually attracted women often choose to conceal the complexity of their sexuality. Additionally, given the social costs of identifying as LGBT, for bisexual or dually attracted women who are in relationships with men, it may be seen as "easier" in the short term, to appear publicly as heterosexual, even though this may not feel internally concordant.

It is hypothesized that there is something valuable to be understood about the impact of a hetero-normative social environment on adult women who feel themselves to be something other than heterosexual but also cannot reap the benefits of minority social support that often comes with a "fully lesbian" public identity (Clausen, 1999). It seems there might be something unique about the experience of invisibility and/or non-acceptance for this population of women. In her book, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Marjorie Garber writes about the way that bisexuality impacts broad social constructions of sexuality while simultaneously eluding to the internal and psychological challenges faced by people who do not readily fit into categories of single sex attraction:

> If bisexuality is in fact, as I suspect it to be, not just another sexual orientation but rather a sexuality that undoes sexual orientation as a category a sexuality that

> threatens and challenges the easy binaries of straight and gay, queer and "het", and even through its biological and physiological meanings, the gender categories of male and female, then the search for the meaning of the word "bisexual" offers a different kind of lesson. Rather than naming an invisible, undernoticed minority now finding its place in the sun, "bisexual" turns out to be, like bisexuals themselves, everywhere and nowhere. (Garber, 1999)

Another important aspect of understanding dual attraction and/or bisexuality is the integration of a developmental perspective and the subsequent acknowledgement of the fact that sexuality may shift across the lifespan (Patterson, 2008). This phenomena, although more common than is represented in cultural lore and mass media, represents a special and complex facet of human sexuality that is currently under-researched. For clinicians who are working with someone who has shifted from one sexual identity to another, or moved from one particular sexual minority community to another - it is particularly important that some thought is given to the complexity of the gains, losses and psychological development that such a person has undergone. For some women, bisexuality may be viewed as one step along a developmental process that culminates in a homosexual identity; however, for others it may refer to a stable but fluid sexuality that includes altering attractions to both men and women throughout the lifespan (Diamond, 2008). Given these critical areas of variation, it is vital for clinicians to educate themselves about the important within-group differences of this population.

In many cases, adult sexual minorities have been part of a supportive and cohesive community where strong attachments and integrated self-schemas were formed. And, when an adult's sexual attractions or partnerships shift, she is often faced with the need to re-conceptualize her identity. If the shift involves a move away from a formerly supportive community that required a particular set of sexual behaviors or choices, a complex and often painful psychological process may unfold. As the person begins to

"rework" her identity internally and externally – she may seek to make it consonant with whatever social constructions and affiliative groups are readily available to her. In *Apples and Oranges*, Jan Clausen writes about her journey from a radical lesbian separatist identity to one of a woman-identified woman who enters a long-term partnership with a man. She writes:

> Both gay and straight consider it rather weird that I inhabit the social space of a "former lesbian". It's a little (just a little) like being a transgendered person, or maybe one of those super-scrutinized mothers on welfare: someone on whom the burden of explanation falls disproportionately. I think people want to know which version of me is real. And how to locate other leopards who might be prone to change their spots....My post-lesbian life straddles two minimally intersecting universes. The fact that I can pass quite comfortably in either doesn't do a thing to kill the pain of loss. (Clausen, 1999)

The vast majority of previous research on sexuality has been based on a binary view of people as falling somewhere along a continuum between heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality (e.g. Bell, 1973; Bieber, 1976: Bieber et al., 1962; Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948). In a paper examining four main components of sexual identity, including social-sex role, biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation, Shively and De Cecco illustrate the complexity of human sexuality in their explication of the physical-affectional theory of sexual orientation. This theory states that people's preferences may vary for types of sexual partners and emotional partners (Shively & De Cecco, 1977). They critique traditional understandings of sexuality as being along a continuum because the underlying assumption seems to be that one preference (e.g. heterosexuality) comes at the expense of another (e.g. homosexuality) rather than seeing sexuality as varying along multiple lines depending on the context, need and psychological/sexual area of experience (Shively & De Cecco, 1977).

As compared to other minority populations, many sexual minorities are in the complex position of being able to conceal their stigmatized identity either some or all of the time. At first, this might seem to be an advantage as compared to stigmatized groups that often cannot conceal their identity such as racial minorities. However, research has shown that people whose identities are linked to social stigma score lower on self-esteem measures and demonstrate increased levels of negative affect than groups without stigmatizing identities and those with visible characteristics of social stigma (Frable et al., 1998). In addition to having psychological consequences, concealment of identity can have profound health effects; research on homosexual men who conceal their sexual orientation has shown them to have significantly worse outcomes in overall physical health (Cole et al., 1996). This data underscores the complex and difficult psychological processes involved in negotiating an *internal* identity that is not readily understood, mirrored or celebrated by one's socio-cultural environment. For LGBT people, the issue of concealment of one's sexual identity has broad and deep implications in a range of areas including mental health, HIV/AIDS prevention, youth homelessness, workplace/legal discrimination, risk of physical harm, maintenance of family ties and acceptance by religious and cultural groups of origin (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993).

The Importance of Belonging: Community Connectedness and Well Being

Research has clearly and effectively demonstrated the positive effects of perceived social support on emotional and physical functioning (Cohen 2004; Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000; Doolin, 2010). Specifically, research has demonstrated positive associations of general social support with personal self-esteem, collective self-

esteem and overall psychological adjustment and negative associations with loneliness, depression and externalizing behavior (Grossman, D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000; Waller, 2001). In a review of the research, Harrell concluded that attachment to an identity group (and the personal meanings of that attachment, such as worldview, cultural values, and spirituality) can buffer the negative effects of discrimination. Feelings of connectedness and perceived support from larger communities are suggested as crucial aspects of mental health (Harrell, 2000). Similarly, Cowen (1994) includes community attachment as one of the essential components of psychological wellness.

Mental health benefits of community involvement are particularly evident for people from minority communities (Jones et al., 1984; Meyer, 2003; Peterson, Folkman, & Bakemen, 1996). Connectedness to LGBT community is an important coping resource because it provides access to non-stigmatizing environments and greater opportunities for positive self-appraisals (Crocker & Major, 1989; Meyer, 2003). By identifying as a sexual minority person and participating in a LGBT community, LGBT persons can benefit from affirmative social norms and create life narratives about LGBT identity reflecting positive transformation of stigmatized identity and enhanced personal growth (Kertzner, 2001; Meyer & Dean, 1998). Previous research demonstrates that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and ethnic minority communities offer members a safe environment where it is possible to connect with others, utilize resources and organize for social change without threat of persecution (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Howe, 2001; Woolwine, 2000). Supporting these findings is further evidence that decreased concealment of sexual identity, opportunity for in-group identification and greater access

to social support that fosters acceptance are strongly linked to psychological well-being (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Meyer, 2003).

In some studies, deep ties to the LGBT community have been associated with specific positive changes in functioning around critical health behaviors such as safer sex practices among gay men (Adib, Joseph, Ostrow & Tal; Seibt et al., 1995). However, these findings have been inconsistent (O'Donnell et al., 2002) and gay men report varied thoughts and feelings about involvement in the larger gay community (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). Parallel work has not been conducted to examine community attachment and health practices among sexual minority women. Fingerhut, Peplau, & Ghavami found, however, that women who more strongly identified with and spent more time in the lesbian community reported higher levels of life satisfaction (2005). Researchers have also found that building community for gay and lesbian youth decreases depression and increases feelings of support and self-esteem (Vincke & van Heeringen, 2004). Increasing the community involvement of lesbian youth, and thereby strengthening and diversifying the larger lesbian community, has been also been encouraged in recent literature (Doolin, 2010).

At the same time, a complex relationship exists between various aspects of LGBT individuals' well being (e.g. physical and emotional health, safety) and their experiences with or perceptions of their surrounding communities (e.g. Choudhury et al., 2009; Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2009; Heath & Mulligan, 2008; Morales 2009; Myer, 2003). Few studies have examined sexual minority women's perceptions of and relationships with their communities. However, in a 2009 study involving focus groups with 49 lesbian and bisexual women, three primary constructs emerged: community concepts (relevance,

meaning), community-based strain (racism, homophobia, biphobia, classism), and community-based action (fluidity and exclusivity). Thoughts and feelings about these themes varied with participants' geography, race and ethnicity (Lehavot, Balsam & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). One common, overarching theme was the experience of strain in one's community; depending on the participant, this was directly or indirectly related to types of community-based discrimination and/or marginalization. Four core strains were identified: racism, homophobia, classism and biphobia (Lehavot et al., 2009).

Dual Identity and Biphobia: Investigating Bisexuals' Relationship to Community

Recent studies continue to support the general idea that engagement in a larger community provides both bisexual and lesbian women with resources, social connections and enhanced self-confidence and well-being (Lehavot, Balsam & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). The choice of an affirming and appropriate community, however, appears also to be critical. A study by Heath and Mulligan showed that lesbian and bisexual women frequently engage with different communities, with subsequently varied outcomes. Lesbian women appear to benefit from larger communities with stronger social ties and norms. As compared to bisexual women's communities, the strength of these social norms and ties sometimes works against lesbian womens' best interests, depending on members' capacities to resist social norms that impede well-being (Heath & Mulligan, 2008). For bisexuals, previous studies have indicated that community connectedness mediated the relationship between bisexuality and decreased social well-being (Kertzner, et al., 2009).

Analyses of ethnic identity have led to the concept of "dual identity frameworks," which have in turn been used to understand how lesbians navigate homosexual and heterosexual communities (Berry, 1984; Fingerhut, Peplau & Ghavami, 2005; LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton 1993; Lehavot et al., 2009). Citing Fingerhut's four identity categories of assimilated, lesbian-identified, separated or marginalized (across the two communities of heterosexuals and homosexuals), one study calls for an expansion of research based in dual identity frameworks by now applying it to bisexuals (Lehavot et al., 2009).

Biphobia has been defined as negative attitudes about bisexuality and bisexual people (Bennett, 1992); research shows that in the face of biphobia, distress can arise through the struggle to form an affirming relationship within the broader gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community (Lehavot et al., 2009). Moreover, bisexual women often feel that they actually belong to two communities: heterosexual and homosexual (Lehavot et al., 2009). As this study will reveal., feelings of belonging or non-belonging may depend on a variety of factors including the sex of one's partner, social environment, experience of discrimination or intrapsychic or life phase factors. Bisexuals can experience marginalization from either or both communities. They are thus thought to face a kind of "double discrimination" because they are not fully accepted by either homosexual or heterosexual groups (Ochs, 1996).

A culture of biphobia is noted in LGBT communities in the United States and other countries, including France (Welzer-Lang, 2008). An Australian study of 60 self-identified bisexual men and women's perceptions of and beliefs about antibisexual attitudes within the gay and lesbian community revealed that many bisexuals were not

active in the lesbian and gay community because they believed that they would be discriminated against or rejected. Those bisexuals who were active tended to keep their bisexuality a secret for fear of feeling like an outcast. This finding has significant implications for the further study of the unique stressors of bisexuals and the impact of being closeted on mental health.

The psychological process of feeling that one has to conceal one aspect of one's minority identity in order to feel affirmed within another minority community is shared by other dually oppressed groups. Rust identified three strategies that LGBT people of color use to negotiate the boundaries of their multiple minority identities: 1) to conceal one's sexual minority status and retain involvement in one's minority ethnic community 2) leave one's community of origin and immerse oneself in the larger gay and lesbian community or 3) remaining in one's ethnic community as an "out" sexual minority (2000). Lehavot, Balsam and Ibrahim-Wells point out that a fourth option is increasingly possible with the rise of internet-based communities and urban LGBT networks of people of color. Their research also reveals, however, that the options for networking with LGBT people of color made possible by the internet, do not change the fact that many still feel marginalized in the larger LGBT and racial communities as a result of their dual identity (2009).

Bisexuals and Community Wellness: Possible Directions for Future Research

There is a growing body of research aiming to understand and improve the experiences of LGBT individuals in larger institutional settings such as workplaces, service agencies and community organizations (Barron and Hebl, 2010; Choudhury et al.,

2009; Morales, 2009; Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazaravic & Goldberg, 2010). It is possible that some of the data and strategies from this work can be utilized to help the larger LGBT community create a safer space for bisexuals. For example, there is the possibility of acknowledging and managing the natural occurrence of subgrouping that often takes place within a larger group (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2007). One theorist aptly explains, "Creation of such groups does not invalidate the need to be part of the wider community but highlights the diversity and difference that may exist within the community" (Wisenfeld, 1996). The question that is then left for the LGBT community is: Is it possible to genuinely and consistently affirm and include bisexuals in the broader sexual minority movement? And for bisexuals, the question arises: Given what is known about the positive impact of community involvement on minorities, is it worth the effort to work for greater visibility, inclusion and participation in the contemporary LGBT movement? In order to better understand the complexities and psychological consequences of bisexual women's relationships with the larger LGBT community, more research in this area is needed.

CHAPTER III

Materials and Methodology

Introduction

This chapter includes a synopsis of the materials and methods utilized for this study. There are four sections: 1) Participants: inclusion and exclusion criteria; 2) Rationale and procedures – Utilizing a Qualitative Approach; 3) Materials: Demographic Information Form and Semi-Structured Interview; 4) Analysis of the Data: Methods and Goals of Analysis.

1. Participants

A sample of 11 adult women from various ethnic and racial backgrounds between the ages of 25-42 years was gathered. To eliminate the confound of an early developmental stage, women below the age of 22 and women who were in undergraduate training were excluded. No vulnerable populations such as children, cognitively impaired people, pregnant women, elderly people or veterans were included. Because the sample was derived from a colleague network, all participants were current or former Rutgers graduate students. Since there is no consensus on how to develop research questions that accurately and fully capture sexual orientation (Harcourt, 2006; Solarz, 1999), the method of selecting participants was based on participants' self-identification as a person who is or has been dually attracted to men and women during the course of her life. All

participants also had at least one significant sexual relationship with and attraction to at least one man and one woman at some point in their adult lives.

2. Rationale and Procedures: Utilizing a Qualitative Approach

This study examines the feelings and thoughts that bisexual women have regarding their sexual identity and their relationships to broader communities (which vary in level of affirmation and acceptance). Specific focus was paid to exploring the role that social and institutional systems play in shaping women' s perceptions, experiences and behaviors regarding their dual attractions/bisexuality. Such systems include friendship networks, family groups, religious settings, community organizations and school/work environments. To date, there has been relatively little written about this topic, particularly with a focus on the adult female population.

Since the researcher sought to establish a base of knowledge rather than test a specific hypothesis, a qualitative approach was most appropriate (McKracken, 1988; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There is currently a large dearth of information and research on LGBT demographics, cultures and experiences, making qualitative research "necessary for the creation of questions and topics for future, larger-scale topics" (Harcourt, 2006). Furthermore, given the highly personal., broad and complex nature of this topic, a private, one-on-one interview was the chosen methodology for data collection. Specifically, a semi-structured interview format was utilized. In order to minimize the influence of interviewer or researcher bias, initial questions were open ended and designed to elicit the participants' most personal and authentic responses to the general topic areas. Then, in keeping with the semi-structured format, as the interview proceeded and more open-ended inquiries were made, the questions became increasingly

specific. The main goal of the interviews was to gather in-depth information and identify key themes in the lives of of participants through the pursuit of descriptive data. Thus, qualitative research methodology was best suited to this kind of research endeavor (Banister et al., 1994; Fishman, 1999; McKracken, 1988)

Rather than seeking to test highly specific and pre-determined hypotheses, a qualitative approach makes room for the phenomenology of personal experience by attending to individuals rather than groups (Patton, 2002). In contrast with quantitative methods that convert participant's responses to numerical form for the purpose of statistical analysis, qualitative data collection facilitates the emergence of themes and patterns and lays the groundwork for more specific hypothesis building (McKracken, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3. Data Collection and Analysis: Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory is a particular methodological approach that is designed for the analysis of qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It will be utilized in this research as a way to generate theory from the data itself, which is "systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and "emerges from fieldwork" (Glaser & Strass, 1967). In grounded theory methodology, the investigator facilitates the emergence of data by having participants verbalize their subjective experiences, which then become the basis for hypothesis building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In their seminal article (1990) on grounded theory process, Strauss and Corbin list four specific goals:

1. To build rather than test theory
2. To conduct research rigorously such that the theory is "good science"

3. To help the researcher/analyst/data collector break through the assumptions and biases that he/she brings to and develops during the research process
4. To provide grounding, build density and develop sensitivity and integration needed to generate rich, tightly woven, explanatory theory that closely approximates the reality it represents.

