Schrödinger's Sexuality: A Dynamic Model of Bisexual Identity Development for Self-Identifying Bisexual Cisgender Women

Kirstin Elliott-Noon, M.A.

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of

The Chicago School of Professional Psychology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of PsyD Clinical Psychology

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Dedication

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Love,

Boo

Abstract

Research studying the identity development of bisexual individuals is limited and often depends on stage models that do not address intersectionality or fluidity. The existing research has also been dependent on the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals, with most being cisgender and white. The current study looked at identity formation in bisexual cisgender women, with emphasis on their bisexual identity and an in-depth look at how their gender identity formed as well. The core research question was *what is the process by which bisexual cisgender women develop their sexual identities?* This question was answered by utilizing a grounded theory methodology and implementing qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The conceptualization of interview questions, the interviews themselves, data organization, and results were informed by queer and feminist frameworks. Interviews were conducted with 12 bisexual, cisgender women who were audio-recorded over Zoom. Throughout the continuous coding process, external (social and geographical environment, interpersonal experiences, and other identities) and internal (conceptualization of identity and expression of identity) experiences were found that cultivated identity formation, as relayed by the participants. Recent data shows a growing number of individuals who identify as bisexual, which has implications for how heterosexual and gay communities, clinicians, academics, and bisexuals themselves view the phenomenon of bisexuality. The ability for research, clinical work, education, and awareness to remain open to deconstructing binaries and empowering differences in sexual and gender identities will be important for how we move forward to lessening the impact of oppression.

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Chapter 1: Nature of the Study

Background

Bisexual behavior has existed since ancient times. The ancient Greeks and the Romans, the Japanese, Native Americans, and more have a rich history of those who would now be defined as bisexual (Angelides, 2001; Cantarella, 2002). Despite this history, bisexuality is still one of the most understudied, undervalued, and stigmatized sexualities in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) community (Brownfield et al., 2018; Colledge et al., 2015; Flanders et al., 2017; Monro et al., 2017; Klesse, 2011; Yoshino, 2000). The existence of bisexuality appears to be a paradox of quantum superposition or, in other words, it is Schrödinger's sexuality. Bisexuality is a concept that both exists and does not exist, like Schrödinger's cat thought experiment, with various aspects of that (non)existence dependent on who is in the room. This study will examine this paradox and explain why this concept is best equipped to stand as a metaphor for the experience of bisexuality.

The concept of bisexuality interrupts the binary boxes used to define the world in such a way that research, academia, and community resources are still unable to find an adequate, agreed upon definition of this identity (Berenson, 2001; Flanders et al., 2017; Halperin, 2009). Due to this, the research that does exist can read as confusing, unorganized, and inconsequential because it cannot be said with certainty that they are all studying the same phenomenon, identity, or community unless the definition of "bisexual" can be matched. This difference is often most pronounced in research versus community studies, because research struggles to leave room for variability in definition, while community studies rely more heavily on self-identification of participants (Flanders et al., 2017). The ambiguity around the definition of bisexuality leads to

societal confusion about the community, as well as identity confusion for bisexual individuals (Klesse, 2011; Rullo et al., 2015).

The societal confusion about bisexuality likely stems from the construct of heterosexism and monosexism that permeate Western civilization. *Heterosexism* is the belief that attraction to the opposite sex is the only acceptable sexuality, along with the discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) peoples due to this belief (Flanders et al., 2016). This is one struggle shared by bisexuals and the lesbian & gay (LG) community. *Monosexism* is an essentialist view of sexual orientation, insisting the only legitimate sexualities are those involving attraction to one sex or gender. This polarization reinforces binary perspectives and poses benefits for both heterosexual and LG communities (Flanders et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2015). The combination of these concepts has led to a phenomenon known as binegativity. *Binegativity* is a comprehensive term that includes biphobia (specific anti-bisexual prejudice and discrimination), erasure, marginalization, and discouragement of bisexual identities (Klesse, 2011; Roberts et al., 2015). These terms will be explored more in-depth in Chapter 2. The lack of clarity surrounding bisexuality, a lack of representation, community, or role models, and the existence of binegativity creates a perfect storm for a slew of negative outcomes for bisexual individuals. Once aware of the issues surrounding bisexuality, it seems inevitable to ask how one would develop such an identity. That very question is the point of this study.

According to Erikson, identity is the apex goal for adolescence; meaning adolescents come to have a sense of oneself and the purpose they have within their world (Berk, 2014; Erikson, 1964, 1968; Fadjukoff & Kroger, 2016). This goal is dependent on achieving some semblance of an identity and not falling into role confusion, which can cause negative consequences in adult life (Kroger, 2002). Once the importance of identity formation during

lescence and emerging adulthood is understood, the question of how sexual identity and sexual orientation identity development occurs emerges. The development of one's sexual orientation is a complex, varied, and difficult process for many individuals (Rosario et al., 2011; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Often, the process can be complicated and difficult but the cultivation of a meaningful sense of sexuality is an important task, especially for sexual-minority people (Morgan, 2013; Rosario et al., 2011). There are dynamic stages during this time that have led many to wonder if any current identity development theory can comprehensively conceptualize the complicated process of developing a sexual identity or sexual orientation (Morgan, 2013). This is especially concerning for those who study the development of bisexual, non-monosexual, and fluid individuals.

Bisexuals are often aggregated into research including LG, indicating some assumption that their experiences of coming to terms with their sexuality are similar (Bostwick & Dodge, 2019). The truth, however, is not that simple. There are unique, distinct struggles and periods that bisexuals encounter that LG individuals do not, including difficulty finding community and support, binegativity from both heterosexual and LG communities, and poorer mental health outcomes compared to both heterosexual and LG individuals (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Bostwick & Dodge, 2019; Bradford, 2004; Colledge et al., 2015; Dyar & London, 2018; Klesse, 2011). Despite the knowledge of this, the research focusing on bisexual identity development is rather lacking (Bradford, 2004; Monro et al., 2017). At this time, there are three proposed bisexual identity development models, all of which build upon each other (Bradford, 2004; Brown, 2002; Weinberg et al., 1995). This does not mean that there are no other models that attempt to explain fluid sexual orientation development; merely that there are few others accepted within the lexicon as pertaining specifically to bisexual individuals (Wilde, 2014).

Problem Statement

There is a lack of research discussing the sexual orientation identity development of bisexual individuals, with no agreed upon definition of bisexuality or model of development (Monro et al., 2017). The experiences of bisexual individuals are often presented as similar to those of LG individuals, conflating the queer experience as similar across the broad spectrum of sexuality. This study attempted to fill a portion of the gap in the literature by providing an identity development model focused on bisexual cisgender women that does not conflate their experiences with other sexualities. There will also be some focus on the development process in terms of how their gender identity impacts the experience.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to create a model of identity development for bisexual cisgender women in the Midwestern area of the United States using grounded theory. This model provides a framework for bisexual women, academia, and clinical professionals. The model also addresses how cisgender bisexual women's sexual and gender identities co-occur and inform each other.

Research Questions/Research Questions and Hypotheses

By using grounded theory, the core of this study asked the following questions: "What is the process by which bisexual cisgender women develop their sexual identities?", "How does this identity develop in tandem with their gender identity?" and "How are those two processes different or the same?" There are also sub-questions, such as: How do those identity experiences affect social, romantic, and personal views of the world? and "Is there a true difference between bisexual identity development and lesbian/gay (LG) development?" These questions informed

follow up questions that were combined to create themes, which was the basis for the model created from participants' responses.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The blank space within bisexual identity research will attempt to be, at least, partially filled with this study. By utilizing queer theory and feminist theory, a model will be developed using grounded theory qualitative methods to help explain bisexual identity development for bisexual cisgender women (Callis, 2009; Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Marinucci, 2016).

Scope of the Study

The study only included cisgender women. The bisexual identity development of men would be a separate study and did not fit the scope of this project. The exclusion of transgender women and men, as well as non-binary/gender non-conforming individuals, is due to similar reasons. The intersection of those identities, in addition to a bisexual identity, deserve their own independent studies.

The bisexual umbrella is bigger than just bisexuality. This study did not include pansexual, queer, homoflexible, demisexual, or fluid cisgender women. By starting with the origin of the bisexual umbrella, this researcher hopes to open a door to study these Bi+ identities in a similar depth.

Only adult (18+) cisgender women were studied, which likely left out more salient developmental issues that occur in childhood and adolescence. However, the sample did complete these developmental stages and could comment on them. My sample was mostly representative of the Midwestern portion of the United States. Therefore, results would not be generalizable beyond that population.

Definitions of Key Terms

Binegativity. Binegativity is the stigmatization and prejudiced attitude both heterosexual and LG communities can have toward bisexual individuals, including violence, stereotypes, and discrimination (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Cox et al., 2013; Lytle et al., 2017). This can include erasure or the disbelief of bisexual as a legitimate identity, causing it to be ignored, marginalized, and invisible (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2017).

Bisexual. The word bisexual has numerous definitions, including factors of desire, attraction, and behavior (Berenson, 2001; Flanders et al., 2017; Gonzales et al., 2017; Halperin, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the participants merely needed to self-identify as bisexual. The inclusion of mere self-identification led this study to differ greatly from research studies versus community studies because they tend to rely on behavioral action with more than one gender when defining bisexuality, which should be kept in mind throughout the remainder of this article (Flanders et al., 2017).

Cisgender. Cisgender is defined as a person who does not find a difference between their birth sex and gender identity (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015). The exclusion of bisexual transgender women stems from the differing experience they would have with the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity, including the cross-section of biphobia and transphobia.

Monosexism. Monosexisum is a term that explains the broad social belief that individuals should be monosexual (attraction to only one gender) and that plurisexual identities are inherently illegitimate (Eisner, 2016; Flanders et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2015).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for bisexual cisgender women, academia, and clinical professionals. For bisexual cisgender women, this might give them a model in which they can find their own experiences. It could allow them a space to understand that they are not alone in how they developed their bisexual identity. In academia, a model such as this could be helpful in training future researchers, professors, and clinicians. Due to the lack of models exclusive to bisexuality, there is a lack of education in this realm for those who may work closest with bisexual cisgender women. Clinical professionals could likely find this helpful when working with bisexual cisgender women as a conceptualization of their bisexual identity development as a woman.

Summary

Bisexual behavior has existed for over a millennium but has yet to find a definition that can include the various ways in which it can be lived out as a legitimate identity (Flanders et al., 2017; Halperin, 2009). Due to this, the existing literature can often ignore, stigmatize, or conflate the experiences of bisexual individuals (Callis, 2009; Monro et al., 2017). This phenomenon has led to the existence of binegativity, which perpetuates stereotypes, discrimination, and the invisibility of bisexual individuals within heterosexual and LG communities (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Lytle et al., 2017). Therefore, bisexual individuals are developing their identities in a world that provides them the narrative that they are not entitled to a comprehensive definition, identity, or life in heterosexual or queer spaces. They are not given much room to exist independent of heterosexual and LG ideas of binary sexuality and fluidity (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Wilde, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to provide that space for bisexual cisgender women to exist and give their perspective on how that existence came to be. It enabled these individuals to contribute to how future clinicians and students will learn about how their identities developed and are maintained throughout different experiences in their lifespan. It may also open up the possibility for models to be created for other genders and other sexualities under the bisexual umbrella.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following chapter will lay out current research on the issues around bisexuality and bisexual identity development. It will begin by briefly going through the history of bisexuality in different realms and the complication of defining the sexual orientation. Then the review will move on to a look at how society views and thinks about bisexual individuals, including monosexism and binegativity. That discussion will provide context for the next, which is an analysis of current research on bisexual individuals, with a focus on bisexual cisgender women, concerning the topics of health outcomes and the experience of living as a bisexual cisgender woman. After these topics have been discussed at length, this review will shift to identity development. General identity development, sexual orientation development, and sexual orientation development models will be covered, with a brief look at factors involved in such a process. This section will finish with a critique on the conflation of LGB experiences within sexual orientation identity development models. Finally, the review will conclude with a discussion on bisexual identity development. Both historical and contemporary models will be discussed, as well as what research knows and what is unknown about this phenomenon.

Bisexuality

History

The term *bisexual* was first used to describe an organism that shared reproductive characteristics of both male and female (Callis, 2009; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009). In the early 1900s, psychiatrists and sexologists began using the term to describe immature sexual development, concluding that maturity was equated to identifying as heterosexual or homosexual. The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, believed that we are all born with the potential for bisexuality but that if it were situated within sex research it would do nothing but

confuse and lead to disruption (Callis, 2009; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009). Instead, bisexuality was conceptualized as an "intermediate position" within psychosexual development (Callis, 2009, p. 224). The use of bisexual as a sexual orientation label gained traction in the "early- to mid-twentieth century" (Bostwick & Dodge, 2019, p. 80). In other research domains, such as sociology and political science, queer theory has often been depended on to help formulate ideologies within the LGBTQ community. However, bisexuality is often disregarded in this research regardless of it representing the goals of queer theory to deconstruct heteronormative issues (Monro et al., 2017). In other words, "in spite of occupying an epistemic position within this very opposition, the category of bisexuality has been curiously marginalised and erased from the deconstructive field of queer theory" (Angelides, 2001, p. 7). Bisexual activism has suffered under the erasure, misrepresentation, and ignorance surrounding bisexuality research, in addition to missing an origin story (e.g., Stonewall) and an agreed upon definition of what bisexuality is (Deschamps, 2008).

Definition

One reason that bisexuality is continually stereotyped, misunderstood, and controversial may be due to ambiguity surrounding an agreed upon definition (Berenson, 2001; Deschamps, 2008; Halperin, 2009; Klesse, 2011; Rullo et al., 2015). A desire for an intelligible and comprehensive definition is common among bisexual individuals, especially in terms of concrete stages for identity development (Flanders et al., 2016; Flanders et al., 2017). Several operational definitions have attempted to explain bisexuality. These definitions have included a middle ground state (i.e., the result of combining heterosexual and homosexual attitudes and behaviors), sexual attraction, behavior, partners, fantasies, and relationships involving women and men, gender non-specificity in these domains, and self-identification (Berenson, 2001; Flanders et al.,

2017; Klesse, 2011; Rullo et al., 2015). The absence of a cohesive definition can foster confusion and create difficulty for bisexuals attempting to disclose their identity in an intelligible way (Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011). Some of these definitions that have been used in research exclude the experiences of individuals who self-identify as bisexual (Rullo et al., 2015), which can contribute to negative beliefs of others, as well as internalized negativity toward themselves. They also differ from the definitions used in community settings or how bisexual individuals personally define their sexuality (Berenson, 2001; Flanders et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2017).

Issues with definitions of bisexuality stem from the current conceptualization of sexuality. The dichotomous view of sexuality, or belief that one is either heterosexual or homosexual, has formed a blind spot concerning the valid existence of fluidity, plurality, and complexity within sexualities that challenge the status quo (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Berenson, 2001; Flanders et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2017). Bisexuals, non-monosexuals, and sexually fluid individuals are a minority within a minority group that disrupts the very foundation on which beliefs about sexuality lie (Roberts et al., 2015). The mystery in which bisexuals are shrouded, combined with the compulsory binary thinking of the majority, has likely exacerbated the heterosexism, monosexism, and binegativity that must be navigated throughout their lives.

Societal Views of Bisexuality

Monosexism

Due to monosexism, bisexuals are often faced with dual exclusion and discrimination from both heterosexual and LG communities (Bradford, 2004; Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Li, Dobinson et al., 2013; Molina et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015). It is well documented that the LG community holds negative attitudes toward bisexual individuals, which typically center on the validity of the sexuality itself (Roberts et al., 2015). The negative attitudes in the

LG community are particularly pronounced when bisexual women are in relationships with men, due to the perceived access of heterosexual privilege, despite bisexual women reporting discomfort and attempts to distance themselves from this "benefit" (Molina et al., 2015; Hartman-Linck, 2014). Monosexism within the heterosexual community also involves invalidation, but is largely dependent on stereotypes, fear, and mistrust (Bradford, 2004; Li et al., 2013). Heterosexuals often view bisexuals as tainted traitors to the heterosexual community, leading to a number of harmful stereotypes (Klesse, 2011; Roberts et al., 2015). For instance, one of Bradford's (2004) participants made the very salient statement of "Bi's are too straight for the gay community and they're too queer for the straight community" (p. 15).

Binegativity/Biphobia

Binegativity is defined by prejudice aimed at the bisexual community, stemming from unsubstantiated stereotypes and negative beliefs about bisexuals as people (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Cox et al., 2013; Lytle et al., 2017; Mulick & Wright, 2002). These additional stressors are unique to bisexuals and can range from hate crimes to microaggressions (Flanders et al., 2016). This negativity is intensified by a lack of positive media, if there is any at all, leading to an absence of affirming bisexual role models (Bradford, 2004; Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011). Overall, binegativity has implications for coming out, social inclusion, relationship opportunities, risk of violence, and visibility (Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Bradford, 2004; Flanders et al., 2016; Hartman-Linck, 2014; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Lytle et al., 2017; Molina et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015). It is rooted in the dichotomy of sexuality and monosexism, which allows belief that bisexuals lack concrete boundaries, are unable to maintain a core, and have made a conscious choice in their identity (Klesse, 2011).

Common Stereotypes and Negative Beliefs

One of the most common stereotypes concerning bisexuality is society denying its very existence (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Bradford, 2004; Cox et al., 2013; Deschamps, 2008; Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Lytle et al., 2017; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Roberts et al., 2015). This belief is what allows binegativity to flourish and allows the continuation of erasure within media, research, law, and various other facets of society (Monro et al., 2017). The caveat to this is that if bisexuality does exist, then it must be temporary, a phase, a transition from heterosexuality or homosexuality, or it is merely experimentation (Flanders et al., 2016; Hartman-Linck, 2014; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015; Yost & Thomas, 2012). In true contradicting fashion, other common stereotypes and negative beliefs center around bisexuals being untrustworthy, unreliable, immature, and attention seeking (Flanders et al., 2016; Hartman-Linck, 2014; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013). However, these stereotypes would require bisexuality to exist as a valid orientation. It is important to note that these stereotypes can be highly dependent on interpersonal experience with bisexuals and social context of the representation of bisexuals, which addresses the contradictory nature of the stereotype that bisexuality does not exist (Cox et al., 2013; Klesse, 2011; Lytle et al., 2017). Rullo et al. (2015) found evidence to support that not only are bisexuals decisive and clear about their identity, but that it does exist and does not constitute a mere phase. Similar to the identity itself, bisexuals must also face stereotypes specific to their approach to relationships. There are conflicting reports of how relationships may buffer or exacerbate stress, anxiety, depression, and substance use (Molina et al., 2015; Li et al., 2013). There are also conflicting reports on what role relationships play in openness, confidence, and well-being (Dyar

et al., 2014). The role of relationships can change significantly if the gender of the partner or number of partners changes (Dyar et al., 2014; Hartman-Linck, 2014).