Using the semi-structured interview as a primary tool, the researcher is able to both follow a consistent format while also maintaining the freedom to explore new themes as they arise naturally during the course of the interview itself (Banister et al., 1994). In addition to valuing the importance of eliciting authentic and minimally biased information from subjects, grounded theory researchers acknowledge their role in shaping the data collection and analysis through their critical thinking and creative interaction with the research process as a whole (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Once data is collected, the researcher engages in a three stage coding process for the purposes of analysis. The first of these stages is called "open coding" and here the data is examined and categorized. Each subject's response is viewed with as open a mind as possible (without a particular theory guiding the researcher's view) and sifted through as if the researcher were an archeologist. The next stage in the process is referred to as the axial coding stage. Here the data is examined with the intent of finding similarities across and within categories. Cross-subject data is now examined and compared. At this point, the researcher can conceptually utilize existing literature and theory to sort and connect observations. In the final stage, which is termed "selective coding", key categories are identified as they have emerged from the first two stages of the grounded theory research process. The categories are then systematically related, compared and

refined. The researcher is now able to look for both consistencies and contradictions across themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Methods

Recruitment, Consent and Participation

Participants were recruited via a colleague network approach. The researcher provided colleagues with flyers and contact information for interested potential participants. Thirteen women contacted the researcher through this method. While all thirteen were deemed appropriate for the study, due to scheduling restraints, only eleven participants were able to attend interview appointments. All eleven participants who agreed to the study and were able to schedule appointments attended. All participants were fully informed about the purpose and design of the study and no deception was involved. At the beginning part of the interview, participants were given consent forms to review and sign. These explained the purpose and parameters of the study, including the processes of audiotaping and later destruction of audio materials once the (de-identified) interviews were transcribed. Participants were then provided with the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns. They were also reminded again of the option to halt participation at any time with no negative consequences. While a few participants asked general questions about the purpose of the research, no participants expressed concerns or indicated a desire to discontinue their involvement in the study.

Instruments and Methodology

In addition to a demographic information form, one semi-structured qualitative interview was administered to gather data. The interview was completely private and designed to take no longer than 1.5 hours. No other instruments were administered. All data collection and analysis was conducted by Sarah C. Kowal., M.A., Psy.M., the principal investigator. Data analysis was done using grounded theory methodology. All interview data was securely kept and held confidential. No identifying data was kept. All names and contact information were destroyed with the interview recording after transcription. Names used in this paper were falsified.

Description of Instruments

Demographic Information Form

The researcher developed this instrument to collect basic background information about the participants. The form requires participants to share personal information such as date of birth, sexual orientation identification, sex of partner, religious affiliation, degree of religiosity, education level, employment information and area of residence.

Recruitment Flyer

Reviewed and approved by the IRB, this brief flyer was used to recruit participants in the study. It was designed to provide relevant information about the study and explain how to get involved. The flyer was distributed through a colleague network.

Semi-structured Interview

This sixteen question interview was developed by the researcher as an instrument to gather rich and personal descriptions of the experience of bisexuality and dual attraction. Designed to last up to 1.5 hours, the interview enables participants to first offer information and experience that is most salient to them. Thus, questions begin in more open-ended formats such as, "How would you describe your sexuality presently?" They then become increasingly more specific, directing the participant to areas of investigation and requesting responses to particular experiences and terminology. For example, examples of later questions include: What are your thoughts and feelings about the word bisexual? What do you think causes you to have these feelings/thoughts? At the end of the interview, the researcher provides participants with a final opportunity to share information that is personally meaningful but not necessarily addressed by the instrument. Thus, the final question is: Is there a particular memory or story related to what we've talked about today that comes to mind as salient or important for you?

CHAPTER IV

Results

Introduction

This project attempts to explore the relationship between community involvement and bisexuality/dual-attraction in adult women - a highly complex and multifaceted phenomenon with relatively scant previous research. This chapter aims to explore interview data in a non-reductionistic format and to instead make room for both individual context as well as more common or universal factors. From data analysis, underlying themes and potential constructs for further research emerge. The results are presented utilizing a narrative approach that enables readers to consider the context of several of the participants. In addition to frequent use of direct quotes to support the identification of core themes, three participant stories were chosen to provide more in-depth illustrations of experiences and themes.

The chapter is divided into four sections: 1) Participant demographics 2) A Note About the Wse of Language 3) Content Analysis: A Thematic Analysis of the Interviews; 4) Stories of Bisexual and Dually Attracted Women: Three Narratives of Participants' Experiences.

Participant Demographics

Interviews were conducted with eleven women who endorsed having prior sexual relationships with both sexes. At the time of the study, all participants were American

born women between 25 and 42 years of age; 32 was the average age. Three participants had already earned a graduate-level degree; the remaining eight were in the process of completing one. All eleven participants were working in their chosen professional field either part or full-time. Fields of expertise included the arts, sciences and humanities. None of the participants were psychologists or psychiatrists.

Two of the participants had children (each had one child). Eight participants were in long-term, monogamous relationships (five were currently with men and three were currently with women). Three participants were married - two participants were married to men and one to a woman. Three participants were not in committed relationships. Eight participants identified themselves as White/European-American (one was ethnically half Cuban but identified as white). One participant identified as African American and another identified as biracial (half African American, half European American). One participant identified as ethnically Indian but bi-cultural (American and Indian).

Four participants were raised in Reformed Jewish families. One was "moderately religious" (attends weekly services at a progressive synagogue) while the other three identified as more culturally than religiously Jewish (all attend services only on high holidays with family). One participant was raised in a traditional., southern Protestant household but currently identifies as agnostic and denies practicing any religion. Four participants were raised in Catholic households and are not currently practicing (three attend church only on Christmas with family; one never attends). Two participants were raised in non-religious households.

A Note about the Use of Language

Psychotherapists and social activists alike have long hailed the empowering effect of the verbal articulation of experience. Throughout life, people need words to convey boundaries, feelings and preferences to others around them. Arguably, this helps to alleviate the anxiety and confusing emotion caused by the mere process of living and relating. For many people, finding words to explain feelings, symptoms and experiences is clarifying and cathartic. But what about when words are inadequate? Or carry weighty cultural associations? Or feel at first liberating and then suddenly confining of behavior? What happens when choosing a word or label locks one into - or out of - membership in a beloved or dreaded community? For many people, the term bisexual invokes these fears and concerns.

For some people, the term "queer," as promoted by activists and intellectuals who want to reclaim oppressive slurs, is an ideal word because it is deliberately ambiguous, inclusive of all non-hetero identities and playfully challenging of heteronormative society. For others, "queer" is a painful and unwanted reminder of schoolyard bullying or merely an obscure form of nomenclature used by the academic elite. Indeed, the words "bisexual" and "queer" do not resonate with all of the people they are intended to describe. In some cases, the words themselves add additional strain rather than providing the relief often found in naming experience and identity.

With no universally approved term to describe and encompass people who have had significant attractions and sexual relationships with both sexes, the process of researching them becomes instantly problematic. In an effort to be maximally inclusive and encouraging of openness, the researcher frequently used the phrase "dually attracted

and/or bisexual" when explaining the study to participants. Once a given participant explained her preferences for naming herself, the researcher used that terminology. However, when writing a document that spans over one hundred pages and covers a range of research studies, conceptual themes and individual experiences, practical demands often made it necessary to revert to the general use of "bisexual," as it is the most brief and commonly used term. The specific psychological and behavioral impact of this thorny and unresolved issue is, among others, one of the core areas of investigation for this project. Until it is resolved in the future however, readers must accept the ubiquitous use of the problematic term bisexual throughout this document.

Content Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this section is to illustrate core concepts and experiences through the presentation of six overarching themes that emerged from the interview data. The following themes were emotionally salient across most (and in some cases all) interviews:

1) Naming (or choosing not-to name) sexual identity

2) Coming out

3) Religion and family – acceptance, rejection and the negotiation of conflicting values and beliefs

4) Workplace and school experiences

5) Dual identity and other social minority experiences

6) Relationship to the LGBT Community

In choosing to identify and highlight particular concepts, the researcher focused on themes that emerged from a minimum of three participants, and in several cases half or more. The only exception to this criteria for inclusion of a theme was that of race and dual identity. Due to the sample size, geographic and socio-economic specificity of the participant group, racial and other minorities were also minorities within the subject pool. However, the researcher believed it important to include the experiences of these groups; thus, issues raised by those with dual identities, including racial minority status, biracial identity and disability (due to chronic illness) were also included and explored in this section. Within each themed section, sub-themes are also identified and explored. Interestingly, the researcher did not find any age-related differences, nor any notable differences between the subjects with and without children. However, the small sample size of this project means that readers cannot assume this finding to be representative of the population of bisxuals as a whole. Rather, the themes and subthemes that follow may be used to provide direction and material for future, larger scale studies.

Theme 1: Naming the Experience of Dual Attraction

> Although I have lived monogamously with a man I love for over 26 years, I am not now and never have been "a heterosexual"...Although some of the (very few) individuals to whom I have been attracted during my 47 years have been men and some have been women, what those individuals have in common has nothing to do with either their biological sex or mine- from which I conclude not that I am attracted to both sexes, but that my sexuality is organized around dimensions other than sex.
>
> - Sandra Lipsitz Bem

Despite research that says bisexuals have higher distress levels than monosexuals, it is likely that a great number of bisexual people are living invisibly within monosexual communities and are not thus represented by existing research samples. This means that

current sample pools are likely not capturing the full experience of bisexual distress and/or well-being. It is possible that at least part of the reason for this is that many bisexual people do not openly refer to themselves as bisexual and are thus not able to be "counted" in empirical studies. However, proving this theory is beyond the bounds of this project. A less debatable assertion is that research increasingly shows that bisexuals who are captured in research samples may have unique forms of distress that are presently little understood. It then becomes important to consider: what lies at the heart of this increased level of distress? The data presented below begins to explore this question.

First, an underlying assumption of this research is the idea that understanding, naming and expressing a bisexual identity is a complicated and often daunting process; for many women, including several participants in this study, it is simply as easier to simply pass as monosexual (meaning straight or gay/lesbian). There are a plethora of word choices/narrative phrases available for dually attracted people, each with their own set of advantages and limitations. Examples include: queer, bisexual, "I don't label myself. I'm attracted to the person-not-the-sex," sexually fluid, "I used to be gay but now I'm more straight", "I used to be bi but now I'm gay," "I'm straight but I just fell in love with this one special person." Depending on the individual., any one of these options may feel accurate or conversely, trigger a defensive or negative reaction. As a result, while conducting the study, the researcher used the term "dually-attracted" to be descriptive and inclusive, while evoking minimal identity politic associations.

There are ever-changing internal/intrapsychic and external/interpersonal dimensions to naming one's sexuality. For many people, including participants in this study, the process is dynamic throughout life. For some bisexual people, it paradoxically

includes the choice *not* to name a sexuality at all. In her book, *Vice Versa,* Garber attempts to describe the complexities of bisexual identity and politics. To begin this task, she utilizes the philosophy articulated in the editorial section of a well-known magazine for the bisexual community called, *Everything That Moves*:

> Bisexuality is a whole, fluid identity. Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or dichotomous in nature: that we must have "two sides or that we MUST be involved simultaneously with both genders to be full human beings. In fact, don't assume that there are only two genders. Do not mistake our fluidity for confusion, irresponsibility or an inability to commit. Do not equate promiscuity, infidelity or unsafe sexual behavior with bisexuality. Those are human traits that cross ALL sexual orientations....Do not expect a clear cut definition of bisexuality to jump out from the pages. We bisexuals tend to define bisexuality in ways that are unique to our own individuality. There are as many definitions of bisexuality as there are bisexuals. Many of us choose not to label ourselves anything at all, and find the word "bisexual" to be inadequate and too limiting. (cited in Garber, 1995)

The varied messages in this quote are echoed in the interview data. One commonality was that most participants found the term bisexual to be problematic in some way. A variety of reasons were offered, ranging from a sense that one's attraction was currently aimed at only one sex (even though one's past attractions strongly included the other sex) to the belief that the term bisexual, while accurate, was simply too stigmatizing in both the gay and straight communities. On the issue of public and self identification, Clausen writes:

> I think its important to note that a history of sexual flexibility by no means automatically ensures, though it may sometimes encourage women's resistance to identifying as either gay or straight. Given the social and political utility of these powerful identities, not to mention the difficulty of bypassing them in a society where everyone is widely assumed to be one or the other, it is hardly surprising that many attempt to square complex erotic histories with simple, dichotomous labels. (1999)

Since Clausen wrote that quote, there has been over a decade of activism and intellectual work dedicated to promoting the word "queer" as a more inclusive and flexible

alternative that would encompass bisexual and homosexual people. Since all of the women in the study were educated at the graduate level, there was a frequent acknowledgement of queer theory, which appeared to offer some useful, new language. Yet, in this study, "queer" was of little practical use to all but two participants. The following quote seems to capture the interplay of these issues in the life of one 34 year-old participant:

> I don't know. I know I'm really educated beyond what most women or people are. So I've been exposed to feminism and queer theory and all that stuff. I never really got into it though. It kind of intimidated me to be honest. I'm pretty much a science geek when it comes down to it. I'm not so consistently comfortable around my species in groups. But now, you know, I'm thinking I'd like to revisit some of that stuff ....the queer theory stuff. Now that I'm more secure in myself. But, I also kinda feel like my window to get my identity together has passed. I'm in my thirties and have a long-term partner, am about to get a PhD. I was supposed to do all that identity stuff when I was in my twenties. I picture myself showing up at some bisexual event at [this university] and being awash in adolescent hipsters who will look at me curiously... or worse, with pity. I feel like I missed some kind of mark where after a certain amount of Ani DiFranco and girl punk and feminist readings, I should be fully evolved and able to get on to growing a garden with my girlfriend and all at peace with myself [laughs]. I suppose I mostly just avoid thinking about it....identity. I work hard and love my girlfriend. I don't like calling myself gay because I have had satisfying sex with men and can't say that I wouldn't do it again someday...I just know that for right now, I am in love with her and can't imagine sharing a life with anyone else. I also know I'm bisexual. But, truth be told, I don't really want to be. It feels limiting to label myself like that.

In this quote, one can hear a sense of struggle - not only with naming and labeling - but also with the perceived failure to do so within a developmental time frame deemed ideal by a vaguely-defined LGBT community. LGBT scholars have made the observation that lesbian/gay/bisexual people sometimes have an adulthood coming out process that is followed by a period of exploration and experimentation that may be socially akin to the notion "second adolescence." This is often thought to be due to the lack of community support and role modeling in their biological/chronological

adolescence (Gonsiorek, 1991). Additionally, it seems that for women who either missed the more socially sanctioned opportunity to explore their identity in college or realized after college that they were actually bisexual (as opposed to gay or straight), there is often a sense of having "missed the mark" developmentally.

In the aforementioned quote, it appears that the participant has internalized a belief about a normative course that she has not taken. She appears to believe that there is a pathway to "inner peace" that should begin earlier in life (and necessarily involve listening to specific artists and reading certain kinds of feminist theory). She feels that she has missed the opportunity to grapple with her identity in a conscious way and that it is somehow too late for her to even try to find a term that feels accurate and comfortable. This is in part because of her perception of those whom she believes *are* sure about the best words to use – those from the larger lesbian/gay/bisexual community- as somehow fundamentally different from her; to her they are self assured "hipsters" in their twenties, people who will see her and feel pity that she is just now seeking community and identity in her mid-thirties (the concept of celebrities as perceived community will be explored later in this work). The intimation that it is somehow hopeless or "too late" to become affectively engaged in a process of naming an identity was evident in multiple interviews:

> Whatever. I'm through thinking about whether I'm gay or bisexual or god-forbid straight but secretly just screwed up about my relationship with my mom or dad. I'm happy in my life and there's not much sense in re-visiting the mess of 'what are you *really?'* It's tiring and gets me nowhere. In a way it's more for other people to feel clear about who I am. I'm fine just being Kate who had a boyfriend and now has a girlfriend. Labels be damned!
>
> I don't know. I think I'm just straight now. I still think women are really attractive but I can't deal with the stress of actually living in two worlds. Other people don't get it. And when it *was* the right time for me to be figuring out how to be an 'out and proud bisexual', like when I was in college and had all that energy around me, I had no interest in it.

Another sub-theme that arose in the part of the interview where participants were asked to discuss their label for themselves was the use of the word queer. Historically a slur against homosexual people or those with non-traditional gender presentations, queer is now a term used for resistance and reclamation. In theory, it is a liberating and postmodern term that is designed to be inclusive because it encompasses anyone who defines themselves differently from the straight majority. However, while popular and useful in theory circles, for some the term 'queer' seems to beget the same degree of burden as that of 'bisexual.' One participant states:

> Since being in graduate school I've been exposed to queer theory and the use of the word queer as a kind of all inclusive option for lesbians, bisexuals and even supportive straight people. I tried using it because I really liked the spirit it embodied. But, I found it just as hard as bisexual because for one it still required me to explain something personal about my sexuality...and that's just awkward at a cookout or baby shower. Plus, most of the people I know who are queer, are really more lesbian because they were only in relationships with women. When I used the word queer, I really meant that I could be with both. I still had to explain to lesbians that I was attracted to men. And now if I use it, I have to explain to straights that I'm attracted to women.
>
> The problem with 'queer' is that the only people that really get it or really use it are gay people and academic elites. Other people kinda make a sour face and are like, oh that's not very nice!

In lieu of a term that feels right, three participants choose not to label themselves at all. This is illustrated in the following participant quote:

> I didn't find a community I really liked to be in until I got to college and met other geeky people. I went to one gay and lesbian event in college and was like no way these are not my people. I do not belong here...this is not my thing...I'm not straight up gay and I don't want to be. I think some girls are really sexy. But mainly, I like nice, soft geeks. I like boys and girls as long as they're geeky and I'm happy with that. I guess you could say that I've made up my own sexuality and it doesn't have a name and it doesn't have a lot to do with gender or sex or whatever you want to call it either.