The stereotypes bisexual women face often overlap with the stereotypes attached to bisexuals of any gender. A rather common belief is that bisexuals are promiscuous, are sexually risky, and carry diseases back and forth between heterosexual and LG communities (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Cox et al., 2013; Li et al., 2013; Lytle et al., 2017; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Roberts et al., 2015). In addition, bisexuals are often perceived to be prone to infidelity, incapable of monogamy or deep, meaningful commitments, and inherently indecisive about relationships (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Cox et al., 2013; Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Lytle et al., 2017; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Roberts et al., 2015). There is also some concern about initiating relationships with bisexuals due to the assumption that every bisexual is polyamorous (Klesse, 2011). This fear lives on despite no significant differences in rates of polyamory within the bisexual community versus either the heterosexual or LG community (Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Molina et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly, there are stereotypes centered on bisexuals being eroticized, oversexualized, and objectified (Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013). The latter is more specific to bisexual women, mostly due to men being attracted to lesbian sex, finding less threat in women competitors, and thinking that bisexual women are specifically able to benefit their sexual fantasies in ways that straight women cannot (Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Li et al., 2013; Reinhardt, 2001). Conversely, research has shown that potential and current partners often show anxiety concerning their bisexual partner abandoning them for the opposite gender (Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013). This is especially pronounced in lesbians and their disdain for bisexual women who find solace in relationships with men because

of the heterosexual privilege that accompanies such a relationship (Bradford, 2004; Li et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015). Another assumption is that bisexuals in relationships with men are straight and those in relationships with women are gay, which emphasizes issues of erasure and visibility (Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Clark, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014; Johnson, 2016; Monro et al., 2017; Mulick & Wright, 2002).

Bisexual Cisgender Women

Bisexual Health Outcomes

Internalized binegativity, in addition to experiences of victimization, harassment, discrimination, and other negative factors influence a vast number of outcomes for bisexual individuals. The following section will discuss internalized binegativity and highlight three major areas where research has shown that bisexuals, and specifically bisexual cisgender women, have more concerning outcomes compared to their heterosexual and homosexual counterparts. The sections will differentiate between outcomes found for bisexual individuals (including all genders) and bisexual cisgender women.

The combination of heterosexism, monosexism, and binegativity can cause bisexuals to fall prey to something referred to as internalized binegativity, which is the "unintentional agreement with negative and biased understandings about bisexuality, as well as the subsequent development of negative beliefs and feelings about one's own bisexual orientation" (Roberts et al., 2015, p. 557). The experience of internalized binegativity can cause increased stress levels, shame, guilt, and self-doubt (Bradford, 2004; Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Molina et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015). In addition, internalized binegativity can impact identity disclosure, mental health, perceived value, and sense of self, and creates higher risk for negative health outcomes (Colledge et al., 2015; Dyar & London, 2018; Flanders et al., 2015; Lambe et al.,

2017; Warren et al., 2018). There may be some evidence to suggest that living authentically and involvement with LGBT- or bisexual-specific community can buffer these issues (Brownfield et al., 2018; Lambe et al., 2017).

Overall, bisexual individuals are found to have poorer health outcomes than their LG and heterosexual counterparts. This includes mental health, substance use, physical health, and sexual behavior consequences (Bostwick & Dodge, 2019; Warren et al., 2018). In terms of mental health, bisexual individuals and bisexual women have increased risk for a number of disorders and symptoms that contribute to poor psychological wellbeing. Numerous studies have found that bisexual individuals have higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to their LG and heterosexual counterparts (Colledge et al., 2015; Flanders et al., 2015; Mereish et al., 2017; Persson et al., 2015; Salim et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2018). There is also evidence to suggest that bisexual individuals have higher levels of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and self-harm behaviors (Colledge et al., 2015; Flanders et al., 2015; Mereish et al., 2017; Persson et al., 2015; Salim et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2018). Mixed evidence exists suggesting increased risk for disordered eating (Colledge et al., 2015). Similar to bisexual adults, bisexual youth also have concerning rates of psychological symptoms and disorders (Flanders et al., 2015).

Bisexual individuals have reported higher rates of substance use than both heterosexuals and lesbians and gay men. This includes alcohol use, marijuana use, tobacco use, and other illicit substances (Colledge et al., 2015; Flanders et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2018). Bisexual women have significantly higher rates of alcohol use compared to lesbians, while bisexual youth have higher rates over their lifetime compared to LG youth (Flanders et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2015). Bisexual women have also been found to have higher rates of binge drinking than lesbians (Salim et al., 2019).

Concerning sexual behavior and consequences, bisexual women have reported worse health outcomes, higher rates of sexually transmitted illnesses (STI), and more intimate partner violence (IPV). In addition, due to fear of discrimination bisexual individuals are less likely to report sexual behavior or concerns to medical professionals, which is also likely impacting their negative physical health outcomes as well (Flanders et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2018). The dual discrimination theme brought forth by binegativity has led to higher rates of violence and victimization for many bisexual individuals (Mereish et al., 2017). Some research has suggested that discrimination leads to isolation that creates an environment of risky sexual behaviors (Molina et al., 2015; Persson et al., 2015). This risky sexual behavior includes a combination of substance use and sexual activity, which has been found to be correlated with higher risk for sexual victimization (Persson et al., 2015).

The presence of monosexism and binegativity in the various spaces that bisexuals frequent can be distressingly common. This can play a role in the ubiquitous nature of stereotypes, mental health outcomes, and overall well-being discussed here; while also potentially limiting, or removing altogether, the disclosure, relationship, and community opportunities bisexuals have (Barringer et al., 2017; Bradford, 2004; Feinstein et al., 2016; Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Molina et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015).

Living as a Bisexual Cisgender Woman

Despite the vast negative consequences of a bisexual identity and internalized binegativity, there are some positive factors that can create a healthier daily life. There has been some evidence that suggests higher social support, acceptance, and self-acceptance combined with outness can improve the various outcomes of bisexual people. In contrast, due to negativity surrounding bisexuality, living openly can increase risk for negative experiences. The following

section will look at three aspects of living as a bisexual cisgender woman, including both positives and negatives of that experience.

Coming Out

Identity disclosure, or coming out, for bisexual individuals is a weighted and unique decision. There are numerous competing entities that can help or hinder the decision. Unlike their LG counterparts, bisexual individuals do not feel that they can rely on their queer peers and have a higher tendency to be "out" in some realms and closeted in others (Barringer et al., 2017). However, Roberts et al. (2015) hypothesized that higher self-acceptance could buffer discrimination and lead to less internalization. Outness has the potential to be protective, dependent on LGBT community social support (Molina et al., 2015). The act of merely being in a relationship can also combat victimization and discrimination that is commonly associated with disclosure (Feinstein et al., 2016). However, disclosure always comes with the risk of rejection and can cease relationship opportunities before they ever begin (Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013).

Relationships

Bisexual women in relationships with a single man have shown higher rates of vulnerability to depressive symptoms and alcohol issues, which is possibly due to higher rates of internalized biphobia stemming from rejection of the LGBT community (Molina et al., 2015). It has also been shown that the potential for antagonism from partners is much higher for bisexuals in relationships, regardless of partner gender, but any attempt at reducing this problem could restrict availability of support resources (Flanders et al., 2016). There has been some evidence to suggest that bisexual women present with higher rates of anxiety problems, likely due to feelings of being "closeted," worries over disclosure, or possible rejection, which may all be higher in relationships with differences in sexual orientation (Feinstein et al., 2016). However, the same

study recorded no significant depression diagnoses and a significant correlation of relationships buffering against potential negative mental health consequences (Feinstein et al., 2016). Starks et al. (2015) found that quality relationships were often related to better sexual and mental health. In general, those in committed relationships (including marriage) and those who are open to sharing aspects of self are less depressed, have higher psychological functioning, and are better able to maintain mental health. Disclosure can also cultivate support from a current partner, which can be a positive mediator for mental health but only if sexual orientation is accepted (Li et al., 2013).

There are various facets that influence the well-being of bisexual women in relationships. Bisexual women show some anxiety related to possible limitations in relationships, being misunderstood by partners, and fears of the overall experience proving to be negative (Flanders et al., 2016). The distinct lack of representation of and communities for bisexuals can cause confusion while attempting to build romantic intimacies (Klesse, 2011). Biphobia is a true concern in terms of the effects on bisexuals' well-being, especially in the context of intimate relationships (Li et al., 2013). Feelings of isolation are likely in those who do not feel supported by their partner, with the possibility of decreased relationship satisfaction leading to increased risk-taking behaviors and disregard for safety (Bradford, 2004; Starks et al., 2015). In contrast, social support is positively associated with influencing the ability to maintain relationships (Starks et al., 2015). Additionally, dedication to and acceptance of a bisexual partner can increase the relationship satisfaction of both parties, with a particularly strong identity creating the possibility for deeper relationships (Bradford, 2004; Reinhardt, 2001).

Community

The discovery of a community, community building, and peer support could have important overall health benefits, while also promoting feelings of relief, strength, and understanding and decreasing everyday stress (Bradford, 2004; Flanders et al., 2016). The support of peers cultivates greater public acceptance, while family acceptance has similar implications for private acceptance (Roberts et al., 2015). The presence of this support has shown "increases in well-being, develop stronger and more positive ties to the bisexual community, develop a positive bisexual identity, and develop coping skills needed to combat monosexism and biphobic messages" (Roberts et al., 2015, p. 558). The existing literature shows a marked impact of binegativity on bisexual individuals, but it also shows the potential for resilience and relationships to encourage the creation of a strong, independent identity.

Identity Development

General Identity Development

As stated in Chapter 1, identity formation is important to adolescence and emerging adulthood (Berk, 2014; Fadjukoff & Kroger, 2016; Kroger, 2002; Morgan, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2005). The process includes constructs of both crisis and commitment, with crisis being troubling and commitment leading to resolve (Berk, 2014; Waterman, 1982). Waterman (1982) stated that due to a lack of operational definitions of identity, many researchers have used the following facets to attempt a definition: a clear sense of self-definition, the extent of self-acceptance, the consideration of a range of identity alternatives, a sense of personal uniqueness, confidence in one's personal future, the existence of activity directed toward the implementation of commitments, and the presence of commitments regarding goals, values, and beliefs. The expectation that this occurs primarily in adolescence has not been supported in various studies, with identity exploration having a significant role in emerging adulthood (Fadjukoff & Kroger,

2016). In fact, there is some evidence that the most notable time of identity formation occurs during college years (Waterman, 1982).

(Cis)Gender Identity Development

As previously mentioned, cisgender describes someone that identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth (APA, 2015; Bussey, 2011; Patton et al., 2016; Tate et al., 2015). Literature in the area of gender identity development has mostly focused on transgender individuals (i.e., those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth), likely due to society's curiosity about those who differ from cisnormativity (Tate et al., 2014). Bilodeau (2009) discussed the concept of "genderism," where infants are automatically assigned and expected to fully participate in their expected gender role. By placing these expectations on children, it is possible that society is oppressing gender exploration and prohibiting the full spectrum of gender expression, gender identity, and more (Bilodeau, 2009; Tate et al., 2014; Tate et al., 2015).

Due to the focus on transgender identity development as transgressive, information about cisgender identity development is not very robust. Instead, theories have been evolved or applied to question whether they will assist in explaining cisgender development (Bussey, 2011; Bussey & Bandura, 2004; Dillon et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016). Research has also looked at aspects of gendered activities in cisgender individuals as a means of testing how these theories may be applicable. For example, Tate and colleagues (2015) discovered that higher self-esteem was found in cisgender individuals engaged in gender typical behaviors, which could further suggest the ways that genderism impacts all gender identities and not just those outside of the norm.

There are two identity theories that have been applicable to discussions about gender identity development. Marcia's (1966) Ego Identity Statuses has been applied to cisgender

identity development and will be discussed later as a way of conceptualizing sexual identity development as well. There are four identity statuses: identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, identity diffusion, and identity achievement (Marcia, 1966). Identity foreclosure in gender identity development would reflect someone that did not explore gender identity and, likely, settled and committed to their gender assigned at birth. This would continue to provide evidence of the harm genderism can cause in gender identity development (Patton et al., 2016; Tate et al., 2014). Identity achievement would describe an individual who took care to explore what their gender identity is and commit to that identity in a meaningful way.

The second theory applicable to this process is Bussey's social-cognitive theory of gender identity development. This theory posits that there are three different, but interrelated, components involved in developing a gender identity: personal, behavioral, and environmental (Bussey, 2011; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Patton et al., 2016). The three components are particularly interwoven when individuals make decisions about how to live out their gender identity. Specifically, the decision to behave in gender atypical ways will interact with environmental components (e.g., transphobic remarks) and personal components (e.g., self-concept or self-perception). It would be important to note how culture and time are crucial to this form of identity development, as well as how depth of identity exploration can give different meanings to personal definitions and expressions of their gender identity (Bussey, 2011).

This area may need more research but, as seen above, there are ways in which we can use existing theories to help explain the phenomenon of gender identity. There are very clearly personal, social, and environmental aspects of creating this type of identity be it cisgender, transgender, or other gender expansive identities (Bussey, 2011; Patton et al., 2016; Tate et al., 2014; Tate et al., 2015). The remaining question for this document will be how does the

development of one's cisgender identity impact or affect an identity that possible falls outside the bounds of societal "genderism" (Bilodeau, 2009; Dillon et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016; Tate et al., 2015).

Sexual (Orientation) Identity Development

There is a unique risk of discrimination and violence that comes with acceptance and openness of an LGB identity (Morgan, 2013; Rosario et al., 2011). There can also be differences in stability of identity in LGB people over time in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts (Morgan, 2013; Rosario et al., 2011; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). There has been some attempt to apply Erikson's identity stages (1963, 1968), and Marcia's (1966) four stages that were developed based on Erikson's, to the process of developing a sexual identity. This process can range from identity achievement, including falling in love with someone of the same sex, and identity foreclosure found in those who have never explored the possibility of same-sex attraction or desire (Konik & Stewart, 2004).

It is critical to differentiate sexual identity and sexual orientation. Sexual identity is an understanding and recognition of one's preferences for sexual behavior, partners, desires, attractions, etc. using specific labels (Katz-Wise, 2015). Sexual orientation is a more stable expression of behavior, a physiological disposition, existing on a continuum and consciously acknowledges the sexual orientation label (Katz-Wise, 2015; Morgan, 2013; Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

The timeline of how and when sexual-minority individuals reach developmental milestones in sexual identity and/or sexual orientation identity development has been evolving in past decades. The processes of identity formation (beginning to explore) and identity integration (formation being applied to daily life) are not inherently separate in their sequencing, which can

lead to the assumption that sexual identity and sexual orientation development occur in diverse ways for the diverse individuals involved (Rosario et al., 2011; Shepler & Perrone-McGovern, 2016). Formation can involve awareness, questioning, and involvement with same-sex partners, while integration can involve engagement with LGBT community, navigating negative societal views, and becoming more open with their unique labels (Konik & Stewart, 2004; Rosario et al., 2011; Shepler & Perrone-McGovern, 2016). Considering that women more often simultaneously develop their identities and intimacy preferences, it could be suggested that gender differences alone could play a factor in this diversity (Johnson et al., 2012). The role of sociocultural changes is also significant, with identity formation occurring earlier with more acceptance and options being available to current youth (Calzo et al., 2011; Morgan, 2013).

Morgan (2013) found three common pathways that mark major milestones for sexual minorities: awareness, recognition and exploration, and coming out. This appears to resemble a version of general identity development discussed previously. Dillon and colleagues (2011) attempted to create a universal model of sexual identity with five statuses: compulsory heterosexuality, active exploration, diffusion, deepening/commitment, and synthesis. This model is specifically presented as flexible and nonlinear, fitting more with the contemporary view that sexual identity is fluid and diverse as a concept (Morgan, 2013).

LGB Models of Identity Development

Classic models

Cass (1979) is the most cited and used model of sexual identity development for lesbians and gay men (Brown, 2002; Calzo et al., 2011; Julian et al., 2014; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Morgan, 2013; Rosario et al., 2011). In many cases, it is the foundation for how contemporary models came to be. It is considered a stage-sequential model and historically contained six total

stages, with one pre-stage added later (Calzo et al., 2011; Cass, 1984; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). The six stages are identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Cass, 1984). It is expected that these stages occur in a specific order, with tasks that need completed in order to move to the next one (Calzo et al., 2011; Julian et al., 2014; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Morgan, 2013). Despite its foundational nature, recent critiques have stemmed from limitations of linear models, focusing only on LG individuals, inadequacy in addressing gender differences, and lack of information about intersectionality with other identities (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

Contemporary models

The emphasis placed on Cass's (1979) model of sexual orientation identity development has led to an underrepresentation of sexual fluidity, unique individual experience, and the influence of other identities (Farr et al., 2014; Julian et al., 2014; Morgan, 2013). More contemporary theorists have seen the detriment stage models have caused to our knowledge of how identity naturally unfolds in a manner that does not always follow specific stages or steps (Morgan, 2013; Wilde, 2014). It is possible that some of these models could be applied to bisexual individuals. However, they are not specific to, or sometimes do not include the bisexual experience. Therefore, they will be included in this section instead of within the discussion of bisexual identity development, specifically.

Ritch Savin-Williams (2005) reconceptualized how sexuality development occurs in adolescence. Savin-Williams suggested a move from models to trajectories, stemming from the belief that life is too chaotic for stages to be moved through in a linear sense. The approach is focused on adolescence, fitting with Erikson's (1963, 1968) idea that identity development is the focus of that time period. Four basic tenets are laid out to help explain the trajectory of

adolescent sexual identity development (Savin-Williams, 2005). First, adolescents with same-sex attractions are not different from other adolescents. The second tenet proposes that differences found between them are likely caused by societal pressures and differing psychological development due to that issue. Third, just as heterosexual adolescents differ in developmental trajectory, so do queer adolescents. The reduction of same sex attracted teenagers is ignorant of the other identities they hold and experiences they have, independent of their sexual identity. And finally, all humans differ in what trajectory their development takes because of our unique lives. However, this developmental framework is not specific to bisexual individuals.

Julian et al. (2014) have lent crucial knowledge to specific areas of female sexual fluidity. They followed the trend toward fluid frameworks and interviewed non-heterosexual women in order to gain insight into the process of their identity formation. The authors identified four themes in their exploration: feeling different, lack of information, cultural context, and relational context. Participants differed in their realities but the process through which they managed their sexuality was similarly shrouded in discrimination and fear. Julian and colleagues (2014) also pushed for future research to focus on the role of gender identity in sexual identity development, citing a lack of information about how that intersection may influence other identities and developmental trajectories.

Factors Involved with LGB Identity Development

As with most identities and their formation, they do not occur in a vacuum. There are multiple aspects that influence decision making, impact relationships, and help or hurt their feelings of authenticity (Calzo et al., 2011; Farr et al., 2014; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Morgan, 2013). The decision to come out to the world, or specific parts of it, is a uniquely difficult choice for queer individuals. Unsurprisingly, it would be necessary to have some level of social support

or community involvement during that process. Finally, this section will discuss the impact of queer individuals finding media representation and how that influences their identity development.

Identity Disclosure

As discussed in Cass's (1979) model, coming out, or identity disclosure, is considered a crucial step in developing a sexual minority identity. The act of coming out appears to be the apex for most sexual orientation identity stage models, stating that it points to a person fully integrating their identity with the rest of their world (Calzo et al., 2011; Cass, 1979; Morgan, 2013). More recently, research has found that younger generations are differing from their older counterparts. They tend to fall within identity-centered developmental trajectories, as opposed to behavior-centered (Calzo et al., 2011). This means that, in contrast from previous generations, younger sexual minority individuals are no longer waiting to identify as such until they have had romantic, sexual, or intimate experiences with a same-sex individual. In other words, the youth of today are no longer dependent on specific acts to feel comfortable coming out (Calzo et al., 2011).

Regardless of whether one ascribes to stage models or fluid frameworks, identity disclosure has been found to be a significant portion of the developmental process. The decision to do so often hinges on the person's perceived amount of support, religious beliefs, contact with other sexual minority individuals, and other issues concerning their personal views or environmental factors (Barringer et al., 2017; Brewster et al., 2016; Jackson & Mohr, 2016, Riggle et al., 2017). There are consequences for both identity disclosure and concealment of identity. Concealment, a person's decision to actively avoid disclosing their identity, has been found to be related to higher rates of depression and anxiety (Jackson & Mohr, 2016). In a

different vein, disclosure can open a person up to more discrimination and violence from an unwelcoming society (Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Riggle et al., 2017). Within this dichotomy, there is the belief that coming out is a continual process that varies from person to situation (Levitt et al., 2016). As a queer individual, there are many factors that influence the decision to disclose their identity.

Community Involvement

Often, decisions about coming out rely on the amount of support the individual feels, whether from friends, family, church, or the LGBT community. Therefore, when family, church, and friends are unsupportive of their identities, they often turn to other queer individuals and community. It is not surprising that queer individuals would assume that other queer individuals would support them. However, this experience can be different for bisexual individuals, considering the issue of dual discrimination (Dyar et al., 2015). In one study, a lack of visible bisexual-specific community was a concern for bisexual individuals feelings of support and increased their negative psychosocial outcomes (McCann et al., 2021).

Levitt et al. (2016) completed a qualitative study that analyzed resiliency and choices for queer individuals, finding that community involvement was a protective factor for many in terms of minority stress, depression, and anxiety. Religious communities have had varied impacts on the wellbeing of queer individuals, stemming from the common religious belief that homosexuality is a sin (Brewster et al., 2016). However, positive religious coping was found to be a means of increasing positive psychological outcomes (Brewster et al., 2016). Sometimes, community involvement can be online and centered on discussing different media role models that help them discover what it means to be queer (Bond, 2014; Craig et al., 2015).

Media and Role Models

Historically, LGBTQ+ characters were either wholly ignored on television, depicted in a negative way, or used as a joke, device, or token for some feigned diversity without opening the character beyond their sexuality (Bond & Compton, 2015; Bond, 2014; Craig et al., 2015; Johnson, 2016). With these depictions in mind, one can begin to question what role models are available to queer youth. In a developmental sense, society understands that positive role models are important for youth. They strive to find someone to look up to. They yearn for role models, community, and concrete ways to make important decisions, often looking to family members or celebrities. However, that process can be a trying one if you are different from the majority of people around you. Three main aspects of positive representation have been found that could dramatically improve the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals (Bond, 2014; Craig et al., 2015; Johnson, 2016). The presence of positive and realistic fictional role models was found to foster self-acceptance, assist in information gathering and education of issues, and a sense of community within LGBTQ+ circles, and in some cases outside of them. However, with that concept in mind, and next to the historical depiction of LGBTQ+ characters on television, we might ask what role models LGBTQ+ individuals can find within their communities. A lack of role models, representation, and overall validation as members of society can have major implications on mental health and well-being (Bond, 2014; Bond & Compton, 2015; Craig et al., 2015; Johnson, 2016).

There are still issues in representation of LGBTQ+ characters, similarly to representations of race and gender. But that has been evolving over the years, and with it a sense of acceptance from society and a boost of strength for those who struggled for that acceptance. We are moving away from the current systemic annihilation of LGBTQ+ invisibility and influencing a change (Bond & Compton, 2015). In other words, the media is beginning to tell us

to think about LGBTQ+ issues. We are finally at an age where we can find many more fleshed out and contributing LGBTQ+ characters on television, whether on broadcast, cable, or streaming platforms, which has promising value for LGBTQ+ individuals (Bond, 2014; Craig et al., 2015; GLAAD, 2019; Johnson, 2016).

Critique of Conflation of LGB Identities

Most contemporary models of sexual orientation identity development are dependent on gay men's retrospective recall of their developmental process, which would not account for gender differences or sexual orientation differences (Julian et al., 2014; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). The vast majority are also dependent on sequential stages, with only some more recent models or frameworks emphasizing dynamic or fluid approaches to sexual identity development (Calzo et al., 2011; Farr et al., 2014; Galupo et al., 2015; Julian et al., 2014; Morgan, 2013; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). This is important due to the general consensus that female sexuality and bisexuality are more fluid than male sexuality or lesbian and gay individuals (Calzo et al., 2011; Farr et al., 2014; Galupo et al., 2015; Julian et al., 2014; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Morgan, 2013; Thompson & Morgan, 2008; Wilde, 2014). Recently, there have been calls for research to focus on bisexual identity formation as a separate process from LG identity development (Wandrey et al., 2015). Considering what is known about cisgender women and bisexuality, it is not surprising that conventional models are not an adequate means of outlining their identity development (Farr et al., 2014; Julian et al., 2014; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Morgan, 2013).

Bisexual Identity Development

Classic Models

Like LG development models, early bisexuality models also struggled with the desire to depend upon stage models. Weinberg et al. (1994) proposed that bisexual identity development consisted of four stages: initial confusion, finding and applying the label, settling into the identity, and continued uncertainty. There were a range of experiences explained within each stage of development, including feeling the need to be either straight or gay, pressure or encouragement to self-identity, acceptance of their chosen identity, and a lack of support lending to prolonged confusion despite acceptance. Brown (2002) reconstructed this theory of development by keeping the first three stages and replacing the fourth stage with Identity Maintenance to focus more on the resiliency within uncertainty, rather than the uncertainty itself. The model also attempted to differentiate between the experiences of bisexual men and bisexual women. There was some emphasis on the role of community, or lack thereof, and how it can lend to more confusion, less self-acceptance, and continued confusion over their place in any social hierarchy (Brown, 2002).

Contemporary Models

The research on bisexual identity development is scant in the existing literature, but there are a few individuals who have put forth different options that may be salient to the current study. For instance, Mary Bradford has dedicated her research career to working with bisexual individuals, specifically bisexual women (Bradford, 2004, 2006, 2011). Wandrey et al. (2015) has also examined the process of coming out for bisexual women as a model for identity development.

Bradford (2004) posits that bisexual identity development involves "questioning one's reality, inventing one's identity, and maintaining that identity" (p. 19-20), which tend to occur in the context of numerous stressors. This is not dissimilar to Weinberg et al. (1994) or Brown's

(2002) theories of bisexual development. However, Bradford (2004) specifically stated differences in the theories presented. She had found that a significant portion of her participants began their bisexual journey by identifying as homosexual, differing from the proposal of the other theorists that development is predicated on identification as heterosexual. There was also a difference in definition cultivation. The previous two theories mostly discussed identities being claimed via cultural availability, while this theory found that bisexuals benefit the most from trusting their reality and structuring it to fit their unique experience. Bradford (2004) discovered that maintaining a bisexual identity was often done through becoming a role model for other individuals struggling with their journey, as well as creating or joining bisexual communities separate from general LGBT spaces. Bradford (2004) also found high levels of self-reliance, openness, and enrichment in her cohort of self-identified bisexuals. These aspects cultivated strength, empathy toward the oppressed, and recognition of their potential.

Farr et al. (2014) rejected the idea of innate sexuality, stating that female sexuality, in particular, "unfolds through multiple developmental pathways, has multiple manifestations, and may have multiple determinants," (p. 1477). The trajectory of female sexuality is more susceptible to change, based on changes in the lives of these women. The authors present an argument that women's sexuality is conceptually different from men's sexuality based on the dynamic and fluid nature of their personal processes (Diamond, 2008; Farr et al., 2014). Focusing on the debate about distinction between lesbian and bisexual women, the research done was hoping to discover how fluidity is enacted among differently identified women and whether a "core bisexual orientation" exists (Farr et al., 2014, p. 1480). Results found that a bisexual "core" identity does exist, as well as lesbian and fluid identities, with some evidence that changes in attraction, desires, and behavior do not retract from said identities. Therefore, the

authors concluded that female same-sex sexuality involves some manner of plasticity not found in male sexuality.

Like Farr et al. (2014), Jenée Wilde (2014) proposed a framework for bisexual desires that attempted to take a dimensional approach to sexuality. The proposed framework hoped to expand sexuality in a way that became inclusive to any and all sexual identities that do not fit within the binary conception that currently dominates, including bisexuality and non-monogamy. Wilde (2014) posited four categories: monophilic monosexuals, monophilic bisexuals, polyphilic monosexuals, and polyphilic bisexuals. The different categories represent the orientation of desires for number of partners and preferred gender of said partners. It also provides some language for different identities that may struggle to find comfort in existing labels that do not encompass the full range of their experiences. A secondary purpose of this framework was to reorganize how gender is recognized in sexual orientation and preferences and, by not requiring a defined gender in defining personal sexuality, there is no longer a focus on binary constructions (Wilde, 2014).

Wandrey et al. (2015) created a model of bisexual identity development that is focused on the process of coming out and exclusively on developing a public identity. The authors discovered eight different themes concerning coming out as a young bisexual woman in the interviews they conducted. The first was the presence of homophobia and biphobia, fitting with the previous sections discussed in this review. The second theme was centered on different labels the women would use to avoid the impact of biphobia. Participants also spoke about the performative persona attached to bisexual women by heterosexual men, specifically in university settings. Assessment of acceptance in both LG and heterosexual spaces was the fourth theme, which stemmed from fear of rejection from either or both communities. Approaching coming out

casually was a preference for many of the participants, with many of them feeling that being laidback about their identities invited less discrimination. The sixth theme was the concept of "passing" as either gay or straight as a means of avoiding identity disclosure or waiting until having a partner of a certain gender to disclose. The participants also had a tendency to speak about bisexuality as "partially or incompletely homosexual," (Wandrey et al., 2015, p. 209). The final theme was the outright refusal to disclose their identities. The reasons for this refusal varied but included protest in reaction to heterosexuals having no need to disclose, belief that sexual orientation is irrelevant, and the potential costs of disclosure. Altogether, the study showcased the expansive constructs and influences that impact bisexual women and their personal choice to disclose their sexual orientation to those around them.

Factors of Bisexual Identity Development

What We Do Know

Most research surrounding bisexuality and bisexual identity development focuses on the negative aspects of the process, including discrimination, violence, and poor mental health outcomes (Bradford, 2004; Brown, 2002; Brownfield et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2014). The lack of research investigating positive outcomes or aspects of bisexuality can be perceived as stigmatizing in and of itself, with the experience of bisexuals being reduced to only the things that can go wrong while they explore who they are and who they love. However, some research has found heightened insight or awareness, ability to love without concern for biology or gender, and freedom of sexual expression and societal labels (Rostosky et al., 2010). Self-acceptance and outness have been found to be affirming, likely due to feeling more pride leading to higher likelihood of being out and, conversely, being out can cultivate more pride in oneself (Paul et al., 2014).

In addition, consistent disclosure of sexual orientation is something inherently unique to bisexuals due to assumptions made based on partner gender (Barringer et al., 2017; Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Riggle et al., 2017). This phenomenon typically occurs within monosexist spaces lending to a certain level of caution when making disclosure decisions (Barringer et al., 2017; Bradford, 2004; Li et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015) and can often feel awkward or impossible (Flanders et al., 2016; Molina et al., 2015). If disclosure is met with biphobia, bisexuals are likely to react with feelings of rejection and threat (Roberts et al., 2015).

What We Do Not Know

At the time of this literature review, there is no published model or framework that focuses specifically on self-identified bisexual cisgender women's identity development in the realm of the intersection of their gender identity and sexual orientation. The movement toward fluid and dynamic approaches is an inclusive, contemporary answer to rejecting previous dichotomized and rigid identity development models. The growing understanding of the differences between innate, biological processes and evolving societal constructs (i.e., sex vs. gender) have been integral to sexuality research. With that being said, in the case of bisexual identity development and intersectionality of gender and bisexual orientation, many questions still need to be answered about how these issues impact and shape individuals.

Many of these fluid and dynamic models do not differentiate differences between identities within the construct of female same-sex sexuality (Julian et al., 2014). This intertwining could cause a different issue of conflation from the predominant problem with LGB models discussed earlier. Plurisexual identities (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer) are being conflated into similar identity formation experiences without fully addressing the potential differences they may have in identity development (Flanders et al., 2017; Galupo et al., 2015).

Hopefully, with this addition to the literature, more models can be proposed specifically for those who identify with other plurisexual labels such as pansexual and queer.

In relation to the upswing in fluid sexuality frameworks, there is a lack of research on how the intersection of sexual orientation and gender influences identity development. There has been a call for research to remedy this gap in the literature, with a goal of narrowing this gap in the literature and gaining more knowledge around this unique amalgamation of identities (Wandrey et al., 2015; Julian et al., 2014). Due to this, the current study will attempt to provide a model or framework specifically for self-identified bisexual cisgender women.

Theoretical Framework

Queer theory and feminist theory are useful ways of considering the current study and how it should be situated, created, and carried out. The discussion on queer theory will focus on the way bisexuality has been erased in the conception of demolishing the binary, while acknowledging how queer theory fits in the current study. The section on feminist theory will focus more heavily on how feminist theory informs qualitative research, specifically in terms of interviewing and data collection.

Queer Theory

Queer theory began to gain traction in the 1980s due to a growing need for queer politics and liberation concerns (Monro, 2015). The term finds its origin in the feminist work of Teresa de Lauretis (1991), where she challenged others to rethink their conceptualizations of sexuality. Queer theory wishes to avoid essentialist ways of thinking about how identities develop and acknowledges the social construction of them (Callis, 2009; Levy & Johnson, 2011). This theory is interested in contesting concrete definitions of sexuality, as well as the construct of heteronormativity that delineates positive and negative sexualities. The deconstruction of

binaries is conceptualized as creating space for equality to grow (Jagose, 1996/2009). The reliance on binary, essentialist identities arose from necessity during gay liberation movements (Butler, 1993; Cohen, 1997; Gammon & Isgro, 2006; Winnubst, 2012). The essentialism needed for queer politics has pushed the view of bisexuality into non-existence, instability, and further marginalization (Angelides, 2006; Gammon & Isgro, 2006; Gurevich et al., 2012).

The erasure, and subsequent invisibility, of bisexual identities in queer theory and queer research may stem from the tendency for queer politics to conflate queer notions as one side, with heterosexuality on the other side (Angelides, 2006; Cohen, 1997). The identities not within the monosexual framework (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, etc.) are inevitably absorbed into an all-encompassing queer label (Cohen, 1997). However, could that conflation relate to the desire for queer theory to deconstruct a binary? Angelides (2001, 2006) does not believe that such a deconstruction can occur without acknowledgement of the role of the third item in her trinary. In other words, queer theory has ignored the role that bisexuality has played in the construction of the very binary they wish to deconstruct (Angelides, 2006). Therefore, it could be suggested that queer theory is at a large disadvantage for achieving their goal.

The current study does look to deconstruct the queer binary, especially in terms of defining bisexuality and expanding our view on what differing journeys can appear to be. However, by merely stating that bisexuality is the focus of the model of identity development, I have rejected what queer theory proposes in terms of viewing the binary as a concept to be deconstructed and identity categories as controlling and unable to provide freedom of evolvement (Angelides, 2006; Callis, 2009; Cohen, 1997; Gammon & Isgro, 2006; Gamson, 1995; Seidman, 1994). But that rejection can become less important if this study can look at

"multiple, fluid desires," and "an analysis of bisexuality that centres bisexual people's experiences" (Monro, 2015, p. 47).

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory has been critical of "assumptions, biases, and consequences of androcentric philosophies and practices" since the 18th century and understands the importance of intersectionality in the realm of gender inequality (Brisolara, 2014, p. 4). Intersectionality in reference to race, sexual orientation, disability, and more helps to inform novel lived experiences often barred from traditional means of methodology (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Freeman, 2019). Research that comes from a feminist framework actively "*disrupts* traditional ways of knowing to create rich new meanings" by questioning hierarchical standards and power differentials (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 4).

The act of conducting research within a feminist framework does require a level of reflexivity and positionality, as well as a relational viewpoint of knowledge (Brisolara, 2014; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Freeman, 2019). Reflexivity and positionality are intertwined concepts that highlights the personal role of the researcher, situates her socially, and "complicates the question" of how methodology is conceptualized (Freeman, 2019, p. 9). The idea of reflexivity stems from the relational nature of feminist theory and how it challenges patriarchal concepts of information (Brisolara, 2014; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Freeman, 2019; Hesse-Biber, 2012). It also challenges researchers to be reflexive thinkers about how their identities will impact the work they are doing (Brisolara, 2014). Their positionality (personal identities) will undoubtedly affect the lens through which they view the stories they hear, which is not inherently positive or negative but a concept that balances power by plainly stating it (DeVault & Gross, 2012).

Relatedly, there is an argument in feminist theory that there is no generalizable truth and no unifying theory, only concerns for the acknowledgement of differences among people and the promotion of overall well-being (Brisolara, 2014; DeVault & Gross, 2012). Interviews are "hyperpersonal," informed by the researcher, and partial (Freeman, 2019, p. 9). The mere concept of knowledge is dependent on cultural standpoints, societal views, and comfort with information being shared with the researcher (Brisolara, DeVault & Gross, 2012). DeVault and Gross remind us that "researchers need to recognize that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, that telling requires a listener and that the listening shapes the account as well as the telling" (2012, p. 9).