It is interesting to note that this participant's decision not to identify as lesbian or bisexual had to do with how she felt around others who labeled themselves that way; she did not feel a sense of community kinship or belonging. Some might insist that this participant's decision not to name her sexuality or come out to others about her difference is psychologically harmful or self-limiting in some way. However, this does not bear out consistently in the small amount of existing literature. One study examining levels of perceived wellness of women who have had both female and male partners (and who identify as bisexual) compared with those with the same experiences (but who did not identify as bisexual) found no differences between these two groups (Kerz, 2002). Contrastingly, several studies have indicated that participants who identify as bisexual experience increased positive feelings and an expanded sense of possibility surrounding both who they could be and love (Bradford, 2004; Diamond, 2008).

From the interview data in this study, it appears that each woman's interpretation of and feelings about her choice (to identify as bisexual or not) varies with the specifics of her communities and life circumstances. For example, the previously quoted participant holds negative expectations of how she would be treated if she were to choose a nonmajority label for her sexuality; this is likely partly related to the strong rejection she faced in her family and church as a child. Although she maintains ongoing attraction to both men and women, this participant is not involved with LGBT community of any kind. When asked if she felt if there was anything missing in her life (related to community), this participant adamantly replied that there was not. Although she acknowledged chronic feelings of isolation when she thought specifically about her sexuality, she adamantly denied feeling at risk for serious depression and had no interest

in psychotherapy. She felt successful in her career and able to maintain a relationship with both a lover and her family. When asked why she agreed to participate in the study, she replied that she was a little bit interested in it and generally liked to support science. This woman is an example of a kind of bisexual woman whom the researcher believes would "fly under the radar" of many clinical sampling procedures because she does not use any LGBT-related term to label herself, is not involved in any clinics or mental health programs and denies any significant distress. She appears to be an example of a dually attracted woman whose sexual uniqueness is not visible to most of the world.

People from majority groups are often unaware of their identity. For example, heterosexual people generally do not undergo a process of determining an accurate name for their sexuality. Minorities, who are thought of in reference to the majority, are forced to reflect more on both cultures (majority and their own) and understand what makes them unique. For some, refusing to choose an identity term may be a way to take a stand against the pressure to label oneself separately from the "invisible" but powerful majority. For others, including three women in this study, the decision not to choose a label seems fraught with uncertainty about how one might be viewed and treated by heterosexual and homosexual groups once a name is determined:

> ...[bisexuality] is still seen as a flaky thing. If I were gay, I'd have no problem telling my boss...If I were straight, I just wouldn't have to. Telling him that I like both just makes me look unreliable or worse, messed up.
>
> If I really came out and said I was bisexual, I think it would make my girlfriend and her friends uncomfortable. They know I've been with men but they think I was still trying to find myself at that time...I've never agreed or disagreed with that. I just know that me calling myself bisexual would make me a little less trustworthy to lesbians.

Most of the women in the study indicated some degree of ambivalence and unresolved feelings about the term bisexual. The following negative stereotypes about and associations to the word bisexual were mentioned or implied across multiple interviews:

- The bisexual as promiscuous
- The bisexual as flaky and unreliable
- The bisexual who was really straight and would break her girlfriend's heart
- The bisexual who was really lesbian and would break her boyfriend's heart
- The bisexual who was less valuable/strong because she was "less gay"
- The bisexual whose sexual interactions with women are designed for the purpose of titillating straight men
- The bisexual who is confused and trying to "find herself"

Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned an identification with the term "sexually fluid." It is likely that this term is not appealing because it is even more suggestive of the stereotype that many bisexual people attempt to fight – which is one of unreliability, or unpredictability. During the interview, one woman was speaking in terms that were especially suggestive of the concept of fluidity because she described her sexuality as "ever changing"; thus, the researcher asked her how she felt about calling herself fluid. This was her response:

> Oh no. I wouldn't use that. It sounds new-agey. I'm picturing a woman in a flowy dress in California with crystals and Tarot cards....and that is certainly not me...The only thing that is fluid about me is the percentage of water in my body.

Regardless of each woman's particular choice to name or not-to-name her sexuality, there was nearly ubiquitous acknowledgement of some degree of discomfort or

difficulty with the terms currently available. Such discomfort invariably had to do with perceptions about social stigma and decreased belongingness (mostly in family and LGBT communities) that were imagined to result from the choice of a single word.

Theme 2: Coming Out

"Every time I come out to someone, I feel that I begin battling a silent stereotype of the promiscuous, unformed bisexual." (study participant)

The process of coming out begins with an internal understanding and relative acceptance of one's sexual identity. This is then followed by a claiming of one's identity amongst important others – a fundamentally interpersonal event. Referring to the process as 'confrontation', de Monteflores marks coming out as one of several strategies for communicating and managing difference. Emphasizing the importance of community support, he goes on to assert:

> ...the process of coming out is a process of development of identity, but it does not follow s simple linear progression. Coming out is also affected by environmental factors, employment, survival needs, and the strength of affiliations to various support networks, such as family, ethnic groups and class. (as cited in Garnets & Kimmel, 1993)

In addition to exploring the impact of community environments, another area of investigation for this study is whether the coming out process is different and potentially uniquely problematic for bisexuals (as compared to gays and lesbians). Consideration is given to the impact that the term 'bisexual' has on individuals' coming out processes as well as their perceptions of community availability, support and stigma.

The coming out process varied for the women in this study. For *all* participants, there was a history of feeling emotionally strained by the experience on more than one occasion (albeit not in the same setting or community). For most participants, strain took

the form of worry about what others would think and/or how one may be treated in the future. Specifics varied with each individual; however, these worries extended across all social communities - including family, religious institutions, workplaces, schools and LGBT communities. Illustrative experiences in different settings are described in greater detail in the participant narratives and the other theme sections.

The aim of this section is to explore what participants said about the process of coming out. Difficult and/or emotionally charged experiences with coming out were most often revealed in response to the interview question, "Is there anyone whom you are particularly closed about your sexual identity with? What makes this the case?" The following includes basic summary data. In answering this question,

- 6 of 11 women interviewed named a familial relationship first
- 4 women listed the lesbian/gay community first
- 1 woman named the work environment first
- 8 women followed their first answer with some modification that "it depended" on a number of factors (to be more fully explored in other theme categories). When probed, these included:
    - current sex of partner
    - past vs. present life situation/self schema
    - particular sub-groups within the lesbian/gay community
    - particular sub-groups within participant's family (usually parents vs. siblings/cousins)
    - particular individuals at workplace (boss vs. colleagues)

Interestingly, three women followed up their first answer by saying that coming out was not a current issue because they now publicly identified as either gay or straight. For all three of these women, there was a feeling that it was too complicated and/or socially risky to let strangers or acquaintances know that one had prior relationships with the other sex. One participant explains:

> The only time coming out feels like an issue for me now is when I'm in all straight environments and people are talking about "gay people" as if there are

> none in the room. Invariably someone will say something that I want to comment on in some way...but usually what I want to say makes it clear that I'm talking from personal experience. So then I have to decide whether I feel like coming out or not. If someone is being ignorant, I usually force myself to speak...I don't know...I guess that's the main way that I'm still a little gay at heart.
>
> I don't come out if I can help it. I don't think people need to know that much about my personal life unless they are close friends. You never know how people are going to react....It's a way I keep things neat and clean in my life.
>
> If my relationship with Cara hadn't been so messed up, I probably wouldn't mind coming out more. But it was a bad relationship so I try to forget it. I guess I put those things together in my mind – how I used to be gay and being in a dysfunctional relationship. I guess that's why I don't come out. I don't want to seem suddenly all weird and depressed about how I used to be with a woman because the person will get the wrong idea. Cara was a freak but being gay is cool in a lot of ways...and so I don't want to misrepresent it.

As these quotes illustrate, there seems to be a fundamental suspicion or negative expectation of straight people on the part of some bisexual women. When queried about what the main concern was in coming out to a straight or gay person, four participants indicated that the changeability implied by bisexuality seemed to cause discomfort in others. One participant states,

> I know some of my old high school friends were thinking 'All right already, enough with finding yourself! We're getting older....which is it gonna be? Boys or girls?'

In coming out, the bisexual asks the monosexual "listener" to remain mentally flexible about sex and gender. Arguably, this is one of the main, unique challenges posed by bisexuality; people have an innate desire to categorize and predict what will come next. Accepting someone's bisexuality means being comfortable with uncertainty in the areas of sex and gender - categories that gender theorists describe as is highly policed, affectively laden and socially reified (Bornstein, 1994; Butler, 1990; Feingberg, 1998). Thus, the simple naming of one's identity poses an interpersonal challenge to the bisexual

woman, who may feel she is responsible for educating or reassuring the other person in the interpersonal exchange. Seven out of eleven study participants explained that they had worked hard to help at least one person who was important to them (but not fully accepting) to feel more comfortable with their sexuality. In a similar vein, Jennifer Baumgardner describes her experience in "coming out" as a bisexual in *Look Both Ways*:

> While I don't exactly relate to that touchstone gay movement myself, I have to admit that I repeatedly go through my own special bisexual form of it, having to explain my life with each relationship I am in. Rather than being 'closeted' I feel forced to be host, guiding the uninitiated on through Sexuality 101. The constant negotiating one has to do in the face of fear same sex relationships is draining. I felt how tedious and painful it could be during the years I brought Amy Ray home with me for Christmas. I always felt as if I had to be doubly sure to be the 'same old Jenny'- friendly, feminine, social – in order to cut off at the pass any stereotype or social discomfort. I was aware that people might simply not know what to say when I introduced my girlfriend, not out of hatred but out of pure lack of experience. I was always conscious of trying to ease the transition for others, and it was, at times, oppressive, even though self imposed. (2007)

The author describes her internal experience of coming out and managing concern about what she imagined others to be thinking and feeling as "oppressive." Data from participants' responses in this study is consistent with the general idea that bisexual women often become engaged in a process akin to mentalization where, in addition to coping with their own feelings and concerns, they become focused on imagining the feelings and minds of others (Fonagy et al., 2004). This "extra layer" of mental effort is not required of heterosexuals because their sexuality is in the majority and considered normative; thus, they are not persecuted, judged or rejected for it. Taking the exploration a step further, it is then important to consider how this extra degree of mental effort may impact other areas of experience, functioning or life choices. In the following quote, one author jokingly but eloquently describes how dealing with socio-political issues of

identity can become extra burdensome when compiled with the commonplace disappointment of not having a love interest or sex life:

> It's hard enough to be "queer" (or whatever) in a heterosexist, homophobic society, and to feel the pressure of constantly asserting your 'sexuality,' as a defined entity, in a society where straightness as the unmasked term, is assumed until proven otherwise. It's hard enough to be unsure what exactly this monolithic 'sexual identity' of yours is, and constantly wonder whether it makes sense to "out" yourself again and again in an endless stream of new situations, when it's not even clear what it is you're outing, or whether you have a right to claim membership in the world of queerness. It's bad enough feeling like you're living a lie if you allow straight people to assume you're totally straight and gay people to assume you're totally gay. But having to think about all this when you're not even getting laid has to be the most depressing thing of all. (Raymond, 1999)

A key area of investigation posed by this project is how the complexities negotiating a bisexual identity impact women's behavior and choices. In response to the interview question, "What factor plays the biggest role in determining who you date/partner with right now?" a disconcerting majority of women in the study (6 out of 11) indicated that they choose not to engage in the full range of their sexuality because of difficulties with coming out and feeling accepted as bisexual. Samples of responses include the following:

> I've closed that chapter. It's just too much to deal with. Bisexuals are seen as weirdos to straight people and traitors or flakes to gay people....It's not a big deal to me though. I like sex with men a lot more than sex with women so even though I'm attracted to them [women], I don't feel like I'm lying to myself by saying that I'm just gonna be with men from now on. It's just one less thing I have to deal with in the world. That's the honest truth of it.

> My world of lesbians is really important to me...It goes way beyond sexuality. They are my family. I don't feel like I'm missing out on some big, great experience by not acting on my attraction to men... If I did that, it would be really confusing to my friends and probably throw my life into a bit of turmoil. Its not that they are separatists or prejudiced...They just have a lot of their own oppressive stuff to deal with without me bringing men into the mix.

> I deal with it this way: I have close women friends. I read trashy lesbian pulp sometimes. I secretly lust after certain movie stars. Then I go home and sleep with my boyfriend. He doesn't need to know how strongly women turn me on. He's a traditional dude and I don't think he'd get it.

In general, coming out is often an ongoing, emotionally straining and socially challenging process for sexual minority people. As the aforementioned quotes illustrate, bisexuals face unique kinds of concerns and challenges. And, moreover, due to the strain of concern about rejection, some decide to close down on or mask a significant part of their identity from the world. The question left unanswered (and for future research) then becomes: what, if any, is the personal cost of this process of foreclosure?

Theme 3: Religion, Family and Bisexuality
Negotiating Self, Values and Community

Across the interview data, family relationships were often conceptually intertwined with childhood experiences with religion and religious institutions. Due to the variation in individual experiences and religious backgrounds, only two overarching sub-themes emerged from the data relating to religion. The first was related to the fact that all nine subjects who were raised in religious households spontaneously mentioned family relationships when answering the question about religion; thus there was no little discussion of religion as separate from discussion of family. The second sub-theme was that, in the context of family, it was difficult to maintain visibility and acceptance of bisexuality, particularly once a long-term partner was involved. These sub-themes will be discussed in order below.

After sorting through the data for the nine women raised in religious households, it became apparent that religious beliefs and experiences were inextricably linked to both family relationships and cultural values. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> You see, I grew up in the conservative south. My mama is an old fashioned Pentacostal woman who does not acknowledge that its natural for two dogs of the same sex to hump each other, let alone two humans. When I was sixteen, she walked in on me kissing a girl I was in love with in my bedroom. It was *the* worst moment of my entire life...Well, one of the worst I guess...she looked at me later in the kitchen and with the coldest eyes I've ever seen said, "A dyke is a dyke. And I *will* not, I *do* not have a dyke for a daughter!" Those were the dirtiest words I bet she ever spoke in her life. She forbade me from seeing this girl ever again, whom I had known all my life by the way...Of course I did see her. But it was hell. In fact, everything was hell for a long time after that. She asked the pastor at our church to give a sermon about homosexuality and he was more than happy to oblige her. The message was that God would punish homosexuals and that my mother would help...I felt like the walls were closing in on me at that time...

This woman's story illustrates the way that religious communities often have the power to re-enforce and exacerbate homophobia and biphobia within a family, leaving young bisexual, gay and lesbian youth with no place to go to feel safe. Some participants stated that when religion and family seemed rejecting of their sexuality, they turned to friends and/or books for solace. Interestingly, the internet is now thought to offer a kind of in-home respite that, due to age, many of the women in this study did not have during their earlier childhood years. Research shows that the internet is increasingly becoming a forum for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people to find community and support (Lehavot, Balsam & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). In an attempt to "retroactively" soothe herself, the woman quoted above states,

> Yeah, Pentacostals do not play around with their rules or their shame games...I never really believed it in my heart [Pentacostal religion], but it was all around me so I couldn't get away. If I had been one of those queer kids coming up today, I know what I woulda done to get relief from it all. I would have found other gay kids online...I might've even started a blog or something.

Because of the extreme views and prohibitions of homosexual behavior in her family's religion, this participant felt she had to opt out of the sect completely as an adult.

Although her experiences were often painful, she continues to work through them in therapy and personal writing. She seems to enjoy a kind of clarity from the understanding that her family's religion and related values were simply not good for her; and, therefore, she does not desire to participate in or belong to the Pentacostal community. However, not all subjects in the study felt this way about their family's religion. The following quote illustrates the feelings one woman has about her father's abdication of his family's Catholicism and her complex feelings about it as both a bisexual *and* bicultural person:

> As much as being bisexual, I think I struggle with being 'bi-religious.' My mother is Jewish and my father is Cuban - raised Catholic. He didn't care about religion and my mother really did so we were raised Jewish...I'm happy about that except sometimes when people look at me, especially in Jewish communities, all they see is my Jewish-ness. They don't know that I'm half Cuban unless I tell them. I don't really know much about my Cuban heritage but I'm getting interested in it now. Being Catholic was a big thing for my father's family and I don't know hardly anything at all about it...I guess I'm not really so much bi-religious as bi-cultural but I want to know more about this part of me because there are things I get from my father that I know come from that way of life he had...I mean, for his family, being Cuban is kinda synonymous with being Catholic...The thing about being bi anything is that there's no easy way to represent all of yourself at any one time; it always feels like there is a side of you in hiding....[laughs] I know getting to know the Catholic side of my family will mean I have to hide a part of my sexuality...but its worth it to me because it will help me to understand him better...

Among the many issues raised in the aforementioned quotes is the idea that religious communities and values do not stand alone as an influence in LGBT people's lives but, instead, often serve as a kind of "family" to one's family, setting the tone for how sexuality is understood and managed between parents and children. To the above participant, her father's abdication of his religion was not sufficient to exclude her from being impacted by Cuban-Catholic culture. She sensed that his personality and values were formed by his religion and culture, and thus hers were as well. As an independent adult who is in therapy and reflecting on her life trajectory, she faces the task of

understanding and integrating her Judaism, bisexuality, Cuban heritage and influence of her Catholic-raised father. This interview underscored for the researcher how questions about religious institutions could not be answered in a way that was divorced from the many other aspects of social existence (e.g. family and culture) that shape identity.