Queer Theory and Feminist Theory, Combined

Overall, the combination of queer and feminist frameworks allows gender to be viewed through a queer lens and queer identities to be viewed through a feminist lens and the origins of queer theory can be attributed to feminist theory (Jagose, 2009; Marinucci, 2016). Both are concerned with postmodern, poststructural, and critical views of how information is gained, thought of, and professed as truth (Angelides, 2006; Brisolara, 2014; Marinucci, 2016). They both view gender and sexuality as "socially constructed and historically situated" and are heavily concerned with the politics of these identities, including discrimination and oppression (Brisolara, 2014, p. 13). By focusing on bisexuality in women, the current study can deconstruct the binary and challenge patriarchal concepts of womanhood and sexuality while acknowledging how those concepts have impacted their journeys throughout their lives. The commonalities of empowerment, critical analysis of binaries, and relationships being important make these theories fit together well and lends a seemingly appropriate view of research within this unique and specific population.

Summary

The classic models of bisexual identity development are dependent on stages and their completion, typically in a specific order. These models do not appear to create space for fluidity and flexibility, which we know to be important aspects of female sexuality (Diamond, 2008). Cisgender identity development may be dependent on aspects of personal, behavioral, and environmental issues that may impact how bisexual cisgender women navigate and explore both identities throughout their lives. Based on existing literature, it appears that environmental concerns (e.g., binegativity, monosexism) can heavily influence personal concerns (e.g., mental health outcomes, internalized binegativity, etc.). The way these aspects of self and environment can interact, with a tendency toward fluidity in women's sexuality, the application of more contemporary, dynamic models of identity development are seemingly better equipped to explore the ways in which these identities are formed. The present study aimed to look at these common experiences, gaps in the literature, and hear from the source how these identities interweave, interact, and impact each other.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Method

The lack of research surrounding a bisexual identity development model justified the need for a grounded theory study to be completed. In order to maintain an IRB appropriate study, the systematic style developed by Corbin and Strauss (2015) was utilized for the purpose of having more structure. The grounded theory approach was useful due to the potentially outdated existing research models that apply to both men and women no longer adequately informing how these identities develop (Bradford, 2004; Brown, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Weinberg et al., 1994).

This chapter will cover what questions this research wanted to answer, how the research was designed, who was included in the sample, how data was collected and analyzed, what was done to garner valid results, and how participants were protected. The research questions centered on the experience of being a bisexual cisgender woman, how that came to be, and what it meant for other identities and aspects of their lives. These questions informed themes that fostered the creation of a model, which was done using the tenets of grounded theory qualitative research methods. The research questions were used to create a semi-structured interview that was conducted with women who met inclusion criteria and consented to completing and recording an interview with the researcher. Themes from the interviews were coded and used to develop a model of identity development. During this process, the researcher was involved in multiple processes that controlled for external and internal threats to validity of the results gathered by the interviews, as well as ethical standards for confidentiality and safety of participants. There will be a short discussion about the assumptions made by the research and limitations that might exist based on the current criteria used, setting, and methodology.

Research Questions and/or Hypotheses

Grounded theory focuses on research questions that will create a hypothesis, rather than informing various hypotheses posited prior to data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The core question that this study asked is *what is the process by which bisexual cisgender women develop their sexual identities?* In relation to this question, the current study explored how bisexual identities developed with their female identity. These two constructs of sexual orientation and gender identity were compared to answer how they might affect one another. The study also analyzed how these identities impacted the relational lives and personal views of these women. The existence of a difference between bisexual and LG sexual orientation development will also be discussed. All these questions served to create themes that were used to form the model proposed.

As previously discussed, the lack of research discussing bisexual identity development and conflation of experiences with the LG community has led to a gap in the literature and subtle or overt erasure in what literature does exist. The research questions proposed in the current study aimed to fill in the gap and prevent further erasure, by providing a model to help explain bisexual cisgender women's experiences developing their identities. In addition, time was spent exploring similarities and differences in their lives compared to the LG community they are often enmeshed within.

Research Design

The current study was qualitative in nature, specifically using grounded theory. Qualitative methods have been determined to be the best means of gathering information in an area of research that has been routinely ignored or undervalued, while also empowering participants to answer questions in their own unique ways. Grounded theory was used to create the proposed model, which was chosen due to its use in building theories surrounding unknown

experiences. Grounded theory is used to "generate or discover a theory" that explains a particular process, such as identity development (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 82). By using the systematic approach of Corbin and Strauss (2015), the model attempted to bridge both subjective experience and objective commonalities among and between the participants.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the study also utilized both queer and feminist theory as a framework for participant interactions, data analysis, and model creation. The justification for these theories stem from the population being studied (i.e., bisexual cisgender women), as well as the desire to approach the research in a relational and liberating manner. Queer theory is interested in the "deconstruction of the naturalized binary" that can often become a barrier in research with bisexual individuals who, often, do not adhere to a binary view of sexuality (Callis, 2009, p. 214). Therefore, this study will attempt to provide space for participants to expand on their own truths of sexuality and gender within the context of their personal experiences.

The space provided to have these conversations is rooted in feminist theory and its dedication to equity and empowerment within research. This research does strive to find justice for those left out of queer and feminist discussions and empower them to use their stories and experiences to develop a model that will assist this community further. The importance of utilizing feminist theory is reflected in the commitment to treating each interaction with participants as an embodiment of how similar, different, and significant each of their experiences are within a cultural and constructed context (Hesse-Biber, 2012). How the research followed these frameworks in terms of data collection and analysis will be covered in the validity section of this chapter.

Population and Sample

Using criterion sampling, a demographic information form was completed that located individuals who met inclusion criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The inclusion criteria were cisgender women above the age of 18, who self-identify as bisexual, speak and understand written English, and are willing to be recorded. There is no indication in the literature that an age ceiling is beneficial to answer the research questions (Bradford, 2004; Brewster & Moradi, 2010). Participants were "out" in some capacity for at least one year, to gather information on how a bisexual identity can affect their lives socially and romantically. This included being out to siblings and friends, but not parents, or other combinations. This study did not require that participants be fully "out" to all of the individuals in their lives.

Demographically, there was no other exclusion criteria beyond the age, sexual orientation, gender identity, language fluency, and "outness" of the women who participated to be inclusive of what diversity could be present in such a population. If an individual met inclusion criteria and decided they wanted to be part of the study, they were sent basic information on the study being conducted and acknowledgement that I would contact them to schedule an appointment for the interview. For grounded theory, the goal for sample size is typically 20-30 participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). However, the final number of participants is dependent on when theoretical saturation has been met, fitting with the practicality of my ability to recruit participants in the time given to complete the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Procedures

To create this model of identity development, interviews with self-identified bisexual cisgender women were required. The recruitment process included announcements on listservs, social media sites, and flyers placed in bisexual and LGBTQ+ virtual spaces. A website created

by me was provided for the purpose of recruitment, information about the study and researcher, contact information, and resources for potential distress.

In-depth virtual interviews were completed and recorded with bisexual women who met inclusion criteria stated in the previous section, with each interview ranging from 30 minutes to two hours. Interviews were semi-structured in order to encourage both robust answers on the core questions and allowed room for follow-up questions that sometimes differed from participant to participant. Interviews were influenced by the original research question but also left room for novel ideas and themes to emerge from the unique experiences of the women who participated.

Participants completed virtual interviews via Zoom, an online video communication platform, allowing long distance interviews, assisting those with difficulties scheduling an appointment or leaving their homes. Zoom was chosen due to it meeting security requirements for research confidentiality. I conducted interviews from my residence, a private location. The location of virtual interviews was decided by participants, but I suggested a similar environment to the participants. Before the interview began, I gave the participants a demographic questionnaire as a means of ensuring eligibility for the study and gathering information about different individual aspects of the participants. The questionnaire included name, pronouns, age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation label(s), education, socioeconomic status, geographic location and type (i.e., urban, suburban, rural), religion/spirituality, and how long they have been "out." After eligibility was confirmed, verbal informed consent was completed with each participant, in which they also consented to being recorded for the purpose of transcribing the interview. Included in the conversation about informed consent, I disclosed my identity as a bisexual cisgender woman. At this time, participants were invited to address any questions or

concerns about the information provided. After informed consent was gained, I began recording and initiated the interview.

A debriefing procedure was implemented after the interviews were conducted. They were given the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the research. They also received an email that included relevant information about the study. The handout contained my contact information, the research website address link, therapy and counseling resources, avenues by which they could receive information about conclusions and results, and a reminder that I may need to contact them during my coding process. This information was also verbally conveyed at the end of the interview process.

Instrumentation

The only tools used for this study were the demographic information form and the semi-structured interview. The demographic information form was used to confirm that all participants met inclusion criteria, while also allowing for possible exploration of differences in responses based on demographic information. The semi-structured interview was an integral tool that applied the research questions to the creation of the model developed. The interviews were recorded, and those audio files were transcribed and coded.

As the researcher, I took certain steps to ensure that I am controlling for biases that I carry. As a bisexual woman, it was important to not let my own experience of identity development unduly influence the participants' lived experience. The practice of bracketing was used to decrease any potential influence I may have on participants. I also kept a reflective journal and utilized a variety of validity protection procedures to maintain the best potential space for objectivity on my part.

Data Processing

The interviews were continuously organized and combined with memos made by the researcher. This kept data easily accessible, but the memoing also showed the process by which any evolvement occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). During the organization, categories began to be identified and saturated (open coding). Once the categories were fully saturated, I found one category to become the central phenomenon of interest. After the central phenomenon was pinpointed, a deeper investigation of how the other categories related to it was necessary (axial coding). The central category was then interwoven with its related subcategories to create a story, which is what eventually became the theoretical model of bisexual women's sexual orientation identity development (selective coding). This act of coding will be visually represented in a diagram and depicted with a thorough discussion of the different tenets within (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). That model was then used to propose a potential theory of bisexual identity development in cisgender women. The process of model development with the data collected will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Validity, Researcher Background, and Bias

In addition to procedures mentioned previously, there were many processes put in place to ensure validity in this study. Bracketing, memoing, and keeping a reflective journal are ways that I ensured that validity was not threatened by my own biases and human error. Bracketing is typically a feature of phenomenological research and involves acknowledging personal experiences to better equip researchers to look at data without undue influence from their own lives (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). However, due to my identification as a bisexual cisgender woman, as well as other identities discussed by participants, this process felt particularly necessary in my study. My own positionality inevitably interacted with the results and likely influenced how interviews were conducted. I did disclose my identities in both my website and at

the beginning of interviews. During interviews, I refrained from sharing more than empathy with participants' stories, avoiding providing personal anecdotes that may have derailed interview progression. Memoing is attributed to grounded theory studies. This is the process by which I began developing the theory as data was collected and analyzed and assisted me in mapping out how the data evolved as each interview was conducted (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). The bracketing process also occurred throughout my memoing process. After each interview, I would record all notes and thoughts about emerging themes and would then go back through and assess those notes for any evidence of bias stemming from my own experiences. The reflective journal was used as a means of expressing biased thoughts and looking at how those thoughts may have impacted the results I found. This journal was also used to analyze reflexivity and ponder how power dynamics were potentially influencing my data, despite my attempts to lessen this difference between researcher and participant. The combination of these methods were put in place due to my theoretical frameworks of queer and feminist theory (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Gammon & Isgro, 2006).

The following procedures also prevented validity issues, while also addressing internal and external validity concerns. Before recruitment began, the interview questions were examined by advisors and peers to ensure they were easily understood, maintained focus on the research questions, and any other issues. During the coding process, data was reviewed and debriefed with advisors and peers. Checkpoint lists for methodological consistency and applicability were utilized consistently to maintain constant evaluation of the study as it went through each stage (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Assumptions

In research, there are multiple assumptions made by researchers that can influence their findings. One of those assumptions is the belief that the methodology chosen is the optimal means to answer their research questions. In this case, the proposal of a theoretical model for identity development fits within the parameters of grounded theory. There was also an inherent assumption when conducting interviews that participants are answering openly and honestly. This assumption should be kept in mind in following chapters.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that could be encountered while conducting this study. Most of the participants will likely be from the midwestern portion of the United States, creating a possible limitation to the geographic generalizability of the results. Similarly, the research will be conducted in an urban area, possibly leaving out participants who live in rural or suburban regions. The age restriction could lead to missing information about the state of sexual orientation and gender identity development in childhood and adolescence, with data collected in that area stemming from retrospective recall of individuals no longer in those developmental periods. There could also be an unforeseeable difference between in-person and virtual interviews.

Ethical Assurances

This study was conducted with IRB approval. The study followed IRB policies and direction. This was done to protect both researchers and participants, minimizing risk to both parties. The informed consent provided to participants contained relevant information about the study, what was expected of participants, how their information and recordings were collected and protected, and included explicit allowance of withdrawal at any time during their participation. It included the necessary criteria for informed consent laid out by the American

Psychological Association's [APA] Code of Ethics (2017). To the best of my ability, I ensured that participants did not feel pressured to remain in the study by accepting both verbal and written withdrawal.

Prior to virtual interviews, I ensured that the participant felt comfortable in their space to conduct the interview. Once I met with the interviewee, I covered informed consent verbally, including consent for recording. After informed consent was confirmed, I began recording. During this process, I also disclosed my own bisexuality. This was done as a means of avoiding deception, increasing rapport, and hopefully, preventing the participants from censoring their language for someone they may have assumed was heterosexual. It was also an attempt to minimize harm. For example, a discussion about their bisexual journey could have been harder with someone that was LG or heterosexual due to the high level of biphobia that bisexuals experience from both of those populations (Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Roberts et al., 2015).

Participants in this study were confidential, not anonymous, due to my awareness of their identities. Confidentiality was protected by using pseudonyms in the final product and within data collection materials. The recordings of the interviews were kept in a locked folder on my personal computer, with each recording labeled with the participants' given pseudonym. After transcription, the interview recordings were deleted. In a different locked folder, I maintained a master list that contained the participants' legal names and demographic information. These folders were backed up onto a personal external hard drive that was kept in a locked file cabinet at my residence. This external hard drive was encrypted, with the password contained in a password protected document on my personal computer and cellular phone. The transcriptions of the interviews, along with my memos, were kept with each participant recording in the

corresponding locked folder. The transcriptions only refer to the participants by their pseudonym. To better organize the data, I printed them for my personal use. The print outs were stored in the same locked file cabinet as the back-up hard drive. Data gathered from this study will be stored for five years. After that time has passed, the data will be destroyed in a manner that complies with the ethics code (APA, 2017).

Summary

The current study is qualitative in nature, using grounded theory to develop a model of identity development in bisexual cisgender women. Both sexual orientation and gender identity were explored and evaluated to better understand this population. This exploration and evaluation came to fruition by virtually interviewing individuals who identified as bisexual, cisgender adult women with a select set of core questions. Those interviews were coded and analyzed to create the identity development model that showcased a unique identity development trajectory.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, the data found within the qualitative interviews will be presented. The demographic information for each participant will be discussed. Bisexual identity development for cisgender women will be outlined using three themes of external experiences, two themes of internal experiences, and how those factors combine for identity formation, which will lead into a discussion of the developmental dynamic model. Themes were identified by coding topics that all 12 participants discussed. Subthemes were identified by coding how those themes were discussed and could range from four to 12 participants. The way in which subthemes differed for participants will be discussed further in each section of this chapter.

Overall, participants spoke about how their external environment influenced their lived experience of being a bisexual woman and how that impacted their inner feelings about those identities. They discussed important milestones in their journeys, including label discovery and adoption, rejection of gender norms, how important representation can be, and what these identities have provided to their sense of self, their view of others, and perspective on the world at large.

Participant Demographics

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 individuals. All 12 were bisexual, cisgender females. Participants ranged in age from 21-50 (M=28; SD=8.1). Many participants originated from the Midwest region of the United States, with two participants from the South and two participants from the East Coast. One participant identified as African American, one identified as Hispanic/Caucasian, and the remaining participants identified as White/Caucasian. Their education levels ranged from high school diploma to doctoral student and were diverse in terms of socioeconomic status. Atheism, agnosticism, or no religion was the dominant religious

identity, with one participant identifying as pagan and another identifying as a Protestant Christian. Table 1 shows the pseudonyms that will be used for each participant and their basic demographic information.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation	Years "Out"
Ella	29	Hispanic/Caucasian	Bisexual	3-4
Lucy	24	White/French	Bisexual	5.5
Amy	24	White	Bisexual	4-6
Poppy	23	White	Bisexual or Pansexual	10
Tessa	23	White	Bisexual	10
Allison	30	African American	Bisexual	8
June	21	White	Bisexual; Queer; Bigray/demisexual	2.5
Riley	21	White	Bisexual	3-4
Emma	26	White	Bisexual	8
Charlotte	50	White	Bisexual	20+
Luna	34	White	Bisexual	17
Rose	31	White	Bisexual; demisexual; heteroromantic	10

External Experiences

There were three external experiences found throughout the interviews conducted in this study. The participants discussed their overall environment, including cues about sexuality and gender, as well as their geography. Ample discussion occurred concerning their interpersonal experiences with family, peers, and communities. They also discussed how other identities were relevant to their identity as a bisexual woman. The themes, subthemes, and frequency of the subthemes are displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2

External Experiences: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency
Social & Geographic Environment	(Bi)sexuality Cues	10
	Gender Cues	12
	Region	4
Interpersonal Experiences	Family	10
	Partners	8
	Friends & Peers	10
	Community	10
Other Identities	Religion	6
	Race/Ethnicity	5
	Other Queer/Sexual Identities	4
	Fandom/Nerd/Geek	5

Mental Health Concerns   4

Social and Geographical Environment

(Bi)Sexuality Cues

How participants viewed their own sexuality was often influenced by cues they received throughout their lives that were not necessarily dependent on their own bisexuality, but the identity of queer people in general. These cues were present in family dynamics, social environments, and media representation, with many participants discussing how religion, politics, and media have likely impacted how others view their sexuality. Social environments could be virtual or in person. Some discussion also occurred around the lack of positive or realistic exposure to bisexual media and the sexualization of bisexual women in media.

Family dynamics that were more negative in nature toward the LGBTQ+ community were discussed by multiple participants. Poppy reflected that "being gay was always kind of like the butt of the joke, even in my own household and in most of the media that I was seeing." Tessa's family gave cues that "if it's not normal, it's not okay in our family…so being gay or bisexual is not something we talk about." June's family dynamic was specific to bisexuality not existing:

> I grew up in a very conservative household, so it was like gay or straight and if someone was like "oh they're bisexual," and my parents were like "oh that just means they're gay," or if they were a person in a not same-sex partnership they were like "Oh well they're just straight and want attention" or whatever. So, bisexuality was not something I heard about growing up.

Rose discussed how she felt about the consensus on sexuality that she grew up with:

Everyone just assumes everyone is straight and all of the religious standards. It's not just

an assumption that someone is straight, it's already ingrained in people that if you're

anything but straight you are wrong, you are the devil, you are whatever.

Media representation was a big issue for multiple participants, likely due to the relative lack of

bisexual role models these women have had in their lives. Multiple participants discussed the

stereotypical nature of most queer characters on television, lack of nuanced, positive, or realistic

portrayals of bisexual characters, the view that bisexual women exist for men or the male gaze,

and most participants explicitly stated that the sexualization of bisexual women in the media was

upsetting. The details of bisexual representation in media will be discussed further in the identity

formation section.

Overall, participants largely had negative experiences around (bi)sexuality cues in their

lives. Those cues were typically dependent on the stereotypes associated with either the

LGBTQ+ community in general or bisexuality on its own.

Gender Cues

All 12 participants discussed where they learned what womanhood means, with six

stating that they learned from family, three that did not learn from family, and two that learned

from both family and other external sources. One participant, Tessa, stated "I don't think I've

ever learned what womanhood is, to be honest." Gender will be discussed at greater length

during the discussion around internal aspects of these identities, but eight of the participants'

definitions were informed by the gender cues of socialization, societal expectations, and gender

norms. This can point to how the participants conceptualized what was allowed in their

womanhood based on cues from their environment. As Riley described, "I know what it is

because I grew up with it. There's no escaping it…" and Poppy echoed with her statement:

"…society's been successful training me that things are meant for men and things are meant for women." Others spoke about the political nature of womanhood and how those ideas contributed to their education on the subject. Ella stated that her family was not responsible for her knowledge of womanhood but "people that I kind of look up to and women's rights really brought me into my womanhood."

Region

How some participants lived out their identities was based on historical and current geographical region. Some experienced moments of liberation, moving from more rural areas to urban ones due to more liberal beliefs around sexual orientation. Two participants, Riley and June, discussed their Southern heritage and how that impacted their experiences of both bisexuality and womanhood. Another participant, Rose, discussed how her rural Midwest conservative Christian upbringing was not optimal for her journey toward her bisexuality and perception of womanhood. Only one participant, Luna, explicitly discussed how her region was likely one of the better options for being queer. She was born and raised on the East Coast in a liberal state that never made her feel lesser for being who she is.

Interpersonal Experiences

Each participant discussed the ways in which treatment from others, in a more personal sense than overall environment, impacted their identities. The most commonly discussed interpersonal relationships were family, friends, partners, peers, and local or online community. The experiences they had were both negative and positive, and mostly related to their identity as bisexual rather than female.

Family

Participants often shared how their family reacted to their own bisexuality. These included many negative interactions, but also quite a few positive interactions from family members that are allies or identified within the community.

Poppy's father told her not to tell people she was bisexual because everybody would only associate that with sex. Emma and Luna disclosed that all of their siblings are some form of queer, which makes the identity more comfortable for them. However, both had negative experiences or thoughts about telling their fathers. Luna never plans to tell her father due to his views around race and her assumption that he would feel similarly around the LGBTQ+ community. Amy and Ella were told they could not be bisexual because they had never had a relationship with a woman. Allison's sister came out as bisexual first, and it did not go well. She stated that this delayed her desire to be open with her family. Lucy's mother found out about her identity during her freshman year in college and reacted negatively. Lucy has frequently experienced binegativity from her since this discovery, including asking her "aren't you repulsed by the idea of having sex with a woman?" Tessa's father is an alcoholic, and his initial reaction to finding out his daughter "associate[s] with the rainbow" was to exclaim, "God, Jesus Christ, I need to get a beer." She expressed hurt by this moment, saying:

> …whether my dad was joking or not, was already planning on getting a beer, I don't know. But for me to tell you that I associate with the rainbow and you need to go get a drink? That kind of sucked. That kind of stuck with me. I joke about it now and my mom and I will laugh about it, but that was actually kind of hurtful. I'm still your daughter.

June and Rose have both refrained from coming out to their parents because they know it will go badly.

In terms of positive experiences, quite a few participants had powerful moments with family. Poppy attributed her immediate and extended family accepting queer identities to two cousins who were out as bisexual and pansexual with a loudly supportive mother:

> Honestly, without my cousin's family I don't know if my family ever would have gotten to a point where they were accepting sexualities. I don't know…they were a big part of that for all of us…it made it [disclosing] easier. I knew they were only one phone call away if my dad decided not to be accepting.

Riley's mother is only concerned about her education and said, "she wouldn't care if I dated a tree if I brought home As and Bs." Lucy was told by her mother that her aunt would never allow her to see her goddaughter if she disclosed her sexuality. Contrary to this statement, Lucy did disclose to her aunt and said, "she came here last summer, I told her mine and she told me hers. We talked this weekend, we're fine. No one gives a shit." June recently told a family friend about her identity because she trusted her to react well:

> …just having her give me a big hug and tell me that she loved me and that she was always going to love me, that she was there to talk if I ever needed someone to talk to or the crushes that I can't tell my mom about or whatever. That was a pretty big and important thing for me…

Tessa experienced a powerful moment through a journal entry of her grandmother's that her mother found after she died. Her grandmother was likely within the queer community. She lived with a life partner who was a woman, but never said it aloud, which is why Tessa felt this was a particular special moment:

> She found in the journal…I don't know, like a daily entry about how my grandma was so proud and so amazed by the strength that I had because I was not afraid to be who I was.

That I was not afraid to walk around with the freaking pride flag attached to my book bag

in high school. That I wasn't afraid to do the Day of Silence in high school and put duct

tape over my mouth and say I'm not going to talk for a day…I guess my grandma wrote

this huge entry in her diary about the strength I had to not be afraid of who I was and

while she never said that to me, I think that affected me more than my dad's comment.

And that was a positive thing.

Partners

Of the 12 participants, four were not currently partnered, five were currently partnered,

and three were married. Most of the relationships were with men, with only Allison married to a

woman. Participants reported both supportive and unsupportive relationships. Supportive

relationships often still came with a lack of understanding of what their bisexual identity is and

what it means to them currently. Unsupportive relationships were often attributed to the addition

of emotional and sexual abuse and included binegativity. Three women suppressed their bisexual

identity due to a partner for a period of time. Ella and Luna find that dating men is easier, which

has been difficult in living out their identities fully. Rose and Lucy were similar in their

statements that interactions with women are not as comfortable for them as they are with men.

Tessa, Poppy, Lucy, Ella, and Allison all brought up the expectation of threesomes or the

assumption of others that bisexuality must involve such a concept. Tessa and Poppy had partners

that either pressured or forced them to engage in threesomes. On the opposite end of the

spectrum, Luna expressed some guilt over "being the reason that stereotype exists," because she

enjoys engaging in threesomes with male and female partners.

Poppy, Luna, and Tessa discussed the difficulties in their relationships, despite the fact

that their current partners are generally supportive of them and their identities. Tessa's partner

may struggle with increased caution around both populations that she is attracted to: "I don't want to say he doesn't trust me. But I do know that trust with him is a little bit harder." Poppy's partner has expressed some confusion around the importance of her identity while she is in a relationship with him:

> I feel that it kind of confuses him that I still feel a need to talk about it and identify with it because I am in a relationship with him and will be for the rest of my life and we both know that by this point. I feel like it makes him slightly uncomfortable but also, he's known me long enough that he understands that it's a big enough part of my identity for me to still hold importance to it.

Luna's partner sometimes feels conflicted over the parts of her she may have to suppress in order to be in a relationship with him:

> My current partner does express that based on my politics and…I'm just very into queer culture that he sometimes feels that he's holding me back from my true expression of identity because I'm living this heterosexual life. So, I don't think he…me being bisexual isn't a negative thing for him but he's aware of the negotiation I have with our relationship.

Allison and Emma are both married to fellow bisexual people which feels validating. Emma's first experience with disclosure occurred because her husband first came out to her. Lucy enjoys the freedom of expressing her attraction to women with her partner, which feels meaningful, even if she does not live out the identity as often. Ella also enjoys that freedom and stated, "we talk about girls and that's kind of nice to have somebody you're dating…you can talk about who you are with them, and they don't get jealous or think you're going to leave them."

Friends and Peers

The participants generally had supportive friends and discussed what their bisexual identity meant to those close to them. Six women had created friend groups with majority queer people because that felt more comfortable. Poppy prefers to have a social circle that is diverse, which to her means they have "common ground." June became gradually more comfortable with her identity due to garnering friendships with other bisexual women and coming to understand that her experience of that identity is not particularly as atypical as she thought. Amy, Tessa, and Emma have mostly queer friends by chance and environmental luck. Luna stated that coworkers, with whom she spends most of her time, are majority queer which makes her daily life easier.

However, some participants discussed how friends and/or peers discussed queer identities and bisexuality that felt invalidating. Tessa reflected on bullying that she experienced in junior high and high school, stating "you're ostracized" merely because she was different. Charlotte has had moments throughout her life where she does not "feel straight enough," and she witnesses heterosexual individuals discussing queer issues and thinks to herself, "you guys are morons…rejection of any kind matters to a person." Rose remembers watching movies with other girls in her childhood and adolescence:

> There's been times where I've been… years ago I'd be with a friend watching a movie and there would be … when I was with a friend watching a movie and there was a sexual scene where two women start kissing or whatever and she's like "ew, lesbians." There just are so many things that can happen that lead you to feel like "cool, not going to tell you!" Great, it's so good to know how you feel about that.

Lucy experienced binegativity from members of her master's cohort during multiple outings, including sexualization and nonconsensual disclosure of her identity:

Every time a sexual card came up [in this game], I was given it, regardless of what it said anytime anything came up it was given to me. What I was told was… it's like "Oh well you're bi and like you feel comfortable talking about sex so obviously we think of you" and I'm like no I'm just not uncomfortable talking about sex and I'm European and we talk about sex and it's not shamed in my culture to talk about sex… but because I was willing to be open about it, it was associated with then me being bi and then was used to separate me from the group…and the first time I went out with them, they outed me to the entire rest of my cohort so my whole cohort knew about me being bi without my consent.

Community

Participants varied on their involvement in their local LGBTQ+ community. The reasons for not being involved included accessibility concerns due to region, fear or experience with discrimination from LG individuals, and feeling that they did not need a queer community. Lucy, Riley, and Rose expressed a lack of desire to find a queer or bisexual community or be involved in it. Ella, Poppy, and Allison all thought that community equated to freedom to exist as they are. Five women endorsed rejection, isolation, or alienation from the straight community, while six women endorsed the same from the queer community. Four did also acknowledge that in some spaces they "pass" as straight or queer and therefore do not experience much rejection, isolation, or alienation from the straight and/or queer communities.

Others stated that their ability to connect with others like them was limited due to their location, which sometimes led to finding other ways to build community. Lucy and June both talked about how moving away for college allowed them to find queer communities that were unavailable in their hometowns. Others discussed that their region was not urban enough to have

an expansive queer community, let alone a bisexual-specific community. Four participants stated

their region led them to create online communities. Ella had found a bisexual women's

community through gaming, like Amy and Tessa. Luna is heavily involved in Reddit, checking

bisexual threads daily and considers that to be her queer community.

Ella, Luna, and June all discussed their fear of or experience with discrimination from the

queer community and their belief that Pride, GSAs, and queer women's groups were not for

them. Luna said that her "lack of lesbian cred" has barred her from certain spaces and

experiences due to her only dating men, so far. Ella said, "I know how people can be in those

[LG] communities about bisexuals, so I just don't bring it up." June spoke at length about the

exclusionist movement on Tumblr, which consisted of LGBTQ+ people being adamant that

people on the asexual/aromantic spectrum were not included in the community. That experience

made her feel uncomfortable with going into spaces she had previously felt safe in:

> This is when exclusionists started becoming a thing in internet spaces. And that kind of
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> drove me away for a while because I started…that was when it was really big. TERFs
>
> and stuff were becoming more insidious in the fan-ish and feminism spaces on the
>
> internet. So, I pushed away from the queer community for a while because I was scared
>
> and upset. I had finally found this identity and it made sense, I had a word for what I am,
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> and I'm fine and it's normal and it's okay. Then all of this happened, and I said "oh, now
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> I don't have anywhere to go." Because I don't understand straight people but now, I can't
>
> hang out with queer people anymore. So, I just kind of assumed that I didn't have an
>
> identity for a while.

Ella expressed concern that Pride was only for gays and did not want to impede on "their

celebration." June initially refused to attend a queer women's group with fellow queer female

friends because ""I can't go to that; I'm not queer enough." Even after consenting to attend, June still felt that she did not belong in that space. Luna reflected on her teenage self and how certain queer conventions may have evolved:

> So, now that I'm leading the GSA, I realized that when I was in high school there was a GSA, and I didn't go to it because I didn't feel like I was the type of person that the GSA was for. And I think that might be some of the bi-erasure stuff like that I struggle with feeling not queer enough. The GSA that I lead… it's like a third trans kids and 2/3 bisexuals and that's the makeup. And a lot of the kids are…they first say that they're allies and then come out as bisexual like a couple of months in. So, I now know that the GSA is a place for anybody who wants to be there, but as someone in high school it was like "oh, I'm not the someone that belongs there."

Other Identities

All 12 participants reported strong influences from other identities they held, currently or historically, on their bisexuality and womanhood. Most participants related these identities to their bisexuality rather than their womanhood. Religion, race, and fandom were the most common responses from participants, but those varied in terms of positive or negative influences. The presence of other sexual preferences and identities were reported by three participants. Two participants stated different ethnic origins as influences on their identities, although one spoke about this in a more general manner than relating to her identities as bisexual or as a woman. Two participants also included different mental health concerns as important to their bisexual identity development.

Religion of Self and Religion of Others

Only one participant discussed her own current religion, and religious journey, as an identity that influenced how she feels about her bisexuality. June became "disillusioned" by religion throughout her adolescence as she began to identify with feminism and the queer community. She was raised in an evangelical church family, with uncles who are pastors. Once she came to college in a big city and found churches with explicit markers that express support for the queer community, she began to integrate that part of her back into the story saying, "I started to have a little hope and faith in religion again." However, she struggled with the stereotype of all queer people being atheist or agnostic and how people viewed her for being religious:

> That's another thing that drives me really mad, another assumption that people make, "oh, you're queer, and you don't look like a normal feminine person, so you must be an atheist or agnostic." I'm not going to try to preach at you about my religion or try to convert you, because that's bullshit. You're going to hate me and hate it and I don't think that's the way to show you how I feel about my religion. Generally, the whole thing is you need to be kind to people and you need to love people and you need to not judge them and you need to help them. I think I'm doing a pretty good job of that, and that's how I show my religion every day, by doing the things my religion tells me to do. That's not hindered by the fact that I'm a queer person.

Five participants discussed how the religion they were raised in or the religion of others has impacted their journey. Ella's mother became a Christian during her discovery of her identity. She also talked about the "hardship" of coming out when "having family or friends who don't believe in that because of their religion, that's a huge thing for me." Tessa stated that she

rebelled against the religious nature of her family and how it might be different for other queer

people:

> I had it shoved down my throat when I was a kid and I know that shaped a lot of who I
>
> was, but it did it in the opposite way, because I rebelled against it. I know there's a lot of
>
> people that grew up in really religious households that shaped a lot of who they were and
>
> hid a lot of who they really were because of their religion.

Allison interwove the cultural religious attitude of the Black community, stating, "It's always in

a cultural context…like religion has a role but it's not… a deep-seated connection to religion, but

it's definitely there." Riley spoke about the conflict of the importance of her atheism and

scientifically oriented self and the religion of others, specifically in her region and her

stepfather's Orthodox Judaism. Rose, as discussed previously, grew up in a very conservative

area that garners their morality through religious means. She talked about the difference in who

she is because she began to let go of religion in college vs. who she might have been in she had

never left:

> I feel like a lot of me letting go of religion over time allowed me to move closer to who I
>
> actually am as a person. And then the framework through which I understand the world, I
>
> moved closer to that over time and that allowed me to let go of the shame and shit that's
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> associated with not being straight. So, for me, that's a big part of it and who knows…
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> what if I would have ended up staying religious forever? Then who knows what would
>
> have happened. I mean, I have no idea but I'm glad that it didn't work out that way
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> because this, I think, to me, is more authentic

Race/Ethnicity

Three participants discussed race, while two participants discussed ethnicity. Lucy and Amy discussed ethnicity. Amy spoke about her difficulty thinking outside of a binary due to her "very German mother," and their cultural way of seeing things in black and white. Her bisexuality falling outside of that conceptualization led to difficulties for familial support. Lucy spoke about her pride in her French identity and how that identity has opened her up to discuss things like sex with a freedom she does not see in others. However, in reference to this freedom of sexuality and her mother's issue with her bisexuality, she said in her cultural environment, "men being gay is fine, women being a lesbian is okay, bisexuality does not exist, so…yeah."

Riley and Luna talked about how their White identities have insulated them from certain experiences that bisexual women of color may experience more often. Both recognized the privilege that brought them. Riley stated that "I know I'm going to have a very different intersection with my sexuality than a person of color," and acknowledged that her location in the south lent to more protection from certain elements due to her race. Luna's response agreed with Riley. She stated: "I certainly think that being white was an important identity, in terms of it being more culturally acceptable for me to come out as bisexual to my middle-class White family, than it might be to other people."

Allison, the only participant in the sample to identify as Black, spoke at length on how her identities intersect and impact her daily life. She spoke to Black culture and gender in her family and community, as well as the view of bisexuality in the context of her race.

My race would definitely play a role as far as my perception of sexuality as well as my perception of womanhood and gender stereotypes and those types of things. I do think that those play a role. Because within the Black community there are very, very staunch differences between men and women and how they must behave…it's honestly foolish.

And fortunately, I have kind of matured to the point where that doesn't bother me

anymore. But there was a point where those things, that's what made me question "Am I

enough of a woman?"

Other Queer or Sexual Identities

Four participants talked about the impact other queer and sexual identities have impacted

their bisexual identity. Charlotte spoke about how her involvement in the swingers' community

with her husband began due to her desire to be intimate with women. She also attributed this

community with her increased feelings of safety and community, because bisexuality is

relatively normal and common. In addition, Charlotte also admitted that she may be polyamorous

but struggled to identify with that in concrete terms. Luna also spoke about her polyamory in

past relationships, discussing how her current monogamous relationship can sometimes feel

limiting to her full experience of her sexuality.

June and Rose both spoke to other queer identities. June uses the label bisexual, but also

the labels of queer and bigraysexual/bidemisexual to signify her identification with the asexuality

spectrum. Specifically, June struggled with her asexual spectrum identity and feeling unworthy

of the label:

> At the beginning, I was kind of afraid to call myself bi[sexual] because I was like "oh I
>
> don't deserve this label," going back to the checkmark box of things you have to do to be
>
> able to call yourself bi[sexual].

However, her identity as queer has felt simpler and considers it a liberating label. The ability to

label herself as a member of the community without having to explain the nuance was important

to her journey and comfort with her different identities.