Sex of Current Partner as an Influence on Behavior in Family

Unlike gay, lesbian and heterosexual sexual orientations, the bisexual or dually attracted person is not fully "out" just by being seen with a partner of a given sex. As one participant states, "It would be much easier for everyone, even my super-religious grandmother, if I just stayed with women and moved on from there." Similarly, several women reported having great difficulty maintaining an understanding and acknowledgement of their bisexuality within their family. Along with four other women in this study, this woman made the decision to allow her family to think of her sexuality based on the sex of her current partner:

> I've been with Sam for three years now. He is a part of my family almost like we're married. It's not worth the effort or awkwardness to remind them all that I'm bisexual. I mean sometimes its weird because its like well I had this serious girlfriend before Sam who I loved a whole lot and you all knew her. But, if I bring her up, its like it makes everyone confused or maybe uncomfortable or something. I don't know maybe they aren't really uncomfortable. They aren't really conservative but they are pretty mainstream about things. They get gay, they get straight. I'm not sure they really get bisexual...I loved her and now I love him. I think I'm going to be with him for the rest of my life so I'm not sure how much it matters anymore...except that it gets a little weird when I want to mention something about my past. Most of the time I just leave her out of it. Not because I'm ashamed or anything. I was totally out to them. Really just because its easier for people to just think of me as straight now. Maybe that sounds bad but it just is.

When probed further, this same woman acknowledged that if she married her current boyfriend, her wedding would likely take on a slightly more religious tone than it would if she had married her previous girlfriend. She states,

> When I was with my ex [female], we talked about having a ceremony in the woods with our friends and family...an earthy, laid back kinda thing. With Sam, his family is more religious, we talk about maybe doing it in a church of some kind. I don't really mind if that's what makes him happy but its weird how different it is...if I were still with women, I doubt I'd even be considering getting married in a church.

Although this is the only participant who raised the specific issue of being married in a church with a man (versus in the woods with a woman), the intersection of religion, family values and bisexuality was evident in multiple stories. As most participants communicated, there is a sense of flexibility and ongoing re-evaluation of life choices and roles within families and communities which seems fundamental to the bisexual experience. Indeed, while dealing with forces as potent as religious and family values, the bisexual person has the added challenge of grappling with her potential to continually change something as powerful as her sexual self-representation. More clearly, even if her internal experience of her sexuality is consistent, the external perception and reflection of who she is may be more akin to someone who has made a big change or "switched teams" with each new partner. If the woman comes from a highly religious or conservative family, the emotional implications for this kind of switching are not benign. But, with maturity and individuation processes, it seems possible to reconcile the tensions between religion, family and bisexual identity. This can happen, in part, by simply naming the difficult position of bisexuals in their varying community contexts. As one woman eloquently put it:

> For me its always been damned if you do, damned if you don't...whether it's the church or the lesbians, no matter who I sleep with, I'm always pleasing someone and defying someone else. That's why I basically just say screw it and live for myself.

Theme 4: Workplace and School Experiences

In their article about lesbian career development, Morgan and Brown assert, "The nonlinear nature of both the sexual identity development and career development processes leads to complex interactions." (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993) Exploring areas of difficulty specific to bisexual or dually attracted women in work/school settings was an aim of this research. In order to further clinical and scientific understanding, it seems important to understand what is both shared by lesbian and bisexual women and also what is particular to bisexuals. In general, respondents' answers included two key sub-themes:

- Negative expectations of non-bisexuals, particularly of those in positions of power
- "Passing vs. coming out" to coworkers and bosses

To the interview question, "Do you feel that your sexuality is understood by those at your workplace?" - 8 out of 11 participants gave a response that included negative experience or expectations. Samples of responses include:

> ....well, my coworker is my friend and she knows everything about me. We go to lunch and talk about our lives. I talk about my girlfriend and she talks about her husband and kid. So I guess you could say that my sexuality it understood at work then...But its not like I'd talk to my boss about anything personal...I mean I get what you are getting at because its true that I bet my boss knows the sex of most of the staff's partners. And well, I've never told him that I even *have* a partner. I don't think he'd discriminate or anything because I'm gay, or whatever...with a woman, I just don't think it would help my cause in any way, ya know what I mean?

> Huh. Understood at my workplace. Well, there are probably a bunch of people who would understand if I wanted to take that on. You know, tell them and talk to them about it and show them that I'm still a regular normal functioning person and all that. But, who wants to go through that? I have enough friends....I guess you could say that I pass as straight and maybe I'm just lazy or apathetic that way...plus, there is always that one or maybe two people who are not so understanding and I really don't want to deal with that at work.

> Understood?...At my workplace? Do I think the people at my work *understand* being into both men and women? ....heh [laughs]. I guess the answer to that is No. Nope. um...Definetly not. But that's not surprising to you, right?

The word "understood" seemed to trigger a strong reaction in many participants. Arguably, this is because it sets a high bar for others. Bisexual, lesbian and gay people are often so accustomed to being in a sexual minority position, and thus not fully visible or known, that the prospect of being understood may seem quite unrealistic. This is illustrated by the following participant quote:

> Well that's a tall order isn't it? I mean work is not supposed to be a place to have your sexuality understood I don't think. It's a place to work and show your professional skills. I don't bring my sexuality up at work and I don't feel a need to...Work is a place where I can shine no matter what is going on in my romantic and personal life...No, my sexuality is not understood at my workplace, but I really don't need it to be either.

Interestingly, it probably does not occur to most people - straight, gay and bisexual alike - that an understanding of heterosexuality is simply assumed (Feinberg, 1990; Lorde, 1984; Queen & Bornstein, 1997). In contrast, a sense of social understanding of bisexuality appeared to be an absurd or luxurious notion to some participants. Instead, the expectation appears to be that the burden fall on the bisexual woman to facilitate her own acceptance in a work or school community – at an apparently high level of risk. Indeed, psychological strains created by managing self-

disclosure at work are well noted (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Levine & Leonard, 1984; Morgan and Brown, 1993; Schneider, 1987).

Partly in response to these difficulties, most of the women in the study opted to conceal their bisexuality at work, resulting in a kind of "blending in" with the heteronormative culture. In his article, Notes on the Management of Difference, de Monteflores writes,

> "To function in most spheres of social life, minority groups often find ways to assimilate. For example, in order to function and succeed in the workplace, minority groups may learn the behaviors, dress and language of the dominant group and "pass" as a member." (1993)

Four participants made comments that communicated something about what might be unique to passing as a bisexual person as opposed to a monosexual (gay or straight) person:

> It's different for me than it is for my girlfriend. I mean, it won't be if we end up together forever. But for her, she can just say, 'I'm a dyke' to the world and that's it, end of story. They can love her or hate her but at least she knows what to expect. Come out at work and let the chips fall where they may. For me its different, if I were with a guy right now, I might be totally accepted there by people that might treat me differently if I were with a girl because when it comes down to it, you don't really know the people at your work unless you've been there a long time. But see I don't really have any way of knowing how people really think...unless the sex of my partner changes. I've seen this with bisexual women who are with a guy and suddenly feel like whoah, why is everyone being so much nicer to me...but the other side of it is that to the outside world, my identity changes depending on who I'm with. So if I'm being true to myself I'm saying to them that I'm a bisexual *all the time*, no matter what the sex of my partner is.,,and that's just a hard thing to do.
>
> I have always 'passed' because I look so girly. Now I really pass because I'm also with a guy. Sometimes I think I'm just not into girls anymore and its easier that way anyway. But then I see a woman I think is attractive and I want to say something to a coworker, like a fun side comment, and I censor myself because I think to myself, 'no. don't. they see you as straight.'
>
> It's important to be taken seriously at work. And if you are with a guy for a while and then with a girl, they might think you are flaky and that's not a good image to

> portray at work...I guess at work I'm a quiet and hardworking lesbian. Funny to think that being a lesbian makes you more trustworthy, but in a way, nowadays, it does.

So as not to erroneously pathologize bisexual women's decisions to pass as monosexual, it is important to note that there is still an enormous amount of stigma, discrimination and unpredictability around sexual minority status in most public environments. As a result, passing can be seen as a kind of survival mechanism or way of coping with a social reality that one person alone cannot change. In a similar vein, de Monteflores frames the process of passing as a way of managing complicated social boundaries:

> Passing is ordinarily defined as appearing to be like the dominant group when one is not really a member of that group and as adopting the outer appearance of the dominant group in order to avoid direct rejection by it. I would like here to broaden the connotation of passing by defining it in a more positive and functional way as a process of managing the boundary between two groups and literally passing, or traversing, from one group to another... Passing becomes dysfunctional only when the outer appearance and the inner feelings or beliefs become disconnected; when the mask acquires a life of its own. (1992)

Due to limitations in time and scope, the extent to which any of the women in the study felt that they were wearing a "mask" (that was psychologically harmful) could not be assessed. Although they indicated negative experiences and expectations, none of the women endorsed a perception of significant distress in work or school. In general., it was the researcher's sense that the participants had made realistic compromises – decisions based on weighing the various factors and potential risks involved with coming out - and made practical decisions based on what at the time seemed most beneficial and least distressing. For example, several women stated that they had come out to coworkers but

chose not do so with employers or bosses. This was often explained as typical professional behavior that was applicable to areas other than sexuality.

It is important to consider whether this seemingly pragmatic and logical approach to coming out at work and school may be a function of the homogenaeity of the sample in question. All subjects were educated or being educated at the graduate level. Thus, they had already achieved a high level of success in work and school and conveyed a concordant degree of confidence. It is possible that the importance of school and career success was sufficiently high for all of them such that sacrifices in other areas - such as the need to feel fully socially authentic or known - would be seen as worthwhile and thus less distressing.

Theme 5: Dual identity- Racism and Other Social Minority Experiences

Five out of eleven participants claimed a social minority identity other than or in addition to bisexuality; all five mentioned this identity as a factor that required some degree of additional consideration or effort to negotiate within the context of other (often majority or socially dominant) communities. The specific nonmajority identities mentioned included the following: one participant identified as African American and another identified as biracial (half African American, half European American). One participant identified as ethnically Indian but bi-cultural (American and Indian). Another participant identified as white but stated that she was beginning to see herself as bicultural because, although she passed as white, she was recently getting in touch with her father's Cuban heritage. Another participant identified as disabled due to mild cerebral palsy.

In asserting the importance of clinicians attending to the nature of experience for different oppressed groups, Glassgold and Iasenza write,

> We are all socialized in a society where racial, gender and sexual orientation oppression are pervasive. These interrelated realities and the discriminatory practices that accompany them create a unique range of psychological demands and stressors which their victims must learn to address. Clinicians who treat socially oppressed groups must be aware of these realities and their effects if effective treatment is to take place. In addition to the extreme demands of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, members of affected groups must manage the routine and mundane developmental tasks and life stressors which everyone else faces. In this scenario the potential for negative effects on their psychological well-being is high. (1999)

Given the challenges of being a part of any one oppressed group, it is vital to consider the additional strain that having two or more minority or oppressed identities might place on self-concept and mental health. One participant states,

> Most of the time I'm not thinking much about my disability. But there are occasions where I'm reminded of it. Usually those moments have to do with something related to sex....in those moments I am reminded that I don't fit into a mainstream ideal for what is attractive to men. Women who aren't disabled have to deal with a lot simply because they are women, but many of them can also play up the whole 'sexy woman' thing to get validation and attention. I've never had that option because of the way my body looks...as a teen with surging hormones, well, lets just say it wasn't a confidence booster.

Literature supports the idea that LGBT people who are also racial minorities must traverse complicated social terrain where each of the communities they belong to may not acknowledge or value other critical parts of their identity (Chan 1995; Diaz 2001; Lehavot et al., 2009; Loiacano, 1993; Rust, 2000;) Illustrating her own personal struggle with being black, female and lesbian, poet Audre Lorde explains what its like, "constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of [your] self and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self." (Lorde, 1990) This kind of strain was described by "Olivia," an African-American bisexual woman whose

story is told in greater detail in the next section of this work. Olivia felt that a lesbian identity would not be accepted in the context of her family's religious, African American community. Married to a woman, Olivia stated that she chooses to label herself as bisexual partly because she believes it more acceptable to her family. Moreover, she has made this decision in the context of a marriage to a white lesbian. Underscoring the complexity of Olivia's situation, Loiacano writes:

> For Black American Lesbians, it is often challenging or impossible to find a community that offers acceptance. Lesbianism is largely considered incompatible with the role expectations of the women in the Black community. At the same time, lesbian-supportive communities and social groups often marginalize their Black American members and do not provide the level of affirmation that White American members receive. (1999)

In a book entitled *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities Over the Lifespan,* Chan's article about Asian American LGBT populations addresses the same conundrum:

> Even if it is one identity among several, and it is not given priority over racial., ethnic and gendered identities, individuals who declare a nonmajority sexual identity become identified primarily in terms of this sexual identity. It is because of this primacy effect of transgressive sexual identity that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals of color may be reluctant to take on a sexual identity. A declaration of lesbian/gay/bisexual identity can overshadow their racial/ethnic identity, and the latter identity generally affords a powerful sense of social belonging and group affiliation. (1993)

To cope with the strain of multiple oppressed identities, Loiacano's research indicates the need to integrate and "find simultaneous validation for one's various identities" (1993). Olivia views bisexuality as a term that enables her to retain and sustain all of the various parts of her identity. In this way, unlike other participants, she associates it with *inclusion* in two communities that are important to her (African American and LGBT). Her decision to come out to her religious family and marry a woman shows a capacity to retain involvement in both communities. This is illustrative of one of Rust's major

strategies for negotiating multiple community identities; as compared to remaining closeted in either community, this strategy requires more effort and tolerance of homophobia and/or racism. But, it is thought to be preferable in the long run because no aspect of self is denied or split off in order to retain critical human connections (Rust, 2000).

Whether Olivia is denying an aspect of herself or not (by calling herself bisexual or lesbian) is not for the researcher to assess. What is notable here is how bisexuality, rather than being a sexuality that is at "the bottom of the sexuality barrel" as some white participants seem to view it, is actually a *preferable* identity because it retains, at least in theory, a connection to black men. The felt need to retain a connection to the men in one's particular community of color was also mentioned by one Indian American participant who spoke of her transient experience of lesbian separatism in college:

> I remember reading radical women's studies stuff in college and feeling so good about being surrounded by these beautiful and powerful women. Some of them made it seem like life was best if you just never dealt with men again in your life....But I could never really live that life. I'm half Indian and that is a huge part of me. Being around Indian culture means being around Indian men...and I wouldn't want it any other way.

Both literature and data from this study illustrate the idea that LGBT people of color generally want and need multiple community settings to affirm the different parts of themselves. In describing her own experience, Audre Lorde writes:

> I grew up in largely female environments and I know how crucial that has been to my own development. I feel the want and need often for the society of women, exclusively. I recognize that our own spaces are essential for developing and recharging. As a Black woman, I find it necessary to withdraw into all Black groups sometimes for exactly the same reasons – differences in stages of development and differences in levels of interaction. Frequently, when speaking with men and white women, I am reminded of how difficult and time consuming it is to have to reinvent the pencil every time you want to send a message. (1984)

In addition to adding a level of strain to one's experience of community and identity, data from this study suggests that having multiple oppressed identities may also sometimes function to increase capacities and foster self esteem in other areas of life. If the process of overcoming the limitations of one of the oppressed identities occurs earlier in life, it is possible that this helps to prepare the individual for grappling with the challenges posed later by sexual minority status. As one participant explains,

> My disability has made me a smarter person. No doubt. Since I could never rely on my looks for attention, I always focused on using my brains...and its worked out pretty well so far.
>
> Being queer is nothing compared to being black in a white high school. Now that will make you strong.

The concept that grappling with another oppressed identity early in life could make an individual more prepared for difficulties related to sexual orientation is preliminary and suggests a possible area for future research. Regardless of whether this hypothesis is true or not, it is clear that the women with dually oppressed identities in this particular study were able to build resilience and thrive enough to attend graduate school. Additionally, they were able to convey the complexity of their experiences in a highly articulate and honest fashion.

Theme 6: Relationship to the LGBT Community

There is a long and complicated history of tension and mistrust between some bisexual and lesbian women. Research has shown that bisexual women frequently report experiencing feelings of alienation and rejection within the lesbian community (Baumgardner, 2007; Garber, 1995; Lehavot, Balsam & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). Reasons for this include, but are not limited to: 1) fear, on the lesbian woman's part, that she will

be abandoned by her lover for a man because her bisexual partner was "never really gay" 2) fear, on the bisexual woman's part, of being judged for her attraction to men and thus seen as somehow a "lesser" gay person 3) inability to integrate the fundamental complexity and paradoxical nature of being attracted to two sexes 4) rejection by both gay and straight communities of bisexuality.