Rose identifies as bisexual and heteroromantic, but also feels a pull towards a demisexual identity. The combination of all her attraction labels has caused a heavy conflict around her desire to be with women, but her inability to create romantic feelings for them that she needs to be intimate:

> …the assumption that if you're bi you also want romantic relationships with women, those would go hand-in-hand for a lot of people. And it just hasn't really worked out that way for me… since I don't have a lot of like romantic desires with women, but sexual desires were there …I just really need that emotional connection. I don't know. I've never successfully, with a guy or girl or any human, I've never been able to say "oh let's just like get some sexual needs met" without anything else there.

Fandom/Nerd/Geek

Five participants discussed how their involvement in fandom, media, YouTube and gaming helped or harmed them on their journeys. Ella reported that her bisexual development was heavily influenced by her progression from television shows to bisexual/lesbian YouTube channels to finding a bisexual community through video game spaces. Amy said that a way she keeps her bisexuality visible is by talking with friends "about beautiful anime characters that we adore," and that her experiences through gaming have also been important to her identity. Emma hypothesized that her identity as a "nerdy geek" was a benefit to her sexuality:

> …definitely being kind of a nerdy geek…because that is one of those things that's on the outskirts. So, it was allowed to be a little bit weirder, it was allowed to have a lot of things that other media didn't have at the time because they wanted to be mainstream. So, there are some characters that you get to see in those in those more outlier media that are

queer and that are good representation. I mean a lot of like…coming to terms with your

identity as your sexual identity or gender identity is seeing that representation.

June and Tessa also pointed to books, television, movies, and Tumblr as important to how they

viewed their sexuality and womanhood. For Tessa, a big part of her journey was her confusion

over the typical clichés in the books she read:

I always noticed it was always the prince saves a princess and it's always male and

female. And I never quite understood why can't it be another female save the Princess or

why can't it be a guy locked up in the castle, you know? Or another guy saves him? It

doesn't always have to be the male saving the female, it can be the female saving herself

for one.

June bases most of her discovery of her identities on her involvement in "fan-ish" spaces,

particularly on Tumblr. Her experiences in these spaces opened her up to perspectives on queer

identities and feminism that were not available in her physical environment. She stated that her

interest in slash fiction led to following those who were also interested in other concepts, such as

social justice:

…people that I reblogged fan-ish stuff from on Tumblr also reblogged social justice stuff

and queer identity stuff and all that kind of thing that I hadn't been hearing about because

that's the type of thing that I grew up in. And so those were kind of an open door to me

learning about like all these different queer identities, including you know being bi or

whatever. That these things weren't wrong, and they were OK, and it also introduced me

to intersectionality in another way, like how feminism interacts with race and gender and

all kinds of other things that others tend to leave out in their white girl Taylor Swift

feminism. And so that's like how fan-ish spaces tended to fit in. So, that was very important to my growth and development.

Mental Health Concerns

Four participants discussed how different mental health concerns influenced or impacted their bisexuality and/or womanhood. Riley stated that beginning therapy is helping her become more "relaxed," and less "anal," which may open her up to more experiences than she has previously allowed herself due to her dedication to her education. June talked about her anxiety disorders and how they often led to sexist interactions with doctors due to her physiological anxiety symptoms. She was often brushed aside and ignored as a "hysterical female," despite insisting she knew something was wrong.

Poppy discussed her Borderline Personality Diagnosis. The impulsivity around sexual behavior is something she has struggled with in the past and may have contributed to her being intimate with more men than she wished to be and lent more credence to stereotypes about bisexual women that upset her. Luna talked about how everyone in her family, but the girls, have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. She believes she has gone undiagnosed and her ability to connect with other women in a romantic way has been severely hampered by her experiences with autism:

> …our culture shows women how to be flirtatious with men and how to interact with men to date them and I feel like, especially with autism and the need for social scripts, that I was not presented with the social scripts as a child for how to find women to date and how to interact with women that I wanted to date. So, just having like a social script for that like has been missing for me and that piece is difficult.

Internal Experiences

Internal experiences of being a bisexual woman were also discussed, including conceptualization and expression of their identities. In terms of their conceptualization, the women spoke about their definitions of bisexuality and womanhood, the personal meaning of those identities, and what is good, hard, and unique about each identity. The expression of these identities was more focused on their bisexuality but did include features of gender expression. The concepts of labels, disclosure, and visibility were discussed in reference to their expression of a bisexual identity. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the themes, subthemes, and subtheme frequency.

Table 3

Internal Experiences: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency
Conceptualization of Identity	Definitions (bisexuality)	12
	Definitions (womanhood)	12
	Personal Meaning (bisexuality)	12
	Personal Meaning (womanhood)	12
	Good, Bad, Unique (bisexuality)	11
	Good, Bad, Unique (womanhood)	11
Expression of Identity	Labels	8
	Disclosure	12
	Visibility	12

Gender Expression   8

Conceptualization of Identity

Definitions

Personal Definitions of Bisexuality. Each participant was asked what their personal definition of bisexuality was and if they believed there were any requirements to identify as bisexual. Consensus was found in the realm of personal definitions for bisexuality. Eight participants stated that gender was not as meaningful to their definition. Six of the women mentioned attraction to two sexes or male/female bodies. Four of the participants declared that no requirements were necessary to identify as bisexual, while eight declared that only the definition they provided was required for identification as bisexual.

The lack of importance placed on gender in their definitions of bisexuality was often due to not wanting a gender barrier on their sexuality, a higher importance on emotional connection, and desire to be more inclusive due to the view that bisexuality is transphobic. Ella stated in her definition:

> I guess…physically, emotionally attracted to anyone. Doesn't really matter if they say they identify as a guy or female or anything, if I just have a connection with you and I find you attractive then, I do. I just don't see, you know, a gender barrier on who I can have an attraction to.

June was particularly concerned about the discourse around defining bisexuality and the inclusion of others within that definition:

…bisexuality just means that you are attracted to someone or you are a capable of experiencing attraction to people that are of all genders. It doesn't go any really further than that. You can put other labels on it, or you can say "well, I experience attraction this way," but bisexuality itself just means you are attracted to people that are male, female, and nonbinary, whether they are cis, trans, or nonbinary. So, yeah, I'm very passionate about this. Yeah, it's a very simple definition because who am I to tell other bi people how they experience attraction?

Those who brought up the "two sexes," sometimes did explain further what that meant for gender. For example, Riley expanded on her meaning behind her definition of "attraction to the two sexes" by stating:

Bisexuality is the attraction to the two sexes that's…because the thing is no matter a person's gender, and stuff like that, there's two sexes. But I also believe that any intersex conditions, because they are part of that, would be absolutely included in it.

In addition, Luna also described further how she came to the decision to define bisexuality in her own way:

I feel attracted to people as a particular gender that they are and so I see bisexual as having a gender element of sexual attraction or an embodied element of sexual attraction, so not being limited like not seeing the word as binary, meaning specifically only cis men and cis women but you know obviously men and women include trans people and I am also attracted to nonbinary people.

The similarities found within the definitions can note the evolving nature of the definition of bisexuality in the queer community.

When asked if they believed there were any attractions, desires, or behaviors required to identify as bisexual, only attractions were brought up as necessary to the identity. No participant stated that any physical behaviors or relationships with women were required. The fluidity and diversity in bisexuality was brought up, with Amy stating, "it's all different," and Allison saying, "it's kind of what you make of it." Rose also brought up the complicated situation of those who are not able to be open about their sexuality or act upon it as her reason for not requiring any behaviors for the identity:

> I don't know if there would need to be behavior. Because, I mean, a lot of people have lived their life just so completely in the closet where they ignore things that…aspects of who they are for whatever reason… like cultural reasons. So, I don't think you have to play it out to be bisexual.

Personal Definitions of Womanhood. Only one participant, Poppy, answered the question of a personal definition for womanhood without difficulty. The remaining 11 struggled to answer the question, taking more time to answer this question than most others within the interview. Generally, the participants defined womanhood as personal (no true definition), shared experience with other women, and socialization/societal expectations/gender norms.

Seven of the participants stated that there was no true definition for womanhood but a personal way of making meaning around being a woman and how to live that out in the world. Ella stated that it was "embracing…the things that make you identify as a female yourself," and Poppy echoed this by saying, "I think womanhood is just the essence of whoever identifies as a woman…whatever each individual may define for themselves." Tessa and Allison both related the idea of a personal definition being meaningful due to their more masculine interests and presentations. Allison said, "I had to find my own definition," and Tessa said something similar

adding that, despite being partnered with a man, "I'm the freaking man in my house basically."

June equated womanhood with "however you tend to feel correct in your body," and Rose had a

comparable definition of "everyone is allowed to have their own definition…to feel good about

my inner identity and my outer body."

Eight of the participants talked about the shared experiences of women as a whole and

how that definition relates to sisterhood, empathy, and safety. Emma spoke about the general

connections that women share due to merely existing as a woman. June, Riley, and Rose were

very vocal about the shared experience and trauma of being a woman in the world. Rose stated

that "there are things about being a woman you just can never understand if you're not one," and

Riley relayed a story about "intergenerational trauma…from my mother and grandmother" and

their experiences with alcoholism and abuse. But she also discussed how two female teachers

pushed her to break gender barriers in STEM. June was focused on the shared experiences of

misogyny and safety within a context of camaraderie:

> Womanhood is that shared experience of having to deal with misogyny and all of those
>
> things and coming out being a better person for it and being able to figure out who you
>
> are outside of what everyone else tells you to be… There's just like a lot of camaraderie, I
>
> guess, that has come out of having the trauma of those shared experiences. The trauma is
>
> terrible, but I think it has made some type of identity that pulls us all together. We're in
>
> this together and we have to be in this together.

Eight of the participants discussed the ways in which women are socialized, the societal

expectations put on them, and gender norms associated with women. Tessa stated that societal

expectations and gender norms make being her definition of a woman "much harder" because

"there's so much pressure to be a certain way." Allison also discussed how these societal

pressures were difficult to deal with due to her very unique definition of womanhood. Amy stated that "being a woman in today's society" includes many "hardships" that are put on them by socialization. Riley resonated with this as well, stating that the "socialization of submissiveness" is frustrating, along with "the fact that you have to deal with the patriarchy and social conditioning…because of basically who you are, a woman." Poppy also discussed "gendering" that told her what is and is not acceptable for a woman. She also expressed that she enjoys some of the "societal standards" and "womanly duties" expected of her, but that she would never impose that upon other women and their personal view of womanhood. Rose also discussed her alignment with typical feminine gender norms, but that she, too, would not want her alignment with these things to mean that every woman should ascribe to such. Emma discussed the positives of societal expectations, particularly women's ability to show emotion in more socially acceptable ways compared to men. Luna agreed with the positives of her definition of womanhood and her happiness at the comfort she feels in her body and ability to present herself as a woman in the world.

Personal Meaning

Personal Meaning of Bisexuality. The personal meaning of bisexuality ranged from being an important part of their identities, not as evident to others, and a way that they gained more empathy and openness toward others. Poppy related the importance of her bisexuality to her education and career goals in diversity and sociology, stating:

> I feel like it's my stepping-stone into the world of oppression, you know? It gives me a platform to speak on what oppression is like and gives me a voice for other communities that are oppressed. But personally, I don't know… it gives me access to a community that's accepting of like other people, too.

Five others spoke about their bisexuality being important parts of themselves, while six discussed how the identity was not evident to others. Those who stated their identity as bisexual was not as evident to others were often in long-term relationships. For example, Tessa disclosed that "it's still my identity…but I don't really think about it as much because I have been in a committed relationship for so long." Lucy echoed Tessa and further explained that "I don't feel like I live that part of my identity very often." Rose had similar statements but related that more to her "passing" as a straight person, which led to feeling like she was living out something similar to a double life:

> It would be way too strong of language to say I live any kind of double life. I don't live a double life but there is part of me or part of my identity or part of my experience that is not obvious at the surface level. And people just make so many assumptions that it's a part of me that's not quickly apparent to people and I don't always want to share that. So, I guess that part of it just can be a little bit of a struggle sometimes.

Empathy and openness served as themes of personal meaning for five participants. Specifically, some believed that their bisexual identity led to a non-judgmental stance. Charlotte believed that her bisexuality "opened me up" to accept others, while Ella said it "makes me feel free" and that she understands what it means to be judged, which makes her want to avoid doing that to others. Riley acknowledged that her bisexuality opened her up to different experiences, difficulties, and challenges.

Personal Meaning of Womanhood. Every participant was asked what womanhood means to them and the value it holds in their lives. The personal meaning was related to pride, strength, equal rights, politics, and creation of life.

Lucy, Riley, and Emma all discussed the ability for women to carry children and become mothers as a meaningful aspect of womanhood. Poppy, Ella, Lucy, Emma, and Riley all discussed equal rights and the politics of being a woman within their ideas of personal meaning. Poppy stated that "being a woman with privilege" has made her "feel responsible for women with less privilege than myself," and that "helping other women maintain their womanhood" is important to her personal meaning of it. Riley did research after a conversation with someone about the necessity for feminism in the modern age. She was appalled at why feminism was still needed, saying that "the amount of rape," the "gender wage gap," and "medical quality" concerning women continues to tell her that the fight is still ongoing. Lucy equated womanhood with Ruth Bader Ginsburg and "being a good person in terms of things that women should have, like rights." Emma became emotional discussing "women that have been erased" and the importance of remembering those who came before us and their actual role in history. She further stated:

> Standing up for people, that can't stand up for themselves or don't necessarily know…that don't have their own skills or their own pride yet to do that. And giving them the ability to do that for themselves. The ability to notice that they are being taken advantage of and the ability to take back their own power instead of saving them, letting them save themselves.

Rose and Emma discussed feeling pride about their womanhood and the meaning that held in how they live. Luna had similar sentiments, recalling a story about her time living in a feminist commune:

> We're at a workshop there and someone asked everyone to go around in a circle and say what does being a woman mean to you? So, people were going around this circle and so

many broke down crying and were talking about abuse and limited opportunities and all

this stuff. And when it got to me, I had to say "Oh, I really only think about positive

things with womanhood. I think about how much I love who I get to be in my daily life

and how I get to dress and how I get to behave." I don't have…I don't know negative

associations that came to all of my peers' minds immediately. It just…I was struck by

how different my experience of being a woman was in terms of relationships from all of

these other people.

The Good, the Bad, and the Unique

Bisexuality. Participants related variety of options in dating, increased empathy, and less

restriction as what is good about being bisexual. The perception of others was the overall theme

of what was hard about being bisexual, with some emphasis on judgement from the LGBTQ+

community feeling worse. The ways these women believed bisexuality was unique ranged from

fighting harder to exist, added perspective, and that nothing is unique about it.

Many participants believed that more options in dating, more freedom, and less

restriction were the good parts of being bisexual. Ten participants brought up these concepts.

Poppy and Tessa agreed that both the variety of options and more freedom were the best part of

their experience. Specifically, Poppy related this to an advantage over monosexual people:

> I feel like I have an advantage over straight [and gay] people where I actually have a
>
> broader understanding of humans that allows me to be attracted to more humans than
>
> what's laid out in front of me as an acceptable option.

In a similar vein, three women discussed their increased empathy and ability to relate to others

stemming from their bisexual identity. Rose also related this to an advantage over monosexual

identities:

I guess it allows you to see some things in perspective than one who's super straight or super gay, they wouldn't. Especially with all of the like political stuff that's happened over the years… So, I guess it's nice that it allows you to see different perspectives in that way, another layer of a way of being and existing.

Riley took a slightly different approach and reported that she feels she can "relate to more experiences when it comes to women, both heterosexual and homosexual women." Ella reiterated her response to the personal meaning of her bisexuality by saying it has made her more understanding and she "knows how tough it is and how people judge you for stuff that they shouldn't," which inspires her to treat others with the kindness she wished for herself.

The only common theme from the question "what is hard about being bisexual" was the perception of others and stigma they have faced from that. Ella brought up the perception that others have on bisexuality being "fake for attention" and Amy stated, "people don't take it serious." Emma also discussed the issue of others not believing the identity is valid or that it's a phase and mentioned the LGBTQ+ community sharing those views, calling the entire prospect "dumb." Poppy also spoke to people's unwillingness to understand the identity, including the queer community:

…people just aren't willing to see the ways that bisexual women continue to be oppressed, even the LGBT community holds negative stereotypes towards bisexual people so it's just like a wide misunderstanding of "oh you're only making out with a girl so that guys will hit on you at the bars," or that kind of general stereotype that's like really invalidating.

Allison also spoke about others misunderstanding the sexuality and the struggle of "being forced into a label," due to her more masculine presentation and her wife causing others to insist she is now a lesbian. Luna agreed with Allison, explaining that bi-erasure was a big issue for her:

> And bi-erasure! All of my long-term relationships have been with men, so sometimes when I've wanted to date women, I get the "well, you don't have any lesbian cred because you've only been in heterosexual relationships." But how am I going to get any lesbian cred if every woman I try to date doesn't want to date me because I've only dated men? Oh, that makes me so frustrated. So, being seen as straight is hard because I emphatically don't feel straight at all.

Riley talked about how much harder it would be if she ended up in a committed relationship with a woman because of where she lives and the views of those around her. Rose summed up the topic decently well with her disdain for heteronormativity:

> I mean what's hard is living in a heteronormative world and people and things are just determined by million-year-old religious standards and people saying things that are hurtful and not realizing that it might be a part of who I am.

The uniqueness of the identity was focused on similar topics, including the need to fight harder to prove the identity and have a voice when it matters, the added perspective, fluidity, and openness to love. Two participants, Luna and Charlotte, responded that nothing was unique about the identity at all, with one struggling to come up with an answer (Ella). Amy and Poppy discussed the hard road to equality in the realms of straight and gay communities, with Amy saying you "have to fight for what you are" and Poppy stating that "it's the lesbians and gays that really have the platform, but bisexuals are kind of lower on the hierarchy." Four talked about the freedom aspects of bisexuality. Allison responded similarly to the question about what is good,

but she clarified that the freedom from "heteronormative standards" in relationships and that she "gets to express that freedom in a romantic sense," too. Tessa followed this topic and said that "more options" means she is not tied down to any certain gender. In some ways, Luna agreed that her identity as bisexual means that any future attraction would not cause "any existential crises" about who she was, and Rose enjoys the "added perspective" it gives her. Emma reflected, "it's nice" that she can "look at anybody and think 'I could love that person.'"

Womanhood. Femininity, relational freedom, and feeling powerful were participants' explanation for what is good about being a woman. Sexism, misogyny, and the patriarchy were the only themes related to what is hard about being a woman. The uniqueness of womanhood for participants ranged from nothing to sisterhood to creation of life.