In their recent study, Lehavot, Balsam & Ibrahim-Wells note that their bisexual participants experienced biphobia in forms ranging from feelings of subtle disenfranchisement to actively being told that bisexuals are "traitors" or "don't really exist." (2009) In this study, more than half the women cited either the expectation of biphobia or the actual experience of it as a reason that they did not make active attempts to be involved in the LGBT communities at the university they attended for graduate school. One participant stated,

> I went to a women's college so I know about the incredible closeness and support that women's communities offer. Even though I've known that I was bisexual since high school, I've always been pretty intimidated by lesbian communities. I used to feel that I wouldn't pass muster...you know....pass their standards for who is cool enough, gay enough, strong enough whatever. As I've gotten older and moved and felt more isolated in general., I wish I made a greater attempt to get involved back when I was in college. I don't think I was strong enough then though. It's funny, I'm with a man now but I feel more bisexual than ever and more deeply longing for a community of great, strong women. You would think I would find that among the women in my graduate program but I don't. They either compete with each other or give off a vibe that they already have enough friends. I know that lesbians know how to relate more directly to each other as women. I guess I just don't believe they would accept me fully...basically because I go to bed at night with a man.

The social and emotional benefits of women's communities and LGBT communities is echoed by research (Crocker & Major, 1989; Fingerhut, Peplau, & Ghavami, 2005; Meyer, 2003). Despite the term bisexual being added to lesbian and gay organization names as a virtual contemporary standard, many bisexual women feel

locked out of lesbian communities and, additionally, that there is a lack of available bisexual community. A good example of how the LGBT community can have a silent culture of biphobia and lack bisexual community is offered in a paper by Welzer-Lang. It explores how, even among activists in France's gay, lesbian, bisexual community, there is shockingly low bisexual participation and visibility. Specifically, after several years of little public mention of bisexual issues, a survey about biphobia was disseminated to 93 people at a sexuality conference. Illustrating a significant level of bisexual alienation and/or non-participation, the paper states that only two respondents identified as bisexual (Welzer-Lang, 2008). One participant from this study offers her related personal experience:

> Sometimes I don't think I need a big, strong bisexual community to advocate for me because I'm with a man right now...so I enjoy a lot of heterosexual privilege. I used to feel guilty about that. Now I realize that the tradeoff that I must make is the feeling of loneliness that I have whenever I'm around all straight people – which is most of the time- or all gay people – which is usually when I'm with my lesbian friends or at some kind of activist event. I know there are bisexuals at those things but....we don't really make it known that we are bisexual. We don't really talk to each other. The only time I ever feel I have a bisexual 'community' is when I'm around another woman who I know used to date girls but now has a boyfriend. Its like we share a kind of secret together that we're not really so dependent on only men to feel attractive. Its like we could run off in the corner and do more than just talk about our boyfriends, you know what I mean?

For bisexuals, the complex and changing nature of relationships to individuals and community, particularly amongst women, is further illustrated by this same participant's observation that she feels locked out of bisexual community when some formerly bisexual women ultimately mate with other women:

> .....Seriously though....it's weird how it doesn't seem to work the other way around. If I know a woman who used to date men but is now with a woman, I don't feel like I can talk as openly with her about bisexuality. It's always like 'she's gay now' even if I know that's probably not the whole story.

In contrast, four participants indicated that they had no desire to connect with a larger community that is based on sexuality of any kind. One woman, who does not identify as bisexual but has had long-term sexual relationships with both men and women, stated:

> I would never want to go to a bisexual women's group. I don't think I'd have much in common with those people except the fact that we've both had sex with both genders. I think that's a kinda superficial thing to connect over quite frankly...no offense to the study or anything. I'm just much more inclined to look for community among intellectuals who share my passions. I really don't give a rat's butt who someone has slept with and I don't expect them to care who I've slept with either. That's why I don't like talking about that stuff openly I guess. If they do care, I don't want to know because then I won't like them. I already don't like a lot of people so I'm trying to keep my numbers down and prevent some kind of major depression I guess. [sarcasm noted]

In this woman's response, one can hear a kind of "pre-emptive withdrawal" from the very idea of a bisexual community. At first her reasoning is that she does not find sex or sexuality to be a rich enough topic around which to form community; but, later she seems to imply that she expects [assumedly] non-bisexual people to judge her for her sexual history and thus does not want to even open up the possibility of being disappointed or hurt. This theme of negative expectations of others is noted in the earlier sections of this work that explore processes of naming and coming out. The above quote is rich because, in addition to explaining her feelings about bisexual community, it also suggests a kind of defensive reasoning for choosing *not* to come out. Her expectations of the outcome, were she to tell someone about her sexuality, are mainly negative; so, her choice is to leave sexuality out of her conversations all together. This sentiment is mirrored in these participant quotes:

> I don't label myself. I think you do a kind of injustice to yourself when you do that. Its like people are handing you options for food to eat and you don't like anything they have...but you feel obliged to pick something and just eat it

> anyway. I hate that idea...I never had to eat things I didn't like as a kid and I don't plan to start now....Joining a 'sexuality support group' or whatever is the same idea to me... its like hanging around with a bunch of people who are eating food I'm not interested in.
>
> Even though I know I must technically fit into the category of bisexual, I don't really feel that way...I feel like I'm straight. If I went to one of the lesbian and gay events here I kinda imagine that I'd be posing as something I'm not. Or maybe its that I think they would see me that way and not really want me there...so I just don't bother with it.
>
> My last girlfriend was so wrapped up in what lesbians thought of her. It was kinda culty and creeped me out to be honest. I don't feel like being vetted for my authenticity or status as a gay person...I guess I already know I wouldn't make their cuts for anything close to the top tiers...I just don't even go there anymore.

Individual choices aside, these quotes illustrate a degree of tension, loss and despondency about forging or retaining a connection to a broader lesbian and/or LGBT community. It is as if, despite the inclusion of the word bisexual in the LGBT acronym, the "real story" is that LGBT communities do not welcome bisexuals with open arms. In exploring this issue, however, it is critically important to keep in mind the fact that there is no monolithic LGBT or lesbian community. Due to the lack of formal research, to grapple with this topic area at all is to accept some degree of engagement with vague terms/groupings, stereotypes and anecdotal reactions.

Celebrities as Perceived Community

An unexpected sub-theme that arose in the part of the interview that inquired about LGBT communities is the positive impact that celebrities appeared to have on several of participants. Comedian Ellen DeGeneres, the Indigo Girls, LeTigre and Ani Difranco (musicians) were mentioned spontaneously by different participants as people whose public coming out processes made a formative impact. Of particular note was folk-punk musician, poet and performer Ani Difranco. To the researcher's surprise, six

women (a majority of the subject pool) spontaneously mentioned this particular celebrity. For a more in-depth exploration of how a particular subject was impacted by this performer, see the participant story of "Max" in the proceeding section.

Bisexual performer and musician Ani Difranco is known for lyrics and music that represent a kind of sexual liberation often promoted by third wave feminists; 'third wavers' and many 'Ani fans' hold a belief in the right to self-definition and owning the same privileges of men (if, in fact, such privileges are wanted to begin with). This includes the privilege to view women as objects of sexual desire. For third wave feminists, there is discussion of the move from feeling oneself to be primarily the object of someone else's desire to being the subject of one's own. In fact, an entire chapter of Jennifer Baumgardner's book about bisexual politics, entitled "The Ani Effect," is devoted to this issue. To illustrate how Ani fits into this generational shift, the researcher has juxtaposed two quotes. The first is from another bisexual author, Jan Clausen, as she analyzes her own adolescent journal entry (from over three decades ago) where she is found grappling with whether and how to be both female and a sexual being:

Jane Clausen (author/sexuality theorist, mid 50's):

> My fifteen year old's anxiety about the degree to which I might be swayed by the desire to be desired is implicitly a question about feminine sexuality. I am worrying that I'll simply turn out to be a typical woman of my class and period [described in her journal as someone who will grow up to 'have a husband and brats'], my feelings *an effect of what other people want.* I'm afraid I can't distinguish between men's lust and my own. I am hoping against hope that I'll learn to negotiate the treacherous terrain between *object and subject*....In recent years, I've speculated that the chronic misery of my high school and college years stemmed partly from my unconscious resistance to becoming a woman on the terms available to me, terms that contradicted my prior vision of myself as independent and competent. (1999)

The second quote is taken from a study participant named "Max," whose story is more fully told in the section that follows this one. Here she describes her own sexual coming of age over two decades after Clausen's:

"Max" – (study participant, late 20's):

> "When I was in college, it was cool to be bisexual. It meant that you were not just waiting for some boy to do something to or for you. It meant that you could be in charge of yourself sexually. Some women were bisexual because it was hot to the guys but I didn't hang out with those kinds of women. I hung out with the women who listened to Ani and went to activist rallies. I wanted to be around the women who wanted to do stuff themselves, who wanted to impress themselves and each other. Like Ani could play guitar and take on the world in her songs and we were totally amazed by her. It reminded me of my brothers, how they just did stuff they thought was cool...BMX bikes, snowboarding, concerts, whatever. Being bisexual in college was really just an extension of that same mentality of doing what you wanted to do and not worrying about whether you were in the right role or not...That's probably how a lot of boys grow up feeling without really realizing it. I realized it because I watched my brothers and knew I wanted that same freedoms, even when it came to kissing cute girls....well, especially when it came to kissing cute girls."

In comparing the sentiments expressed by two women who are over two decades apart in age, the issue of personal and sexual agency is clearly at the forefront for both. Among other critical elements of social change, the difference for the younger bisexual woman is that she benefits from the presence of a celebrity role model. Ani Difranco is an example of a rare role model that unites the lesbian and bisexual communities. For both groups, she can be understood as a kind of "perceived community" leader who promotes the right to self expression and openness about one's sexuality and shifting desires. Her lyrics intentionally exclude pronouns when referring to love interests and she is widely known to have had multiple partners of both sexes. Ani Difranco has personally continued to change across the span of two decades and nearly two dozen albums. She is now a mother and thought to be long-term partnered with a man. Her musical style has

changed drastically as well. It has moved further away from folk/punk and closer to experimental jazz and alternative rock. The fluidity of all these facets of who Ani Difranco is seems to serve as both a beacon and lightning rod for people interested in current debates about lesbian and bisexual female sexuality.

One additional point must be made about the impact of Ani Difranco on bisexual and lesbian women of her generation. This harkens back to the first theme in this chapter, as it relates to the power of language to name and give voice to emotional experience; and, it is perhaps most deftly explained by the following two quotes from study participants:

> I spent a lot of time, like every day all day, listening to Ani when I was in high school. Her lyrics spoke directly to me and helped me to understand what the hell was going on with me.
>
> I don't listen to Ani at all anymore but that's probably because her songs are so ingrained in my head that they're still playing in a way. Some lesbians really shun Ani now because she's with a man...and I'm like yeah whatever girl you're still doing whatever the hell you want...even though I'm not so into her style of music at all anymore, I have to say I really respect her attitude toward life.

In the spirit of honoring the experience of lesbian and bisexual women who feel misunderstood or out of step with their society and long for language to articulate their experience, this section will conclude with lyrics from two of Ani Difranco's songs. The first is from her popular and earlier work in the 1995 album "Not a Pretty Girl":

"32 Flavors"

squint your eyes and look closer
I'm not between you and your ambition
I am a poster girl with no poster
I am thirty-two flavors and then some
and I'm beyond your peripheral vision
so you might want to turn your head
cause someday you're going to get hungry

and eat most of the words you just said
both my parents taught me about good will
and I have done well by their names
just the kindness I've lavished on strangers
is more than I can explain
still there's many who've turned out their porch lights
just so I would think they were not home
and hid in the dark of their windows
til I'd passed and left them alone

-Ani Difranco

This last song covers a wide range of issues beyond those of sexuality and is taken from the 2003 album entitled "Evolve":

"Evolve"

I walk in stride with people
much taller than me
and partly it's the boots but
mostly it's my chi
and I'm becoming transfixed
with nature and my part in it
which I believe just signifies
I'm finally waking up

and there's this moth outside my kitchen door
she's bonkers for that bare bulb
flying round in circles
bashing in her exoskull
and out in the woods she navigates fine by the moon
but get her around a light bulb and she's doomed

she is trying to evolve
she's just trying to evolve

now let's get talking reefer madness
like some arrogant government can't
by any stretch of the imagination
outlaw a plant
yes, their supposed authority over nature
is a dream
c'mon people
we've got to come clean

cuz they are locking our sons
and our daughters in cages
they are taking by the thousands
our lives from under us
it's a crash course in religious fundamentals
now let's all go to war
get some bang for our buck

I am trying to evolve
I'm just trying to evolve

gunnin for high score in the land of dreams
morbid bluish-white consumers ogling luminous screens
on the trail of forgetting
cruising without a care
the jet set won't abide by that pesky jet lag
and our lives boil down to an hour or two
when someone pulls a camera out of a bag

and I am trying to evolve
I'm just trying to evolve

so I walk like I'm on a mission
cuz that's the way I groove
I got more and more to do
I got less and less to prove
it took me too long to realize
that I don't take good pictures
cuz I have the kind of beauty
that moves

-Ani Difranco

Participant Stories

The following section utilizes a sample of randomly chosen case narratives. It is designed for the purpose of illustrating the similarities across participant experiences as well as the unique life and challenges of each individual woman. Stories are compiled from transcribed interviews. To protect participant confidentiality, original tapes were destroyed once the transcription

process was complete. Identifying information (such as cities and towns of residence, universities attended etc.) was removed and destroyed. All names are false.

In addition to providing basic descriptions and backgrounds of participants, the stories highlight themes and issues of particular salience. Consistent throughout the data collection and analysis process was the observation that there was an ongoing dynamic tension between content that seemed more commonly shared by the women in the study and issues that were more specific to an individual life experiences. For example, for one woman, the issue of gender expression was brought up frequently and seemed to play an important role in her self-concept and sexual identity development; thus, the issue of her "tomboyishness" was included in the narrative. Another woman barely mentioned gender expression but instead described multiple experiences with religion in her family of origin and explained how it played a significant role in her process of naming her sexuality. Thus, in her case, religion is highlighted more prominently. Yet another woman had a great deal to say about her disability and its impact on her relationship with her mother as well as her decision not to come out to her family. Since many participants in the study expressed strong opinions and feelings about the LGBT community, this is a highlighted theme in two of the three narratives that follow.

In sum, the factor that unifies the seemingly universal variables with those that seem more individual is that of navigating dual-attraction/bisexuality within one's various social contexts. And by placing this variable at the forefront of the

project and continually returning to it as a locus point for theorizing, the researcher attempts to explore this under-researched phenomenon in the field of human sexuality. Here are the stories of three very different participants:

"Max"

Although her real name has been concealed, Max grew up with an androgynous name. Amidst a gaggle of raucous but uniquely tempered older brothers, she was the youngest of four and the only girl. Now 32 years old, Max describes herself as "a lifelong tomboy who loved the novelty of wearing dresses for special events." She states,

> I didn't mind looking girly when it was fun and special. It gave me my own place in the family and made me different from my brothers. But, I was also interested in everything they did and didn't want to be left out of the fun because I happened to be female. If they got trick bikes and Swiss army knives then I wanted those too. My mom would buy me the Swiss army knife and then think to herself, wait should my daughter have a Swiss army knife?... I mean please, who *doesn't* need a Swiss army knife?

Max's parents were non-religious but she describes them as "traditional in a lot of ways." Specifically, they lived in a northeast suburb and her mother stayed at home to raise the children while her father worked long hours at a high pressure, corporate job. Her parents expected the children to work hard in school, treat people with respect and find the things that made them most happy in life. They were particularly encouraging of athletics and scouting. At the same time, Max states that her parents were not very supportive or accepting of artistic or unusual lifestyles and interests. Max explained that wasn't that her parents didn't like art or punk music or gender-bending, they just had very little exposure to those things and were thus, wary of them. She states,

> I remember when I started asking for a skateboard. It was the first time I thought that my mom was conservative or out of touch with things. She said, 'Oh Max, that's a little boy's toy. You're getting too old to be doing everything that the boys do. Skateboards are dangerous and it's unattractive for girls your age to be riding on them.'

Max says that her mother was so used to raising boys (which meant enabling them to engage in the standard rough and tumble activities encouraged by society) that she would suddenly remember that she had a daughter and almost appear to panic. She would then try to encourage Max to do "random girly stuff" that she thought more appropriate. Max states,

> Once I was a pre-teen, it was kinda awkward at times with Mom. It was as if she was saying to herself, 'oh sh**t, I have this budding woman here and I better make her do girl things or she'll end up all weird and boyish when she's older. Quick honey, let's run to the nail salon!'

Max describes herself as "bisexual from birth." She recalls having sexual fantasies about boys and girls from approximately age five. She is currently monogamously partnered with a man, whom she expects to marry someday. She previously had two serious girlfriends – one during senior year of high school/freshman year of college – and another for three years after she graduated from college. Max also had a serious boyfriend for junior and senior year of college. When asked about her experiences with and desires for males versus females, Max describes these relationships as "very different from each other and hard to categorize along gender lines." She states,

> If I had to say, I guess I was more sexual with the men I've been with and more emotionally in tune with the women. But, that could also be because of where I was in my life emotionally during those periods. I would like to say that there is some formula about what men do for me and what women do for me but every time I try to come up with a neat equation to give myself or someone else, I arrive at the thought that its really just about the person for me...its about what they do for me at that moment in my life.

Coming Out

Max does not view her coming out process as particularly distressing or traumatic. She describes a two-year period of "starting to get that I was different from a lot of people in the area of sexuality." She remembers realizing that she had to conceal her desire for females "for at least a while, with most people, especially my mother." She states that she was able to channel the confusing and strong emotions from this process of concealment into her interests in punk music, skateboarding and reading. She describes her experience in her family during her pre-teen years in the following way:

> ...friends were the go to for most stuff. I realized that my Mom was only so helpful and that she couldn't get a lot about who I was or how I felt... She wasn't worried about what other people thought so much as she was worried that she wasn't doing a good job raising us. That was stressful. I didn't like thinking that my sexuality was somehow a reflection of her failure to do something right so I just kept her out of the loop for a long time....and my Dad, well he's another story. He's one of the most supportive people in my life but he's also super checked out. It's like he was in my head telling me to keep trying at things, whatever they were, but he wasn't there as a real person in the flesh. Anyway, I wasn't going to talk to my Dad about how I wanted to kiss my friend Jake's girlfriend instead of Jake no matter what. I eventually told him that I was bi. But that was years later after I knew better how to explain it to him. He was ok about it really. As long as I was going to college and happy and healthy...Actually, I don't think my Dad really thought of me as a sexual being until recently. In a way, that was convenient because I had enough to deal with Mom.

Around the same time that she decided not to talk to her mother about her desire for girls (during her pre-teen years), Max began talking with a few of her friends, who were supportive; some even shared their own bisexual feelings. Max believes that her peer and friendship communities were extremely helpful in building her self-esteem at that time. She mused that this may not have been the case if she were even just ten years

older, when society was less aware and accepting of gay, lesbian and bisexual people. She recalls attending two meetings at the Gay/Straight Alliance in her high school and describes the experiences as positive and affirming. At the same time, Max didn't feel a need to attend these meetings regularly for own support. She sates,

> I kinda knew I was bisexual but I didn't feel oppressed or anything. I had gay friends who were totally gay in high school and that was different. Their parents were less supportive and they needed the group to talk about how they felt. I had my music, my brothers, my friends and later my girlfriend. I was focused on other things. Even though I was obviously bisexual, I thought of myself as an ally to the group more than a member. I guess I also always knew that once I had the courage and clarity to really explain things to my mom, she'd make it her business to understand. So I guess I always had that in my back pocket in a way. I think I didn't want to have to identify as someone from this big oppressed group if I didn't have to and knowing that my family would eventually be fine with it gave me a way to avoid thinking of myself as oppressed or really different from the mainstream.

In this quote, Max appears to communicate something about the crucial nature of feeling accepted and supported by one's family of origin. The coming out process is often most fraught and emotionally profound within the context of one's family of origin. If one feels accepted there, coming out in other environments (such as workplace or friendship circles) is often less frightening (Fairchild & Hayward, 1998). Interestingly, it seems that Max's relationship to her school-based LGBT community was fundamentally mediated by a basic expectation of acceptance in her family of origin. In the above quote, she seems to imply that she felt she could avoid being a public member of an oppressed group simply through the knowledge that her family would accept her once she had the courage to talk frankly with them (which is exactly what happened). It wasn't until later in her life, that coming out and social acceptance in non-familial environments became an area of conscious difficulty for Max:

> If I'm really going to be honest with myself, things are harder now with respect to being bisexual than they were when I was young. When I was in high school, college, even my early twenties, it felt that everything was still 'up for grabs.' It didn't matter how I represented myself because I wasn't fully sure that that was the person I would stay being anyway...you know what I mean? Now, I'm much more settled. In my career, with my partner [male], in my choices really. Now I feel more annoyed at the lack of representations of bisexuality around me... I feel that if I want to be fully known by others for who I truly am, I have to 'come out' to them as bisexual over and over. I don't like hiding that I've had girlfriends. But sometimes I end up doing that because its just easier than giving someone a lesson about bisexuality. It takes a lot of effort. Even with smart liberal people who support gay rights. They just don't expect someone who has a boyfriend now to have had a girlfriend before. You can see in their faces when you say, 'my ex-girlfriend.' There is this moment of them thinking you meant to say boyfriend or you mean girlfriend the way straight women mean girlfriend. Then you have to gear up to handle that awkwardness. There's no way around it though. The only other thing to do is stay in the closet about it and I could never do that.

The matter of coming out seems unique for bisexuals in that it involves a degree of fluidity and non-fixedness that differs from monosexuality. Unlike the process of coming out as exclusively gay, coming out as bisexual involves helping someone to accept a certain degree of unpredictability. As a result, the bisexual who is coming out asks the listener to remain flexible in his/her thinking, to remain open to more than one possibility. The listener must accept the fact that, unlike a gay or straight person, a bisexual person may not be able to predict whether her future will hold a male or female romantic partner. As Max explains in the conclusion of her above statement, teaching others to themselves accept and embrace this uncertainty is part of the task of the bisxexual person who does not want to be in the closet.

Celebrities and Artists as Perceived Community

In her book Look Both Ways – Bisexual Politics, Jennifer Baumgardner describes the liberating and guiding influence that the folk-punk musician and poet Ani DiFranco has had on an entire generation of young women who, among other things, seek a kind of

empowerment and sexual freedom that has been traditionally assigned only to men. In accordance with five other women from this study, Max spontaneously mentioned Ani DiFranco as an ideal model for female bisexuality:

> When I was in college, it was cool to be bisexual. It meant that you were not just waiting for some boy to do something to or for you. It meant that you could be in charge of yourself sexually. Some women were bisexual because it was hot to the guys but I didn't hang out with those kinds of women. I hung out with the women who listened to Ani and went to activist rallies. I wanted to be around the women who wanted to do stuff themselves, who wanted to impress themselves and each other. Like Ani could play guitar and take on the world in her songs and we were totally amazed by her. It reminded me of my brothers, how they just did stuff they thought was cool...BMX bikes, snowboarding, concerts, whatever. Being bisexual in college was really just an extension of that same mentality of doing what you wanted to do and not worrying about whether you were in the right role or not. That's probably how a lot of boys grow up feeling without really realizing it. I realized it because I watched my brothers and knew I wanted that same freedom, even when it came to kissing cute girls....well, especially when it came to kissing cute girls.

Among other things, this quote illustrates how a public artistic figure can serve as a kind of beacon for a group of like-minded people. This statement is not novel except perhaps when one considers it in terms of models for bisexuality. Leaders in the LGBT movement have named many celebrities that either labeled themselves bisexual or communicated a kind of bisexuality through their gender performance; examples include David Bowe, Boy George, Annie Lennox and Elton John. But, few (if any) celebrities have offered the clarity and volume of language with which to describe and "own" one's bisexuality as Ani DiFranco. Most of the lyrics in her first eight albums do not reference gender when the subject is romantic and many of her themes involve asserting oneself in contexts that are subtly or overtly rejecting of various kinds of difference. For Max, it seems that her brothers provided a template for how a *human being* can act in bold, playful and experimental ways but it was Ani that showed her how *women in particular*

might do this. To Max - Ani, and bisexuality in general, appear to be associated with living a maximally free and authentic life.

Relationship to Larger Communities

Max describes the LGBT community as "one I support and am peripherally a part of" but, she states, "I have never felt drawn to it as a place where I would make my friends or spend a lot of my time." Unlike other bisexual women in the study who are currently partnered with men, Max neither felt a sense of (previous) gain nor (current) loss of a lesbian community after the sex of her partner changed. She acknowledges that she had far more lesbian friends when she was with a woman but she attributes the shift away from this to her moving out of state to start graduate school rather than to her current heterosexual relationship. Max has retained two very close lesbian friends and reports feeling fully accepted by them. She also states that neither of these women are involved in activist LGBT communities themselves:

> Tanya and Kate are like me really....I mean, they have girlfriends, which means they have to deal with more crap than I do in public. But otherwise, they are into the same music and ideas that I'm into. They aren't really all about being lesbians as the most important thing. I think it's been harder for Kate since she moved to a less liberal city but that doesn't affect my relationship with her. If it weren't for her being a lesbian, I don't think she'd be involved in any kind of political community. She just wants the right to be married and all that stuff....Kate and Tanya are my closest friends and they happen to be lesbians. But they both live out of state and aren't very politically minded at all. So, unless you count them, I guess you could say that I don't really have a connection with 'the lesbian community.'

Max describes her three-year relationship with her boyfriend as similarly accepting. Although her boyfriend identifies as straight, he has told her that he understands what it is like to be a minority/feel different because, although white skinned, he is biracial. He also has a father who is in jail. Max and her boyfriend have

talked at length about how little their appearances convey about their history and true complexity. In that way, Max's relationship with her boyfriend appears to serve as a buffer to the challenges of understanding and representing her bisexuality in the larger world. It is as if they share the experience of being "different from most" in some important ways and thus find community with each other.

"Olivia"

Olivia is a 29 year-old African-American woman who has been happily married to a white lesbian for two years. She has three remaining years before she completes a doctorate in a humanities-based field. Olivia grew up in a southern state and is the second oldest of four children; she has one older sister and two younger brothers. Olivia was raised in a strict Pentacostal household where dancing, wearing pants and rock music were strictly forbidden. To her knowledge, Olivia is the only sibling who no longer identifies as Pentacostal. Olivia describes her relationship with her siblings as "close enough to always be cordial." She hopes someday to strengthen these relationships but states that she needs more time living away from her family to feel strong enough to remain unaffected by their extreme religious veiws. Although she identifies as agnostic and bisexual, Olivia works to maintain a relationship with her mother and stepfather. They are aware of her sexuality but her religious difference has never been openly discussed. Olivia believes that her mother's religious community has had a profoundly negative impact on her ability to feel accepted within her family. She states:

> Mama talks religion to me but I do not talk it to her. She knows basically what I think...well, she probably wouldn't really believe how different I am when it comes to God. I'm not sure whether there is or isn't one. But that's not worth discussing with her, would just make her say way too many prayers for my soul.

> Let her waste her energy on someone else in the family who really believes it all....So anyway, we don't talk religion. I don't go home so much anymore so we try to keep stressful conversations at a minimum. That's one thing about the south that I am grateful for. I had a therapist who said to me once 'that's what works for her' and that comment really helped. I realized that my Mama needs religion to help her feel okay on this planet, but I don't. Religion hasn't been so good to me. I spent years in that church feeling horrible about myself for no good reason. If I hadn't moved to go away to school, I would've eventually stopped going to that church and probably taken my parents on more about it. But then I would've never met Anne....it took me a long time to get the courage up to tell Mama and my Russ (stepfather) about Anne. They put me through hell – all because of the way their religion makes them think... We've just come to an agreement that my soul will burn in hell but that won't happen until I'm dead so they might as well enjoy their daughter now....It's actually pretty civilized how it actually goes down. They are nice to Anne the way they would be to any stranger who came to their house.

In this quote, the complex interrelationship between the participant, her mother and the family's religious community is evident. It seems that she views the religion as a barrier to the intimacy and acceptance she might otherwise have with her mother. Olivia's decision to leave her religious community years ago and return later as a "visitor and sinner" who is believed to be damned (because she is sexually involved with a woman) has left her with complicated and unresolved feelings. When asked more detailed questions about the impact that this religious community continues to have on her, Olivia has a difficult time articulating an answer. It is as if she has "frozen" the thoughts and feelings of her time in the community and labeled them as bad and not worth thinking about:

> I don't know what else to say about it. [smiles as if about to joke] They wrong. They dead wrong. And stupid too. Was there anything good about it? Well, I know they taught me to love others. They taught me to forgive. That was good. I guess its the reason I can forgive them for messing me up...I can't say exactly how they messed me up. They just did...

Coming Out

Olivia states that she has been attracted to women since she was an adolescent. She recalls watching older teen girls in her church group with adoration and desire. She was intermittently attracted to boys and had a boyfriend for a few months in high school. In college Olivia became accidentally pregnant and had a miscarriage. She states that this experience "scared me queer" and reports having no significant longings for men since this time. However, Olivia maintains an identity of bisexuality and offers the following explanation:

> Maybe it's because I'm black. Black men are not the big, bad oppressors in my mind. They go through a lot of discrimination and have to overcome a lot of low expectations the way that women do. I have a kinship with black men, feel protective of them. I could never say that I wouldn't have sex with a man again, particularly a black man. I mean, I'm married so of course I won't do it. And, I don't even want to. But, when I think of my sexuality by itself, separate from my marriage, I think to myself, 'I could see myself having sex with a black man again.' I think being bisexual gives me a greater sense of freedom that way. I feel this way even though my whole being really just wants to be with Anne. I don't mind the contradictions...I know a lot of sisters who feel the same way. Where I come from, most queer women do not usually call themselves lesbians. It's almost as if to some people, that's a white girl's identity...I've talked to a lot of our white lesbian friends about this and I'm not sure they can fully understand because they weren't raised black in the south.

In this quote, one can gain a sense of the complex interrelationship between Olivia's racial community, sexual identity community and family. Sexual desire aside, it is as if identifying as a bisexual enables her to retain a connection to her African-American community in a way that lesbianism does not. Although she doesn't explicitly say this, it is possible that Olivia heard fewer derogatory remarks about bisexuals as a child and thus the identity holds less negative valence than others. Olivia's sense of conflict between her racial and sexual identities is echoed in the literature (Diaz, Ayala, Benin, Jenne & Marin, 2001; Espin, 1993; Lociano, 1993; Rust, 2000). In her article

exploring the lack of visibility and scholarship about black gay, lesbian and bisexual history, writer Barbara Smith aserts; "My own experience as a Black lesbian...indicates that black lesbians and gay men are linked by our shared racial identity and political status in a way that white lesbians and gays are not." (Smith, 1994) Although this quote refers to the increased level of connection between Black lesbians and gay men (as compared to that between white lesbians and gays), the concept is consistent with Olivia's sentiment that, at times, racial connection supercedes the connection between those of other sociological groups such as sex.

For Olivia, coming out to family would only take place once she was sure that she was making a lifelong commitment to a particular woman. She believed that the strain it would place on she and her family would never be worth enduring for a passing relationship. Olivia waited until after her wedding to tell her parents and siblings about her marriage to Anne, which took place in a park with Anne's family and many of both women's friends. After the couple's honeymoon, Olivia told her parents that she was bisexual and in love with a wonderful woman. Her mother cried dramatically and at length; her stepfather remained silent and seemingly mostly concerned about her mother's emotional well-being. Olivia states that she prepared herself for this experience and was ultimately surprised at how smoothly it went. She knew her family would not cast her out but was not sure if they would ever allow her partner to participate in family holidays and events. The fact that she and Anne attend Christmas and Fourth of July celebrations is sufficient for Olivia to feel at peace about her relationship to her family at this time. She adds,

> They are fundamentalists and fundamentalists do not change their thinking for anyone. But I am their blood so they love me and I love them. We just see things

> very differently and probably always will. But to me, that's family. As long as they show respect for Anne, because she is my family too, I'm ok with the way things are...It's about as good as it can get when a religion based in fear mongering is in the picture.

Relationship to Larger Communities

Olivia dresses in feminine clothing and could be perceived by most people as a straight, even "girly looking" woman. She states that she has never been openly discriminated against but has experienced internal distress and anxiety prior to coming out in workplaces and school environments. But, Olivia says that once she communicates that her partner is a woman, people have generally treated her in accepting ways. Interestingly, Olivia finds that it has felt easier to come out at work since getting married. She explains,

> People respect married relationships. When I say that I'm married, if they are married, they seem to get it. There may be a moment where they have to adjust a bit to the idea that it's a woman but that doesn't last very long. It seems that the stability in a married relationship balances out whatever uncomfortable feelings they may have. Of course...I know things would be really different in a different state or part of the country where there is less acceptance.

As a bisexual, African-American woman, Olivia differs from her white, lesbian partner. She states the two have had multiple, in-depth conversations about various aspects of these differences and how they affect the relationship. Olivia originally had some difficulty feeling comfortable among Anne's white lesbian friends because she felt different in areas of both sexual orientation and race. Olivia states that this discomfort lessened as she got to know Anne's friends and began to think of them as her own. She also lauds Anne's success in finding two other interracial, homosexual couples with whom they now socialize. Olivia also states that she has gotten two women from this group to admit (after drinking several glasses of wine) that they were probably also

"technically bisexual." In addition to sharing the identity of women-of-color with two of the women, the openness of the group to Olivia a bisexual has enabled her to claim, for the first time in her life, that she feels comfortable and accepted among a larger, LGBT community.

"Jackie"

Jackie is a 30 year old, single, white woman who works part-time as a fitness consultant and is a third year doctoral student in a science related field. She is currently single and lives with a close friend. At birth, Jackie was diagnosed with a mild form of cerebral palsy; this causes her to have weakness on one side of her body, including her face. She has two siblings, a brother who is two years younger and a sister who is four years her junior. Jackie was raised in an upper middle class, northeastern town; both her parents worked. Her mother was a highly driven nutrition products distributor (sales) and her father was a busy lawyer. She states that her parents were both raised Protestant but that they did not practice any form of religion with their children. Her parents are still married and Jackie describes the family currently as "close but complicated."

Jackie has been attracted to both men and women for as long as she can remember. The only exception is during college and the three years following a period when she thought she may be a lesbian. Recently (roughly over the past five years), however, Jackie has identified as bisexual. Jackie says that she is currently attracted to very few females. However, her only serious relationship was with a woman (during college) and it lasted two years. Although she is not currently very drawn to them sexually, Jackie says that she still finds women beautiful and would never rule out

another same sex encounter or relationship. At this time in her life, however, Jackie says she has decided to "give men a real try" because "I have always been attracted to them but just never allowed myself to go there."