The idea of performing femininity or appearance thoughts were present for five of the participants as a good part about being a woman. Rose talked about how she enjoys feminine appearance features such as hair, nails, clothes, and Luna shared this sentiment. Riley and Amy spoke about their appreciation for the femininity and appearances of other women, with Riley reporting that she finds "women prettier than men." The idea that women are able to be more relational was a concept brought up by both Emma and Riley. Emma also compared that experience with men's lack of emotional freedom: "Friendship is really great with other women, empathy, forgiveness, emotions. Conversations can be deeper. Women are allowed to have a closeness with other people, but men aren't and that's sad." Luna, Allison, and Rose brought up the ideas of strength, power, and independence. Allison enjoys turning oppression on its head and "providing another view of what being a woman could be," finding that "I do like that being a woman and being in a situation where gender has been so oppressed, I get to challenge that a lot and I'm really just challenging it by embracing who I am."

Similar to the difficulties with being bisexual, the only recurring theme that occurred for the question about what is hard about being a woman involved treatment from others. Ten participants discussed how sexism, misogyny, and the patriarchy have negatively influenced their experiences as women. "The hardest part is getting people to respect you as an equal," was shared by Charlotte and resonated with Amy's response that she is "often overlooked because I am a woman." Tessa originally answered the question about what is good with "sexism disguised as chivalry" that women can experience in everyday situations and stuck with this response for what is hard about the identity as well. Riley had an extensive list of things that were hard about being a woman, including early childhood sexualization, inadequate medical care, "having to debate men on things that will never impact them," and being taught to be less confident compared to men. Emma had similar thoughts around the idea of invalidation, medical care, and male confidence:

> Invalidation is like a big one where your thoughts, your emotions, can be invalidated by the fact that you got loud, the fact that you cried, the fact that you showed emotion, that you weren't stoic. All of the stigmatization that goes around being a woman in academic fields, the fact that medicine is not made for women, the fact that doctors don't take what women say seriously. You could go to the doctor with a symptom, and they'll be "you're just complaining" so you're just a girl, toughen up. And yeah, just the fact that things aren't taken seriously, the fact that there are a lot of people that are still out there that think they're superior just because they have a Y chromosome.

Rose continued the trend with her dialogue on oppression, but ending on the note that she would not change anything about her identity:

As far as hard…Being oppressed since the dawn of time. Constantly underestimated, people making assumptions about you that are not good, having to protect yourselves every moment of every day, being taught how to not get raped rather than men being taught not to rape people, a number of things can suck about it. But I still wouldn't change it.

The uniqueness of the identity contained three themes: creation of life (mostly from those who also brought it up in the personal meaning section), having a special strength that stemmed from what is hard about it, and sisterhood and emotions. Luna and Charlotte replied similarly to this question, compared to the uniqueness of bisexuality, and said that nothing is unique about being a woman. Amy and Poppy, again, agreed that growing up a woman required a level of strength, because as Poppy put it, "our autonomy…isn't a given right." Allison took a different approach with her explanation of strength, similar to her ideas about what is good:

I'd say…if you're the type of person to create a path for yourself, then I feel like being a woman, it would be a little bit…I don't want to say easier, but you can create a very unique path for yourself. Compared to like, being a man, where even if you differ from that path, someone else has probably already traveled it. Because men have so many predetermined paths for them, whereas women don't. So, you get to kind of explore and, you know, really pilot your own life on your own if you choose to do that.

Emma, Rose, and Tessa agreed that womanhood meant a level of sisterhood and ability to emote in ways men cannot. Tessa said that being a woman provides an acceptable "emotional spectrum," and similarly said that women have more freedom to be queer than men, even if that freedom came from gearing sexuality toward men. "The different experiences. There's a lot of things that can connect us…" was the response that Emma gave, which reflected back to her

response of the goodness that comes from being a woman. The uniqueness that Rose felt

stemmed from the camaraderie aspect:

> …we've had to fight similar battles and I feel like we're in this together because we've
>
> had some similar experiences with this. And if you haven't had the experience, you just
>
> couldn't understand, and I feel like it's that way with womanhood. I feel like there are
>
> aspects of being a woman where… like if I saw a woman walking down the street being
>
> harassed by a man, I would instantly want to do something about it because we have to
>
> stand up for each other. There really is a sisterhood type mentality to it that you wouldn't
>
> be able to understand. And it's the same thing with being a man, I'm not trying to say one
>
> is better or worse, anything like that. It's just different experiences.

Expression of Identity

Labels

The label of bisexual was chosen for two main reasons between participants: the lack of

difference between it and other plurisexual labels and that they chose it and stuck with it because

it fit their experience. One participant, Lucy, stated that she chose bisexual because she has "not

been interested, or been with anyone, who is outside of typical gender norms." Upon follow up,

she did hypothesize that if this interest did occur, she would not change her label. As previously

discussed, Luna had an embodied element to her sexual attraction and she researched the

difference between pansexual and bisexual, coming to this conclusion:

> I've actually decided that I am, in fact, bisexual because my understanding of the term is
>
> that you know… pansexual has this phrase "hearts not parts" and it's more about the inner
>
> person and less about their body. And my sexual attraction is distinctly embodied and
>
> related to gender.

There were four women who explicitly stated that they saw no difference between bisexuality and other labels such as pansexual or omnisexual. Poppy discussed that she did identify as pansexual for a time and explained why that shifted to bisexual:

> I feel like the reasons I was identifying it as pansexual was like due to the fact that it was all encompassing but if you truly view transgender people as men or women and not like some other third party then it like still fits within bisexuality.

June also spoke about this topic concerning the view that bisexuality is transphobic:

> As far as I'm concerned, bi, pan, and omni are all the same thing pretty much, they just appeal to different people. Because they all mean that you're attracted to every gender. I don't want to hear any of that bullshit that bisexuality doesn't include trans people because that's biphobic and transphobic or that it doesn't include nonbinary people because that's biphobic and transphobic, which is awful.

There were also five who chose the label due to its simplicity in explaining their experience. Tessa stated that she "wouldn't know another term that would be just as plain…or just as understandable." Amy also believed that pansexuality and bisexuality were the same, but she also said bisexuality is what she "chose first and it's what I've stuck to." This sentiment was echoed by Ella saying, "bisexuality already happened with me, so it's what I'm sticking with."

Disclosure

Participants were asked about their disclosure experiences, how they would describe their identity to someone else, if labels or descriptions differ in public vs. private settings, and how important coming out is to them.

In terms of disclosure experiences, most participants had both negative and positive experiences (some of these experiences were already discussed in Interpersonal Experiences).

Only three participants, June, Rose, and Charlotte, explicitly stated that they had never encountered a negative experience with coming out. Out of the 12, half explained that they attempted to limit disclosure to those they believed would handle the situation well. Tessa, Rose, and Ella made specific comments about how they have never made an official announcement about their identities, including real life and virtual life. Tessa attributed this to everybody in her life already knowing she was some level of queer, while Rose and Ella said that they did not feel comfortable being that open about it in certain virtual spaces.

Describing their bisexual identity to others differed in a variety of ways, including using different labels, how much detail they give, and how those situations vary based on public vs. private settings or who is in the room. Five women stated they would initially, simply state that they are bisexual. Those five women also stated that they would provide more detail if asked, without much hesitation. They were joined by four more women in this sentiment. Only two, Poppy and June, reported use of different labels depending on the audience. Lucy, June, and Luna explained that how they describe their identity does differ in public vs. private spaces, while Poppy, Riley, Charlotte, and Rose stated that it would not differ. The reasoning behind difference or no difference varied between women. Generally, the reason for difference stemmed from an ability to be more open and detailed in a private setting. The reasons for why it would not differ included apathy toward the reactions of others and privacy.

Ten of the 12 participants were asked if coming out was important to them; Riley and Ella were not asked the question due to being earlier in the data collection process. There was a close split, with six identifying it as important and five identifying it as unimportant. The reasons for importance, or the lack of it, also varied between each woman. Lucy clarified that coming out about her bisexuality is not as important to her compared to other identities, and that coming out

"lets people in the room know where you're at." The importance for some related to providing a role model for others. Poppy reflected on her high school experiences:

> I kind of wanted to be an example for other girls who were coming out that were
>
> potentially in my social circle or in my school. I didn't… I don't know… I kind of like
>
> relinquished any emotions or anxiety I might have had about it so I could show "hey this
>
> is possible," you know? Like "we can do this."

Luna shared this belief, stating:

> I think it's important to feel fully seen and also to show people that you have choices in
>
> who you want to be. I think the more people look around them, and think that everyone is
>
> heterosexual, the less they'll feel like they have the freedom to actually make a choice.
>
> So, being out allows other people to make that decision.

Visibility

The issue of visibility varied throughout the sample. It ranged from unimportance to general LGBTQ+ signaling to bisexual-specific signaling. Unimportance of visibility was related to apathy about the opinion of others, strength in their inner identity, or desire for privacy. There were some women who expressed a fear of others' judgement, which led to them avoiding more public displays of visibility.

Five participants stated that they had "rainbow-themed" attire or accessories they wore occasionally, or LGBTQ+ literature in their classrooms, or followed/supported LGBTQ+ causes as forms of visibility as a member of the queer community. Poppy and Ella both keep "rainbow-themed" flags, shirts, fans, and hats that signal their membership with the community. Emma and Luna are both teachers that keep LGBTQ+ literature in their classrooms and have "rainbow-themed" sections of their classroom. Luna also leads her school's GSA and marches with them in

her local Pride parade as the chaperone. Amy has transgender and rainbow flag pins on her backpack that she uses daily. Lucy shows her visibility by supporting queer causes and following queer activists on social media.

Four of the women reported bisexual-specific visibility concepts in both public and private realms. This form of visibility ranged from t-shirts to engagement rings. Allison is married to another bisexual woman and stated:

> …we have a big, big [bisexual] flag in one of the bedrooms pinned to the wall. Then for us, we don't have any kids, so there's a fair amount of wedding pictures of us throughout the house. It's probably easier because both of us identify as bisexual. So, we do have some stuff around the house, we have shirts and stuff from pride. I wear my shirts outside of just the parade, like I don't have a problem with going to work in my bi pride shirt. I've done it before, and I'd do it again. So, things like that. I've got a couple hats, but I haven't worn the hats outside of the parade.

Similarly, Emma is married to a man who identifies as bisexual and they keep their sexualities visible through their engagement and wedding rings, which are made up of the different colors in the bisexual pride flag.

Charlotte, Riley, and Rose all stated that they had no desire to keep their sexuality visible. Charlotte stated that she is "not really bothered by what others think of me," which she related to her support system and age. Riley's reasoning stemmed from her belief that this identity is inherent to her and does not feel the need to live visibly in every moment:

> No. To me it's such an inherent thing. It might also be my personality. I don't mind being invisible. When I'm at Pride and stuff, I'll shout it all the way. But in my everyday life, I don't feel a need to do stuff like that.

Rose made sure to state that her lack of visibility was not due to shame, however, "I don't feel any need to change any of those parts of me, but I also don't feel the need to make anything visible for any certain reason."

Three participants explained situations in which they felt the need to decrease visibility. Ella had "chickened out" on buying a bisexual pride shirt at her local pride and had worn a bracelet that showcased the colors of the bisexual flag. She stopped wearing it because she "felt embarrassed about it" and that she does not "want to have to explain myself." Tessa wanted to hang a pride flag outside her house but decided against it due to her neighbors' political views and "scared that my house will be burnt down." Luna had a similar experience after moving into her home, explaining that she wants to hang a pride flag but does not "want the neighbors to immediately hate us." In addition, Luna also disclosed that she uses the label of pansexual when leading her school's Gay-Straight Alliance meetings due to fear that the label of bisexual will tell the children that she is "TERF-y," meaning she is exclusionary toward transgender and non-binary individuals in relationships or as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Gender Expression

Many of the participants talked about gender expression being an important part of their journeys, related to both visibility as a bisexual person and a woman who has created her own version of womanhood. Seven participants endorsed some level of unconventional or mixed gender expression, including challenging dominant views of womanhood and femininity. Four endorsed a level of traditional femme expression, including Luna, Rose, Poppy, and June. However, three of those women balanced that traditional sense with the aforementioned unconventional expression.

Lucy, Poppy, June, and Tessa expressed a desire to dress more masculinely but were also specific in how those clothes sent external signals that they are members of the queer community. For Lucy, this was in a historical sense and not something she continues to do because "I thought I had to look gay and now I think I just need to be comfortable." Tessa and Poppy both discussed how they adopted queer female stereotypical clothes and external cues. June specified that her gender expression can be seasonal, with more feminine attire in warm weather and masculine attire in cold weather. She also endorsed physical attributes such as haircut, hair color, makeup, and jewelry as parts of her gender expression that also signifies her queer identity. Luna and Ella wanted to embrace more feminine gender expressions but in their own ways, for Ella this was due to getting her nails done being the only "girly" thing she does. Allison is generally masculine presenting and embraces that part of her identity but feels free to express her feminine side whenever she chooses.

Forming Identities

In terms of forming these identities, participants walked through their personal processes and how those identities did or did not intersect. Bisexual identity development was varied between participants, more dynamic in nature, but contained some similarities. Gender identity development was mostly static and stable. The intersection of these identities was also discussed by the participants, with findings that show some indication that both identities influence or impact each other in various ways. The information in Table 4, provided below, lays out the themes, subthemes, and frequency of the subthemes.

Table 4

Forming Identities: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency
Bisexual Identity Development	Introduction to Bisexuality	12
	Noticing/Acknowledging Differences	8
	Thoughts About Identity	7
	Process of Exploring/Denying/Disclosure	7
	Advocating for Identity	5
Gender Identity Development	Intersections	12

Bisexual Identity Development

There were multiple, varied ways that each woman developed their identity as bisexual. Each story was vastly unique but there were some similar concepts that reverberated through each story and therefore the development model is inherently dynamic. The inclusion of external and internal experiences should be noted but not repeated in this section. Those concepts played important roles in how this identity was developed but the identity development was both interweaved and distinct from those experiences. The following sections were common themes, but they were not endorsed by every participant which further lends to the argument of the dynamic nature of this identity.

Introduction to Bisexuality

Each participant was asked where they learned what bisexuality was. Tessa was the only participant who actively looked for a way to explain her experience, while Riley said she did independent research after learning the term from friends. The remaining 11 recall learning what bisexuality was from others, whether that was family members, friends, or media. Poppy learned from *Glee* and her cousins, Ella from "TV probably," and June from her interactions in fan spaces. Lucy, Amy, Allison, Riley, Emma, Luna, Charlotte, and Rose all believed that they learned the term through school and peers or friends. Emma discussed how her friends identifying as queer increased her exposure to the identity and could have led to more exploration of it being something she could be. Charlotte brought up her age and how binary sexuality was during her adolescence. Luna could not specify when precisely she learned of it but knew that she was aware of its meaning when she began to identify as bisexual.

Noticing and Acknowledging Differences

The acknowledgement of female attraction was a big piece for many of the participants. Four women noticed differences in thoughts towards other women, five noticed attraction to female fictional characters, and five reported developing crushes or falling in love with female friends or acquaintances. This process was particularly hard for June and her identity development in combination with her belief that she was asexual and aromantic because the relational and affectionate freedom that women are given was hard to differentiate from sexual and romantic attraction that she did not think she was capable of feeling. Poppy's first kiss was a girl; she had not yet adopted the label of bisexual but intrinsically understood that she was interested in girls, too. Ella questioned why she kept joining bisexual groups or liking bisexual memes or following bisexual and lesbian YouTubers. Allison felt that she was "noticing things I shouldn't be noticing about my peers." Lucy talked about her confusion with a friend:

one of my friends and I were just spending a lot of time together and all of the sudden I

had an inclination to kiss this person in the stairwell and…and then that kind of was the

start of like realizing that why did I want to do that which I didn't act on it again and we

did not talk about it. And then I just assumed "oh, I like this person" but what does that

mean? But then this person just didn't go away in my head. It was kind of like a every

turn point and remembering "oh, remember you like this person, why did that happen?"

Thoughts Around Their Bisexual Identity

Ella and Luna had never considered being anything but heterosexual, while Tessa,

Charlotte, and June always knew they were different. For June, this was also related to her

asexuality. Charlotte had always found women attractive, but never thought it was something she

would act on. Tessa discussed the difficulty of knowing she was queer from such a young age

and not having any support to explore it safely. Ella and June both discussed how the addition of

their bisexual identity made their lives make more sense. June related her bisexual identity to a

puzzle piece:

It was kind of the final piece of the puzzle, that had been lost for a really long time, had

been found under the couch or something. But it was a very important piece of the

puzzle. The puzzle didn't make sense without it. I had put together small pieces around

the edges, but there was one big piece in the middle that was surrounded by these smaller

pieces and this piece slid right in, and I was like "oh, so that's why I'm like what I'm

like."

In a juxtaposition to the former two women, Lucy and Rose are both still uncomfortable with the

bisexual identity. Lucy's discomfort stemmed from the reactions she's received from others and

losing trust in her experience due to those reactions. Rose attributed some of her discomfort with

her heteroromantic identity but also the "ongoing conflict" due to views of others that she is not sure "if it will ever be over for me until I die." Similarly, Rose called her bisexual identity development an ongoing and long process and that "it's still kind of an ellipses or whatever." Ella did agree with Rose's assertion that her development has been a long and slow process. Three women posited that the identity was not as important as time went on, including Rose and Lucy. Tessa joined Lucy in stating that her current partner was part of the reason for this, while Rose recognized the conflict between her bisexual/heteroromantic/demisexual identities and her desire to remain private about those identities.

Six women experienced some level of internalized homophobia or binegativity throughout their journey. Many talked about the incessant reverberation of the stereotypes and negative notions around bisexuality eventually became too loud for them to ignore. Rose endorsed internalized homophobia explicitly, claiming that she "kind of slowly came to accept it more…it was a slow progression of dismantling the pathology of it." Luna looked back to her liberal upbringing and the shock that came from the difference in accepting others vs. accepting yourself:

> …in 9th grade, I got my first crush on a girl and I just remember it just happened. It wasn't something that I was trying to cultivate. I just became aware that I had this strong crush on a girl and like I had always seen myself as straight and even though… like, you know, my mom was sort of the typical liberal mom who would say things like "we're tolerant of everybody, gay people are great," but she never suggested that I might end up not being straight…she never suggested that we might end up being these people who were outside of the norm…so, I had never considered that I might not be straight ever before that and then I was attracted to a girl. And I remember feeling lots of shame about

it, even though I grew up to believe that there is nothing inherently wrong with that. I was

deeply ashamed and worried that people would find out.

Process of Exploring, Denying, and Coming Out

Six participants recognized and acknowledged their bisexual identity and then denied it

for a period of time. The reasons for this differed between them. Four reported fears of judgment

or actual judgment from others (Amy, Allison, Poppy, June), two said it was due to a partner

(Ella, Poppy), and two stated that other things took priority, mainly their education (Riley, June).