Jackie explains why she has never invested in her attractions to men in the following way:

> I had close friends who had their hearts broken in high school by boys. I always thought they [boys] were really superficial and wouldn't really be able to handle dating a woman with a disability...so I didn't let myself even risk...being disappointed. It's different now though. I'm more confident about what kind of person *I'd* want to be with.

Since starting graduate school, Jackie has been dating online and spent time with several men whom she found attractive. These relationships didn't work out for various reasons; some were not interested in her and others she found unappealing. She says that dating men is teaching her a great deal about herself, particularly about her lack of patience. Jackie states that she believes men are more comforting to be with sometimes because they are "less complicated in general than women." She also says that, as someone who is very verbal and intellectual, she becomes impatient when she feels they are "slower on the uptake." Jackie states that she often notices herself feeling annoyed with the men she dates because the do not match her intellectual or verbal speed; but, then she thinks to herself: "I am turning into my mother!" and tells herself to slow down and "stop being judgmental and impatient."

Jackie says she is working on this issue because she wants to be married to a man whom she loves and have children. This is very important to her and she states that she cannot envision herself marrying or having children with a woman. She offers,

> I know more and more women are starting families and I must say I get a little touched and choked up when I see it. But, I just don't see myself doing it. I think

> I'm not strong enough....too chicken. It just seems so hard. I mean, maybe if I had this amazing supportive family I would consider it. But I barely see my parents as it is. I'm not sure they would be in my life at all if I was like 'Oh by the way mom, oh by the way dad, I'm starting a lesbian family.' I think they would come up with every reason why what I was doing was wrong. And the most annoying one would be that I was doing it to hurt them or not trying hard enough with men. That's what they said pretty much any time I did something that prevented them from looking like our family belonged on the front page of a magazine.

Jackie appears to have a range of strong, negative feelings about her early family life, particularly with respect to the way her mother handled her disability and then later, her sexuality. She says that as a child, there was an underlying communication in the family that if she worked hard enough at her physical therapy, she would not be (visibly) impaired. As a result, Jackie has been doing multi-hour exercise sessions nearly every day for as long as she can remember. She states:

> Over the years, I've learned a lot about how different families handle disability. That has helped me put mine in perspective. I think my mother is, shall we say, unusual about it. We almost never talked about it, except in a sideways way....like when people would visit and she would tell me beforehand how I should practice standing or walking in order to look strong...I remember lagging behind her once when I was really little and crying, you know like all kids do when they can't keep up and are tired? I remember she tilted her head back to me and said, 'Sweetie, crying is for your pillow. C'mon you can keep up' ... In a way it was bitchy and ridiculous and in another way I'm glad for her attitude. I never felt sorry for myself, that's for sure. And, I don't think I would be the person I am today if she hadn't been like that...but as you can imagine, there are downsides to having CP *and* a mother who feels that you're never working quite hard enough."

Coming Out

Jackie's first crush on a girl was in tenth grade and on her best friend Meghan. The two spent all their time together, had numerous inside jokes and even a secret language which was developed enough to communicate for up to a half hour without anyone else being able to decipher what the girls were talking about. Jackie states that this friendship, and her feelings about it, changed her life for the better. She recalls

having sexual fantasies about Meghan for months before she began to consider the possibility that she was lesbian or bisexual. She states,

> Our relationship was so intense and all consuming that I didn't really think about the sexual feelings that much. They just went along with everything else. She was such a good and bright spot in my life at that time...a savior really. I would've taken her in any form. Meg was my first love. She made me feel whole... and I could kinda forget myself, forget my body and just feel happy, for the first time.

Jackie never acted on her sexual feelings toward Meghan. And, their friendship survives today, in a less intense form. Meghan was the first person Jackie told, when the two were home on break from separate colleges, about her sexual attraction to women. At the time, Meghan's first (very telling) statement to Jackie was, "I'm not surprised. Ok, but definitely don't tell your mom until they're done paying for school!" Jackie remembers an instantaneous sickening feeling in her stomach after that comment. She says,

> At that time I was pretty much a lesbian. Men didn't exist in my world. But I hadn't really thought it all through about my family and stuff. I was just caught up in it. After Meg said that I was like 'oh sh**t' can my life with my mother possibly get any worse? I guess it can. She is NEVER going to accept this and I am NOT going to be one of those reconstruction therapy projects....because she would do that kind of thing. She really would.

Jackie remembers shutting down around her family after that. She states that she did "only what was officially obligatory" and "made up excuses about work for everything else." She began a serious, two-year relationship with a woman in college and lived away for two summers. She never told her parents that she was beginning to consider herself a lesbian. To this day, Jackie's parents have not been told about her attractions to and relationships with women. In fact, they think she has never been in a serious relationship of any kind. Jackie states that the reason she has never formally come out to them is that her mother once let her know that she would never approve of any of

her children being in same-sex relationships. She believes that her mother knew about Marcy (her college girlfriend) and severely pulled away emotionally during that time. The worst example Jackie remembers of this is when she wanted to come home for Thanksgiving and her mother said that she shouldn't bother because it was clear that her "special friend" was all that mattered to her so she should spend the day with her instead. For the first and only time in her life, Jackie was basically unwelcome at her family home for a treasured holiday. She didn't go to Thanksgiving that year and the memory still hurts her today.

Jackie's college relationship with Marcy was very tumultuous. She describes it as a passionate, "drama-rama" relationship. She says, "In a weird way, its good that mom let me know she wouldn't support that relationship. It wasn't very good for me anyway. I had serious mood swings in it and Marcy was not in a good place either." In the end, Marcy spent a year abroad and the couple eventually ended the relationship through a series of lengthy emails and expensive, emotionally charged phone calls. By the time Marcy returned to the United States, Jackie had already graduated and moved to another city to gain experience for applying to veterinary school (which she later dropped). She was also in the midst of what she now believes to be a deep depression. Jackie explains,

> I spent several years after college just getting by on the basics. I shut everyone out and had no interest in relationships. I had friends of course, and I knew how to put up just enough of a good face. But, deep down, I think I gave up on people – on being close with them. I'm not even sure why. I just didn't care. Marcy came back and I just didn't care. It was like I had had it, or like I gave up before I'd ever really tried... Its funny I wasn't raised religious but I think I've always had an image of a nun inside me. I decided that that was me. I was not going to be a sexual person. I woulda rather been non-religious, nun girl than deal with being a lesbian I guess. I know that sounds weak to say, especially in this day and age. But, then again, you don't know my mother....And, I know what that may sound like but it's not that. I'm not a repressed lesbian...I think feeling like I should be a

> nun actually has to with me not coming to terms with the fact that I can have a disability and still be sexy, still feel sexy.

Jackie attended only three therapy sessions during that period. She credits her recovery from this depression with the following factors: 1) living on her own in a new city and having to survive 2) coming to terms with her disability 3) coming to terms with her bisexuality. The latter, she states, was accomplished through "journaling and time." Jackie asserts that she is now comfortable with her disability, accepting of her bisexuality and finally, resolved to keep her sexuality a secret from her mother and father. Jackie has very clearly articulated reasons for her choice not to come out to her parents. She states that she is out to most of her friends and feels no personal shame about being bisexual. But, she explains, her younger brother has serious drug addiction problems and is frequently in and out of rehabs. She has made the decision that she doesn't think her family can handle any more stress at this time. She concludes this topic by clarifying that she is open to changing her opinion about coming out if and when circumstances shift in her family or personal life. "But," she adds gravely, "there is no way it [coming out] would ever be pretty."

Disability and Dual Identity

Jackie's description of the role that disability has played in her life shares similarities with other participants who discussed dual minority-identity issues. For Jackie, her bisexuality and disability are inextricably linked. She feels that the intensity of her attractions to women in her younger years, while real., was related to problems with her mother, her disability and her avoidance of men. She explains that she intrinsically "had more faith in women to look beyond my disability." She currently understands her avoidance of dating men as related to her fear of being rejected because of her disability.

To complicate matters further, she adds that she thinks her most intense fear was actually less about being rejected by a man as it was about a fantasy that her mother would somehow know about the rejection and judge her. She says, "there is a way mom can make you feel like a total idiot with one look. I think I somehow believed that if I dated a guy and he dumped me, that she'd be watching over my shoulder..." To summarize her experience, and perhaps that of other bisexual women who feel pressure to name which sexual orientation they are *more truly* identified with, Jackie aptly clarifies:

> I'm not saying that I was attracted to women as a second option. It was just a whole different thing; women were always part of my world...and so were my feelings for them. Men are just new territory for me now...one doesn't have to cancel the other out I guess. They're just different parts of me. I guess that just brings us back to the idea that I'm basically bisexual....it's not that hard of a concept but sometimes it seems like it is...[sigh] it really helps to talk it out.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Introduction

This study aimed to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the experiences of adult women with bisexual and/or complex sexual identities; particular emphasis was placed on women's internal thoughts and feelings about their sexuality as well as the impact that important communities in their life have on their social and intrapsychic processes. Although all participants had significant sexual relationships with both sexes, a majority of them had at least some negative or conflictual feelings about identifying as bisexual. Some felt no connection with the term whatsoever. Thus, when exploring important topics, it was often a challenge to differentiate - in concept and language - between behavioral history, public/social identity and personal concepts/schemas about sexuality. This general finding is consistent with core debates of gender theorists who frequently attempt to tease out differences between commonly merged categories such as biological sex, gender expression, sexual behavior and sexual identity.

Scant empirical research has been done on the experiences of non-clinical samples of bisexual women. Thus, this study focused on information gathering with the purpose of informing directions for future research. The design of the study was qualitative; as the researcher, I conducted eleven 1.5 hour long, confidential interviews,

probing for salient themes and experiences. As previously stated, six broad themes emerged:

1) Naming (or choosing not-to name) sexual identity

2) Coming out

3) Religion and family –acceptance, rejection and the negotiation of conflicting values and beliefs

4) Workplace and school experiences

5) Dual identity and other social minority experiences

6) Relationship to the LGBT community

The open-ended, qualitative approach enabled participants to communicate the interconnectedness of these powerful and varied aspects of their lives. In attempting to identify and categorize the complex and varied experiences and themes, I learned about their fundamental interdependence. To talk about one's personal ideas about bisexuality was often to first invoke one's family's ideas or perhaps the values of one's peer group. This is not surprising because of the complex and dynamic interplay between the "internal" world of the individual and the "external" world of relationships, communities, values and meaning structures. To attempt to sort out or separate the process of naming one's sexual identity from the process of relating to family, lovers and friends was difficult, feeling at times even arbitrary. After all, to label oneself implies the process of doing so in relation to others – and it is the beliefs and communications of particularly valued others that seem to at least partly determine how this process unfolds.

To complicate matters further, women's connections to the important people in their lives were then often described as inextricably linked to larger communities and value systems which serve to support or "contain" these intimate relationships. For

example, participants' comments about family beliefs about sexuality were invariably interconnected with associations to and feelings about their family's religion or culture. In this sample, none of the women reported significant differences between the way their family's (practiced) religion responded to homosexuality/bisexuality and the way their parents themselves responded (or were expected to respond).

This area of dialogue led to the development of the following questions for future research: How do the ideas about gender and marriage held by one's parent(s) impact bisexual women's self concept and beliefs about the future? How do parents access and utilize larger family and religious communities to instruct their daughters on the often difficult-to-discuss topics of gender and sexuality? How do religious communities appear to directly or indirectly affect relationships between bisexual women and their parents? [The latter questions were generated after a participant described her mother's use of a church leader to add additional authority to her condemnation of homosexuality.]

A challenge for future research in this area appears to be finding ways to gather information that both makes room for personal context while also retaining relevance to a broad population of bisexual women. In other words, researchers must craft questions and design interview structures which seek to maintain a balance between the general (e.g. gender/sexuality norms in communities) and the specific (e.g. one's personal experience coming out to mother). As I believe to be the case for good clinicians, researchers who want to understand the impact of norms communicated by social institutions and communities must be willing to both explore broad and sometimes vague generalizations (e.g. "People view bisexuals as unformed") and yet also pay attention to specific experiences (e.g. "My mother behaved coldly after she learned I was bisexual"). A

general point that emerged from interviews was the basic idea that the process of claiming (or "not-claiming") an identity seemingly cannot be separated from social context – and the unique stigmas, meaning structures, experiences and consequences which it evokes. Thus, the word "bisexual" can be understood as carrying both distinct and common meanings for each woman.

Humanizing an Invisible Population:

Studying Variations in Bisexual Samples

The LGBT acronym used by community service agencies, advocacy groups and researchers represents an impressive amalgam of people who band together mainly as a result of being broadly considered sex/gender minorities; but, there are countless and important ways in which lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people differ. I believe that it is important to understand these differences for several reasons. First, in order to help a stigmatized, minority group to gain equal rights and appropriate levels of social acceptance, it must first become visible. Part of being genuinely visible as a minority community means being seen as having as much variation or as many "within-group differences" as majority groups. This is inherently humanizing and prevents majority groups from engaging in dangerous "they are all alike" stereotyping processes. As previously explored in this work, a range of powerful stereotypes about bisexuals still persist within heterosexual and homosexual cultures. These stereotypes are often negative and leave bisexuals feeling themselves to be without community and adequate language to describe and communicate their experience. As this data illustrates, many people with bisexual histories decide to resolve this problem by "choosing a side" rather than enduring the stress of being neither straight nor gay.

As the Kinsey research suggested decades ago, there are likely a large number of people whose attractions and life experiences are bisexual but who - as a result of self identification issues, or lack of visibility – remain "off the radar" as a bisexual population. In essence, this means that there are a high number of bisexuals in the general population that will never be identified or researched simply because they do not relate to or use the term bisexual. The idea that actual sexual experience is far more varied than movies, research or general public opinion would suggest is not new – nor is the concept of being attracted to both sexes as a stable human condition. Kinsey's groundbreaking research suggesting that sexuality existed on a spectrum (as opposed to in strict binary categories) dates back to the 1960's. And, it showed that a great number of people who present to the world as heterosexual and homosexual are actually closer to bisexual in behavior and/or attraction. Data from Kinsey's work, as well as this study and others like it, need to be considered when attempting to understand current quantitative and large scale research asserting that bisexuals are more distressed as a group than gay or straight people. More clearly, if study participants are only being chosen from clinical samples of people who call themselves bisexual, these samples are then not necessarily representative of the larger population of people with dual attraction and bisexual experience. The samples are likely biased because they are either drawn from health clinics (and other groups that are predisposed to show higher levels of distress) or from communities where people have chosen to claim and endorse the politically and emotionally charged social identity of bisexuality.

Sampling problems aside, one may still ask, "Why is bisexuality is still arguably one of the most stigmatized and least understood sexual orientations?" Answering this

question is beyond the bounds of one doctoral thesis. But, it is important to note because it informed the thrust of this work. Data from this project reconfirmed my basic hypothesis that one of the reasons that bisexuals are so poorly understood as a population relates to the fact that social stigma prevents them from being fully visible/available to researchers in the first place. If, as the current literature shows, bisexuals as a population are in fact more distressed than gay and straight people, then there is an obligation on the part of service providers to help them. But, before actions can be taken or programs initiated - clinicians, researchers and service providers must first gain a greater understanding of who bisexuals really are, roughly how many exist and what their unique needs might be. Empirical work is currently a long way from this level of knowledge and expertise. In order to be accurate and comprehensive, much more information must be gleaned about the mysterious population of dually attracted people who live among a variety of communities and, as this research indicates, often call themselves anything but bisexual.

Social Norms and Language:

The Challenge of Accepting Uncertainty and Multiplicity

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

- Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "Song of Myself," (1855)

Arguably, building greater knowledge about one form of sexuality can lead to deeper understanding about all sexualities. Similar to Jung's concept of the shadow, by looking at how we treat others who we say we are not, we can learn something important

about ourselves as individuals and communities. I believe that social reactions to bisexuality inform us about society's general intolerance of people and conditions that suggest multiplicity or complexity; for example, this is evident in the ongoing profound legal and social discrimination against people who change their sex or decide to live "in-between" as a third sex. By their very existence, transgender, transsexual and intersex people, perhaps far more than bisexuals, challenge our assumptions about what is acceptable and predictable in the area of sex and gender. They evoke discussion about what is "natural" and therefore often viewed as respectable and more worthy of greater privilege. It has long seemed to me that sex and gender norms would not be so passionately promoted and vehemently policed within religions and societies if they were truly as "natural" or fundamentally immutable as some assert.

At its core, bisexuality seems to make people uncomfortable because it suggests fluidity and mutability; it does not allow one to predict the sex of future partners or make assumptions about gender roles. Knowing and accepting an "out" bisexual person requires one to tolerate uncertainty and allow for multiple possibilities. Despite the grammatical suggestion of dualism, bisexuality seems to paradoxically challenge binary thinking – a bedrock of most conceptualizations of sex and sexuality. This is perhaps best summarized in Garber's statement that bisexuality "undoes sexuality as a category" (Garber, 1995). Unfortunately, as the data from this study reveals, this can place a strain on the bisexual person's capacity to feel comfortable or fully accepted in most communities (which privilege the predictability of monosexuality). As with most minority identities, the bisexual person faces greater demands to understand the norms and expectations of dominant monosexual cultures and can often expect little

understanding in return. Audre Lorde called this "the ontological privilege of the oppressed" because the minority person, by virtue of understanding both dominant and minority cultures, is technically more knowledgeable. However, for bisexuals in this study, "ontological privilege" did not seem to make life any easier. Most of the the women in the study had some level of distress around the struggle to name a public sexual identity and none felt part of a bisexual community. Instead, their bisexuality was a largely private and seemingly idiosyncratic matter with which they alone must grapple. They seemed to perceive their sexuality as a phenomenon that was a in some ways too complex and demanding to expect others to understand. For some it was akin to a social liability. One participant aptly stated,

> I know gay people don't have enough role models but once you're out as gay, you're at least seen as gay...and people can start getting over it. Grandmas can at least know what they have to get used to...it's not like I'm gonna tell my Grandma, well, just wait and see what sex I end up with. I wouldn't put her through that.

In this quote, one can gain a sense of the participant's anticipation that her Grandmother would have greater difficulty accepting the "not knowing which sex a future partner might be" aspect of bisexuality than she would with a stigmatized - but at least certain and predictable- lesbian identity.

Since the point of this section is to further discussion, rather to reiterate previously discussed findings, I will now suggest an area for potential future investigation and possible social change. The general concern about social acceptance and understanding of bisexuality was echoed at some point in most interviews. Specifically, I found that many of the difficulties participants faced involved problems with expectations of and experiences with other people's real or perceived lack of

capacity to think about sexuality in flexible and open-minded ways. Thus, bisexual women (and transgender people) would benefit from communities that have greater general tolerance for multiplicity and fluidity. Interview data about acceptance of bisexuals in the LGBT community was consistent with other contemporary research: biphobia is alive and well as phenomenon - even in communities that purport to be safer and more supportive than the majority/heterosexual culture.

The LGBT community is, in most cases, the most active, committed and visible group working for social change toward greater acceptance of sexual diversity. Thus, it seems a sensible place to start for providing bisexuals with the community support they need. Questions about exactly how this might occur and who would or should lead such a charge are beyond the boundaries of this project. However, the subject raises new questions for researchers, clinicians and activists alike. Examples include: How can the culture of LGBT communities be changed to promote greater acceptance of bisexuals? What political., social and cognitive forces might currently be preventing this kind of change? Is there something fundamental about bisexuality that makes full inclusion in lesbian and gay community untenable? If so, what other arenas of social support might be developed to provide bisexuals with the buffering effects of community belonging? What has gotten in the way, thus far, of a more visible and organized bisexual community? If bisexuality were to become more fully accepted and visible in mainstream heterosexual society, how might common norms about sex and gender be affected?

One indicator of change in a culture is the introduction of new language. As discussed in previous sections of this work, the problem of finding an acceptable term for dual attraction and bisexual behavior/history remains unresolved for many people. The

term queer has been promoted in academic and political circles as one that encompasses the full range of sexual diversity between humans and makes space for the multiplicity inherent to bisexuality. However, it remains to be seen how well and fully such language will permeate. Despite the famous television show, "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," most people agree that, queer is still not commonly accepted and understood as a dignified social category. As several of the women in this study asserted, it is often thought of as a term used only by insiders or academic elites. To the general population, queer is still a slur.

But, the adoption of new language, along with social change, requires time. And, perhaps this is what is still needed for bisexual, queer and transgender people to be more fully and openly integrated in their communities. In light of this discussion, the following new questions emerge: What role does language play in the shaping of social norms about complex sexual identities? In what specific ways are the words bisexual and queer problematic? Do changes in terminology enable people to become more accepting of the multiplicity implied by complex sexual identities? What role should bisexuals, researchers, clinicians and social activists play in supporting or changing particular terminology?

Conclusion

In essence, the study re-affirmed the notable differences between sexual behavior and sexual identification. Behavior is observable and, to some extent, quantifiable. Identity is fluid, sometimes concealable and, by definition, context dependent. Identity can carry heavy emotional, economic and political meanings; it can shift along with

environment, relationships and life stage. As a result, in participant interviews, discussions about identity sometimes felt ephemeral; it often seemed that the moment the researcher-participant dyad began to investigate bisexuality; its basic solidity as a term was in question – becoming increasingly complicated with each level of examination and turn of story. It was as if most questions about bisexuality were answered "well, yes but also no" – suggesting that, unlike monosexual identities, bisexuality does not yet have a clear and understandable position in modern American culture and language. As one participant stated,

> ...people decide whether you're gay or straight when they hear about the sex of your partner...and it's pretty awkward to randomly tell them not to make those assumptions. You have to make a thing of it at that point and, well who wants to do that?

For a variety of reasons having to do with cultural values and perhaps even the brain's tendencies toward pattern seeking and prediction, bisexuality does not seem to be an acceptable endpoint in sexual development for many people. As one participant states, "if you're bisexual, people think of you, psychologists think of you as on the way to either gay or straight...isn't that what Freud said?"

Even if an environment is theoretically accepting of bisexuality as a solid identity, by its very nature, it often seems to be an identity that requires explaining, and even perhaps asserting. One generally cannot identify a bisexual person unless that person chooses to identify herself. For many people, such a task is simply and understandably not important enough to undertake in the average interaction. But, for those who wish to deepen current understanding of human sexuality, it should not be overlooked as a category for study. I assert this because I believe bisexuality is more common and

complex than most people understand and thus can provide critical ground for deeper insights about the nature of social categorization and human sexuality generally.

Questions for Future Research

In the spirit of intellectual curiosity, this work concludes with an additional sampling of questions raised by the data:

1. How does the question of marriage impact the choice to name or retain a bisexual identity? Are there differences in how women think about marriage to either sex? For example, are there differences in fantasy, expectation and desire? If so, why?

2. This study revealed how bisexual women's relationships to individuals and community can change when the sex of one's partner or attraction changes. What, if any, are the particularities and ramifications of this shifting process for bisexual well being? Does it promote greater interpersonal flexibility and capacities to move between heterosexual and homosexual social worlds? Or, instead, for some, does it lead to greater ambivalence about naming an identity or strengthening relationships to *any* larger community?

3. Why hasn't the identification of sexual fluidity "caught on"? Are there particular social stigmas inherent to the suggestion of changing objects of desire? When it comes to sexuality, do humans have an inherent need for the perception of "fixedness" as opposed to fluidity?

4. It seems a bisexual woman's relationship to the other communities in her life (friends, school, work) is fundamentally mediated by her basic sense of acceptance or non-acceptance in her family of origin. Is this true? If so, what are the mediating factors?

5. In what important ways is bisexuality similar to and different from (psychologically) from biracial identity? Can any particular information from the literature about bicultural and biracial identities be applied in helping bisexuals? Is there any truth to the idea that grappling with another oppressed identity early in life can make an individual more prepared for difficulties related to sexual orientation as an adult?

6. What is the history and current population of informal bisexual communities? Once a person with a bisexual history is partnered with or committed to a particular sex, what factors determine whether she retains or sheds a bisexual identity or self-concept? Why is there not a more organized and powerful presence of bisexuals in contemporary LGBT political communities?

7. What, if anything, is unique about the struggles and experiences of bisexual women as compared to men? What ramifications does gender/biological sex have for helping professionals who are working with bisexual men and women?

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer for Study on Women's Sexuality

I am conducting an exploratory research project that seeks to better understand the experiences of women who have had attractions to and sexual experiences with both men and women over the course of their lives. I am looking for volunteers to participate in the study by completing a confidential 1.5 hour long interview. Information gained from the study will contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the complexity of women's sexuality, specifically those women who either identify as bisexual or have dual attractions and sexual experiences.

Women from diverse racial/ethnic, religious/spiritual., disability and social backgrounds are especially encouraged to participate in the study. Eligible participants must be between the ages of 22-50 and have no significant cognitive impairment. Participants must be able to come to the Rutgers Busch Campus in Piscataway, NJ and talk about their experiences in a private room with the principal investigator for 1.5 hours.

Anyone interested in finding out more about this study and possibly participating in it should contact me (the principal investigator), Sarah Kowal., M.A., at 646-223-0031 or send an email to skowal@eden.rutgers.edu.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Exploring the Role of Social and Institutional Settings on Bisexual and/or Dually Attracted Women

Overview of Study and Procedures

I am asking you to participate in a study of women's sexuality and identity. You will be asked questions about your past and current relationships, the way you think about your sexualiy and identity, your past and current attractions, and the ways you think family, friends, work, school and culture have impacted your sexuality and sexual expression. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic and contact information form. This form will be kept strictly confidential and will be separated from any other data you provide. Next, you will be interviewed for approximately 1.5 hours about the topics listed above. The interview will be audio taped. The purpose of the taping is to give me, the researcher, an opportunity to listen more closely to any themes and ideas that you generate. The audiotape will be transcribed by me and kept strictly confidential. It will be labeled only with a participant identification number rather than your name. The form with the identification numbers and names will be kept in a locked cabinet and separated from the audiotaped material.

If you feel uncomfortable or concerned about anything at any point during the study, you will be allowed to review the audio recordings and request that any data not be used in the study. You may refuse to participate in the study at any point in time, or may refuse to answer any particular question that makes you uncomfortable for any reason.

Risks and Benefits: You may experience some emotional discomfort when answering some questions in the interview. Or, some questions may simply make you feel uncomfortable. If you wish to speak to someone about this unease, please contact Sarah Kowal Alden, M.A., principal investigator, at Rutgers University at 646-223-0031, and I will refer you to a psychological professional.

Some participants may enjoy being able to discuss these issues with the interviewer. Although there is a possible risk of a breach in confidentiality, the investigator will personally safeguard your confidentiality to the greatest degree possible. See the confidentiality section below for more detailed information. This study is not designed for your direct benefit. However, the study is expected to benefit science and psychologist's understanding of the complexity of women's sexuality.

Research Standards and Rights of Participants: You may refuse to participate. If you do not want to answer specific questions, you will not have to do so and will not be penalized in any way.

Confidentiality: No identifiable information will be shared with anyone outside of the study. The information obtained from the interviews and questionnaire will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. Any identifying information that you provide will be separated from the questionnaire and will be kept in a locked file at the offices of the research staff. Your questionnaires and audio tape/digital recording of your interview will only be identified by a numeric code.

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant
If you have any questions about this study, please email or call Sarah Kowal Alden, M.A. at 646-223-0031 or skowal@eden.rutgers.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, call Michelle Gibel, CIM, Rutgers University IRB Administrator at 732/932/0150, x 2104 or email her at gibel@orsp.rutgers.edu.

I have read and understood the information above. The researcher has answered my questions. I may refuse to answer any question I want. I consent to take part in this study and so indicate by signing this form below. Two copies of this form are provided. One is for me. The other form, which I have signed, is to be returned with the demographic questionnaire.

Participant's Name (print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C

ID:_____

Demographic Information About You

The purpose of this form is to gain basic background information about study participants. It will be kept confidential. Where appropriate, please circle the correct number or write in the answer where it is specified.

1. Age:_____

2. Biological Sex:
   [1] Female
   [2] Other (specify): _____

3. What is your current religion?

   [1] Evangelical Protestant (e.g. Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostal)
   specify: _____
   [2] Other Protestant (e.g., Baptist, Episcopalian).
   specify:_____
   3] Catholic/Roman Catholic
   [4] Jewish
   [5] Islamic/Muslim
   [6] Agnostic
   [7] Other
   specify: _____
   [8] None

4. How religious do you consider yourself to be?
   [1] Not at all
   [2] A little bit
   [3] Somewhat
   [4] Quite a bit
   [5] Very

5. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?:
   [1] Graduate school degree
   [2] Some graduate school
   [3] 4-year undergraduate college degree
   [4] 2-year undergraduate college degree

[5] Some college
[6] High school diploma
[7] GED
[8] Some high school
[9] Graduated from elementary school
[10] Some elementary school

6. What is your race?
   [1] Black
   [2] White
   [3] East Asian
   [4] South/Southeast Asian
   [5] Middle Eastern
   [6] Pacific Islander
   [7] Indigenous American/Native peoples of the Americas
   [9] Mixed race -- specify:_____
   [10] I classify myself ethnically and not racially

7. What is your ethnicity? (If mixed, please circle both.)
   [1] African American (North America)
   [2] Native American
   [3] Latino/Hispanic
   [4] European American
   [5] Caribbean Non Latino
   [6] Asia/Middle Eastern
   [7] Western European
   [8] Central/Eastern European
   [9] African
   [10] Australian
   [11] Other_____

8. What is your sexual orientation?
   [1] Exclusively heterosexual (I am *only* attracted to people of the opposite gender)
   [2] Mostly heterosexual (I am *usually* attracted to people of the opposite gender)
   [3] Bisexual (I am sexually attracted to people of both genders)
   [4] Mostly homosexual (I am *usually* attracted to people of the same gender as me).
   [5] Exclusively homosexual
   (I am *only* attracted to people of the same gender as me)
   [6] Uncertain/questioning

9. Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship?

No: [1] Single, not dating
[2] Single, dating

Yes:
[3] I have a girlfriend that I do not live with
[4] I have a girlfriend I live with
[5] I have a boyfriend that I do not live with
[6] I have a boyfriend I live with
[7] I am in a committed partnership/ marriage/ domestic/civil union
[8] I am in multiple romantic relationships

10. If applicable, circle the sex(es) you've had long term, sexual relationships with. You can define what "long term" means. Then, write in the greatest length of time you've had a sexual relationship with each sex (in months or years) and indicate whether or not you've been married before.

[1] Women
[2] Men
[3] Greatest length of time with a woman _____
[4] Greatest length of time with a man _____
[5] Have any of these relationships included marriage? Y N
[6] If yes, circle sex of married partner: M F

11. Are you currently employed?

[1] I work full-time
[2] I work part-time
[3] I am unemployed but seeking employment
[4] I am unemployed and not seeking employment right now

12. Are you currently a student?

[0] No, I am not enrolled in any school at this time
[1] Yes, I am a full-time student
[2] Yes, I am a part-time student

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

An Exploration of the Impact of Social Institutions and Interpersonal Connections on the Sexual Expression and Identity of Bisexual and Dually Attracted Women

Principal Investigator: Sarah C. Kowal., M.A., Psy.M.

1. How would you describe your sexuality presently?

    If participant doesn't offer one, ask: is there a particular identity you would give yourself such as heterosexual., gay, lesbian, bisexual etc.?

    Who are your current romantic partners (past two years) – men, women or both?

    Who are you currently (past two years) attracted to – men, women or both?

2. Has your sexual identity ever been different in the past? Describe.

3. Have your feelings and thoughts about your sexuality changed over time? If so, how?

4. What are your thoughts and feelings about the word bisexual? What do you think causes you to have these feelings/thoughts?

    How do you think others think and feel about the term/category of bisexuality?

5. Who, in your life, knows about your sexual identity/history?

    Is there anyone whom you are particularly open with about it? What makes this the case? (e.g. anything specific about the relationship)

    Is there anyone whom you are particularly closed about your sexual identity with? What makes this the case? (e.g. anything specific about the relationship)

How do you choose who to talk with about your sexuality?

Describe your closest friendships. (If not already discussed) How does your sexuality factor into your friendships?

Do you feel that your sexuality is understood by your friends?

Do you feel that it is celebrated?

5. Who in your professional/work life knows about your sexual identity? If subject says "no one", probe why this is the case.

Do you feel that your sexuality is understood by those at your workplace?

Do you feel that it is accepted? Celebrated?

6. How do you think your experiences in the workplace have impacted your willingness to be open about your sexuality/sexual history? (e.g. probe for issues of acceptance, discrimination, subtle prejudice etc.)

7. Were you raised with any kind of religious values/experiences? If so, how do you think your religion impacted your feelings about sexuality?

Does it continue to impact you now? If so, how?

Do you feel that your sexuality is understood by those in your religion (either currect or past) ?

Do you feel that it is celebrated?

8. How do you think your experiences in schools have impacted your willingness to be open about your sexuality/sexual history? (e.g. probe for issues of acceptance, discrimination, subtle prejudice etc.)

Do you have a particular memory that stands out for you that has to do with your sexuality and your experience in school? If so, describe.

9. How do you envision your sexuality in the future? Do you expect your attractions/partners to change? If so, how?

How do you expect your behaviors to change (e.g. who you have sexual experiences with)? If so, how and why?

10. What factor plays the biggest role in determining who you date/partner with right now?

After subject generates own response, probe about the influences of each of the following: religion, social network, family expectations, desire to marry legally, desire for biological children with man or woman, social prejudice, friendship networks, political ideas etc...

11. Do you ever try to shape/guide your own attractions to fit your goals/expectations related to any of the above factors?

12. For people who are not dually attracted or bisexual, what do you think is the hardest to understand? If you could "import" knowledge about the experience of bisexuality/dual attraction into others' minds, what would you want them to know?

13. Have you been in therapy? If yes, have you discussed your sexuality? Was it ever a central topic for working through? If so, what was your experience like?

14. If therapy has been or will be a part of your life, how important is it to you to know that your therapist understands the experience and complexities of bisexuality or dual attraction?

What, if anything, would you want he or she to understand or know?

15. Are there any social or institutional changes that you think would be most important/helpful for increasing acceptance and expression of dual attraction/bisexuality?

16. Is there a particular memory or story related to what we've talked about today that comes to mind as salient or important for you?