In terms of education, five experienced college as a place that allowed more exploration of the

identity. Ella said, "college is when you experiment, so that's what I did," and Rose seconded

that statement. Lucy and June were able to explore their identities in places with queer

communities readily available that provided exposure, role models, and peers that they lacked

beforehand. Allison met her wife during college, which forced her to address it and explore what

adopting that identity would mean in other arenas, such as family. Two women felt frustration at

the need to disclose their identity when heterosexual individuals do not (Ella and Emma), but

June addressed that frustration and disagreed with it:

> I get that on one level, but also…right now we are still dealing with straight being the
>
> default. So, until that is no longer the case, it is important to me to be able to like come
>
> out and say "all this time I was not as straight as you thought I was and that has really
>
> influenced me in this way in this way in this way and all of these concrete ways and this
>
> is why I'm the way that I am."

Six women endorsed avoidance of binegativity or sexual minority stress and/or their feelings of

needing to remain invisible to avoid shame, rejection, etc. for their bisexual identity. The

stereotypes associated with bisexuality also impacted their ability to explore, led to some denial

of the identity, and inhibited their desires to disclose to others. This aspect of identity development was largely discussed in previous sections. Four women had to have the difficult conversation with themselves around whether their bisexual identity was worth the fight it would be. As mentioned previously, Allison meeting her wife forced her into answering that question quickly, "and eventually I did, but it was kind of a lot of conflict." Ella's conflict stemmed from her believing she came out too late to begin relationships with women, even if that desire is present. She also stated, "I'm out but not fully…it just feels like I can't because…what's the point." Rose's conflict stemmed from religious family members and the concept of "I potentially could have to choose…what's going to happen to my relationship[s]…just because they're so religious." Lucy agreed with the other women and had a particularly poignant observation about her conflict surrounding her mother's feelings around her identity:

> So, I think in terms of her culture and how she grew up impacted my trust, because it just…I knew that if I met a woman I probably would never bring them home. I knew if I did, I would have to let it define my life in order to be validated in my family and I didn't meet anyone that warranted such a fight yet, so nothing happened. Nor do I think it will.

Advocating for Their Identity

Not all, but many, of the women discussed finding importance in advocating for other bisexual women or bisexual individuals and a responsibility to educate others on the identity. Generally, these were the participants who were solidly comfortable and settled in their bisexual identity. Rose felt a responsibility to advance a group of which she is a member, but also felt a level of guilt because "part of me feels like I should do my part…but I shouldn't have to if I don't want to." Ella, Poppy, Riley, and Emma all thought of the importance of doing their part to disprove stereotypes and improve society's view of bisexual individuals. This included the

stereotypes for bisexual men, which was generally viewed as different and worse than what bisexual women encounter.

Gender Identity Development

In contrast to the dynamic nature of bisexuality, the participants gender identity development was generally static and stable. There was some gender exploration present in the stories of these women, but generally that focused on the personal meaning and definition of their gender and how that gender was expressed to the world. There were only two women who explicitly said they explored whether a different gender identity fit their experience.

Intersections

Participants were often split in whether their bisexual identity and female identity developed simultaneously. There were some that unequivocally believed their two identities were dependent on each other, others that were sure they developed in a wholly distinct manner, and others that admitted the identity development of both interweaved at different points throughout their lives. Most of the participants acknowledged certain ways that their bisexuality impacted their womanhood and vice versa. Only one participant, Amy, decided that her bisexual identity and female identity were not influenced by one another.

Ella, Poppy, and Allison were confident that their identities as bisexual and women developed simultaneously. Emma was less confident, but admitted they were likely much more related to each other than she could conceptualize, saying, "being bisexual…I don't really separate it from my gender. They may have developed around the same time." Ella admitted that she had never thought of how it all came together, but "I guess the more I felt confident and strong with myself being a woman…I did feel more confident that I was bisexual." Poppy knew that they were related due to her age when she came out. She attributed her exploration of gender

expression with her growing confidence in her bisexual identity. Allison had a powerful

statement on how her intersectionality played out:

> I would say the combination of being a woman, being a masculine woman, being a black
>
> woman, being a bisexual woman…it's definitely caused me to kind of embrace my own
>
> path. And that's something that, apparently, I kind of grew up doing. It was something
>
> that, when I was trying to figure things out, I kind of strayed away from. I'd say around
>
> the time I hit maybe 25 or 26 I went back to it. I was just kind of like "I'm just gonna do
>
> my thing regardless." And just that overlap of all my various separate identities really
>
> made me realize that if I want to wade into this world, I'm going to have to carve it. I'm
>
> going to make my path in the world as best for me as I can.

Lucy, Amy, Tessa, Riley, Luna, Rose, Charlotte, and June were confident that their identities as

bisexual and women developed on separate tracks. Tessa attributed her confidence that they were

different with her lack of confidence around any actual gender identity development. Both Lucy

and June believed that at certain points the development of both identities met each other and

interacted, but that overall, they were not the same process. June described this as a process of

early development of gender identity due to her environment, asexual spectrum identity, and the

delay in her identifying as bisexual.

Fitting with other sections, seven women thought that being a bisexual woman gave them

a different, more expansive, more diverse view of the world. In addition, as discussed previously,

Amy and Poppy thought that their identities as bisexual women led to a particular strength and

inner fight to be heard and seen as valid and valuable. Five of the women thought that their

bisexual identity opened them to exploring their gender. "It makes me feel even more of a

woman," was Charlotte's belief about how her bisexual identity impacted her gender. Ella and June also stated that their womanhood helped to cultivate their bisexual identity.

One negative interaction was found stemming from being a bisexual woman. Luna and Rose both had concerns that as a bisexual woman, they would be perceived as predatory toward other women. Luna's desire for sexual intimacy with women was often expressed through threesomes with a former partner because: "I guess because I was so nervous and afraid of looking sexually predatory and wouldn't take any shots. Basically, because I didn't want to tell someone I was attracted to them in case it would impose on them." Rose was also worried about being seen as predatory for only wanting sexual relationships with women and her experiences feeling objectified by men who wanted the same from her. Another reason was specifically related to the heteronormative views on locker rooms and her own experiences with men staring at her:

> I feel like you don't even think of it if you're completely straight but… locker rooms cause me a lot of stress. Because I feel like it is supposed to be this safe space where women can go without worries of feeling like someone is looking at them a certain way, without feeling like they're being violated in any certain way, where there's just this hetero, straight understanding. We can all just be naked or whatever and it's uncomfortable for me because I'm not straight...but I just get very easily triggered by those things because of my own experiences of being violated by being stared at by men. I don't like the idea of me doing that to a woman just trying to change clothes somewhere she thinks is safe and I'm unintentionally crossing a boundary.

The Model, Summarized

Figure 1

A Visual for the Interactions Between Internal and External Experiences That Form the Identity
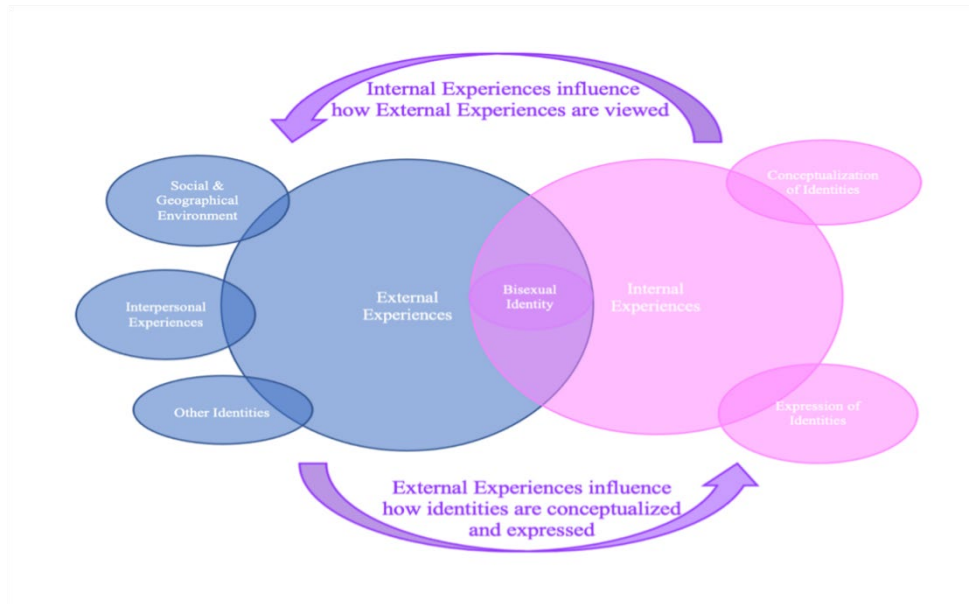
The creation and navigation of both identities is a consistent push and pull from inner comfort versus external judgement about how those identities are lived out. The inner experience of bisexuality was rarely viewed as a negative until they were told by others that it should be considered one. In a cynical cyclical process, the negative interpersonal experiences these women faced were typically informed by the broader social environment. This was seen in the difference region, religion, and media can make in each woman's life. The participants varied on how they dealt with these experiences, with some internalizing the negative messages and withdrawing their visibility and others rebelled and became louder and prouder of who they are. In some cases, they found their own community and in others they retreated from the queer community.

Overall, the model of identity development for bisexual cisgender women found with this sample is dynamic, fluid, and influenced by that inner comfort and external judgement. The ebb and flow of how their identities work for them stems from how flexible that internal and external

conflict can be in each moment, environment, and situation. The journey for each woman had similarities, while also demonstrating vast differences.

This inner comfort was showcased in their adoption of the label, their definitions and personal meaning of bisexuality, how their womanhood interacts with their sexuality, the varied views of what is good, hard, and unique about being a bisexual woman, their personal exploration of being bisexual, and desire to advocate for their community. However, that inner comfort with their identity was heavily dependent on the level of external judgment they could face for being open about it. Increases in familial, friend, partner, and community support were important to external factors strengthening their bisexual identity. Lack of familial or friend support, rejection from the queer community, abusive partners, politically conservative regions, and exposure to negative representation had impacted the stability of how open and proud these women could be about their bisexuality. Their experiences of sexism, misogyny, and binegativity did sometimes have the opposite effect causing some of the women to rebel against societal views and defend their gender and sexuality more profusely than before. However, those experiences were typically more universal and came with solid support systems in their direct vicinity.

The proposed model is more fluid due to the recognition that these women make very deliberate choices on how open to be which is directly related to how that identity developed in their environments. It is diverse and varied for many reasons, and further shows bisexuality as a spectrum of experiences. The model is dynamic because each of these women share bisexual and female identities, but how those identities are expressed, thought of, and lived out are beautifully different and personal. The internal and external experiences intersect to allow for identity formation, but those experiences were diverse between participants and occurred in no specific

order and had no time constraint. In other words, these women did not necessarily experience

stages within their development but interacted with different environmental, behavioral, and

personal components of how those identities would influence their world and feelings about

themselves.

The Last Question

Each participant was asked the same question at the very end of the interviews: What

would you want the queer and/or straight community to know about bisexuality, that you feel

they do not? Themes from the participants included: stop oversexualizing the identity;

bisexuality is fluid and a spectrum; the desire for more (and better) media representation,

education, and awareness of bisexual people; and finally, that it is real, normal, not a choice, and

not transphobic.

Ella, Tessa, Allison, and Charlotte were concerned that oversexualization of bisexuality,

particularly with women, furthered stereotypes about their identities. Ella, specifically, believes

that if sexualization was decreased, more people would identify as bisexual. Poppy agreed with

that statement, saying "the straight communities probably should know that if they were a little

more open minded and more experimental…y'all might be a little gay like, who knows?" It was

also related to some of the sexism and misogyny they experienced, with Allison explicitly stating

that she wanted her sexuality to "stop being geared towards men." Ella, Poppy, and Tessa

blamed much of their negative experiences on the lack of media, education, and awareness.

Tessa expressed a wish that heterosexual, cisgender people would extend more effort to get

queer media correct:

> I think straight or heteronormative people should not make queer shows when they don't
>
> understand it. Not saying that only queer people should make queer shows, but if you're

going to make a show that involves a lot of queer aspects maybe get someone who is

there to give you input on it.

However, Poppy was also discouraged that she is dependent on media for representation and

education, stating, "it shouldn't have to be something that we pride tv shows and media for

talking about.

Allison, Riley, Rose, and June all stated that they wanted others to know that bisexuality

was real, normal, and not transphobic. June, fitting with her other statements, was most

concerned about bisexuality equating to transphobia in the minds of some. Rose took issue with

people believing that bisexuality is a transient state, stating "it's not a phase, it's not confusion,

it's not trauma," while Riley expressed that her desire for women and men "does not make me

abnormal." Allison emphasized normality with "we want the same types of things that everyone

else wants, that everyone else pushes for in their own relationships."

These women also recognized their identity as fluid and a spectrum, which they did not

think heterosexual or LG individuals understood. They were uneasy with the idea that specific

partners invalidated their experiences or that a lack of experience with women or men would

take away their identity. Ella voiced this with individuality as the focus, "it's just individual. You

can't group all bisexuals into just one little idea. I feel like it's one of the most fluid identities

because there's… it's just big, it's a spectrum, it's just so different for everybody." Rose had an

almost identical response, but emphasized fluidity, stating, "I just think everything is so much

more fluid than we try to make it."

Two of the most powerful responses came from Lucy and Rose. The discussed their lack

of choice in identifying this way and how that has harmed them. It is reminiscent of voices from

the gay community long ago, fighting for their existence and acknowledging the hard truth that

heteronormativity brought to their lives. Lucy said:

> Part of me just wants to be like we also don't love each other…like I feel like there's so
>
> much hatred on bi people like we don't love being bi either. It's not a [expletive] choice.
>
> If I could choose to be straight, I would. It would make my life a whole lot easier.
>
> Because then I wouldn't have my mom asking me if it's still a phase. There are parts of
>
> my journey that I say, "you know, I just wish I was straight."

Rose had very similar ideas around her sexuality, "it would actually be so much easier for me if

this was something I could pick up or take away or choose or not choose, but that's just not how

it works."

Based on the themes present from the question, and their detailed responses, the

participants were mostly concerned with how unrealistic, negative media messages, lack of

education, and lack of awareness impacted how others saw them. These concepts were attributed

directly to how they perceive others to think their sexuality is a choice, a phase, confusion,

transphobic, sexualized, and in a specific box with specific stereotypes they cannot escape.

Considering how the proposed model teases out the tension between internal and external

experiences of their identities, it is only logical to assume how their lives would improve if

realistic media, positive education, and supportive awareness methods were employed in society.

Summary

The overarching question for this study was *what is the process by which bisexual*

cisgender women develop their sexual identities? For the current participants, that process was

dependent on both internal and external factors that allowed for the formation of identities.

Formation of a bisexual, cisgender female identity was developed through multiple avenues that

bared both similarities and differences for each woman, with some interaction between female and bisexual development, and included other intersectional identities. Though not explicitly stated by every participant, the process was seemingly ongoing, evolving, and open to new ways of existing should they arise. The data provided by this study has hopefully enriched our existing knowledge about bisexual, cisgender women and how they view their developing identities. Knowledge presented here may also assist communities, clinicians, and bisexual women themselves in normalizing how varied the experiences of identity formation can be for them.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This final chapter will summarize and discuss results from participants, implications of the study, and limitations and strengths of the study, while also proposing future directions for research in this area. The topics of discussion from participants will be explored through literature provided in Chapter 2. The dynamic model developed in Chapter 4 will be compared and contrasted to other bisexual identity development models that were mentioned in Chapter 2. Implications for clinical practice, prevention, and future research will be considered, based on participant responses. Finally, strengths and limitations this study has provided will be deliberated, with limitations of the study lending to directions for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The internal and external experiences associated with existing as a bisexual cisgender woman, and forming those identities, did fit with many concepts that can be found in existing literature. Gender identity development was static but diverse in expression, fitting with the social-cognitive theory discussed in Chapter 2. The way bisexuality was viewed by each participant, how it was experienced internally, and how others view it were areas of focus for these women. The push and pull of internal comfort and external judgement (binegativity, homophobia, misogyny, sexism) were major points in these women's exploration of their identities. The model formed through this study did not find stages of identity development, but rather a consistent cyclical negotiation with this inner vs. external conflict.

Comparison to Literature

The study conducted here did provide multiple examples of variables found within the literature discussed in Chapter 2. The way participants defined bisexuality and conceptualized it was a salient topic. How society views them in the context of their bisexuality was a relevant part

of most of their journeys. The participant's lived experiences also echoed the concerns of coming

out, relationships, and community. Gender expression was a pertinent concern of participants

rather than gender identity, with bisexuality often lending to feeling freer to expand their gender

expression in unique ways.

Bisexuality

Despite the academic hypothesis that the definition of bisexuality is ambiguous

(Deschamps, 2008; Klesse, 2011; Rullo et al., 2015; Berenson, 2001; Halperin, 2009), the

participants did not struggle to provide their own definition. Generally, this definition included

attraction to at least two genders. However, fitting with some literature, they did acknowledge

that the lack of a concrete definition was sometimes difficult when considering disclosure to

others and the fear that they will not understand or accuse them of transphobia (Flanders et al.,

2016; Klesse, 2011).

Societal Views of Bisexuality

Monosexism, binegativity, and the stereotypes that plague bisexual women were a

relatively universal experience for the participants. The participants reported infidelity,

incapability of monogamy or deep, meaningful commitments, and inherent indecisiveness about

relationships (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Cox et al., 2013; Lytle et al.,

2017; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Roberts et al., 2015; Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Li et al.,

2013), assumption that every bisexual is polyamorous (Klesse, 2011), eroticization,

oversexualization, and objectification (Flanders et al., 2016; Klesse, 2011; Li et al., 2013) as

stereotypes that they have encountered in their own lives or have witnessed from others or the

media. The existence of dual discrimination was also found in many of the women, with more

fear stemming from the belief that that the LGBTQ+ community does not accept them (Roberts

et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2015; Hartman-Linck, 2014). And finally, the concept of "passing" as gay or straight and bi-erasure was also a point of contention for many of these women (Johnson, 2016; Hartman-Linck, 2014; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Monro et al., 2017).

Bisexual Cisgender Women

Mental health was something that many of the participants struggled with, but this was not always conceptualized as related or entangled with their sexual orientation or gender identity. In terms of disclosure, many of the women did live in multiple closets while being "out" in others (Barringer et al., 2017; Wandrey et al., 2015). They also had generally supportive partners currently, but many had a history of abusive, invalidating, and biphobic partners that impacted their journey. Community building was important for some of the women, but not all of them. Many wished to surround themselves with other bisexual women who understood their experiences, while others were not concerned with building a bi-specific community but merely a supportive one. One finding that participants attributed to their bisexual identity and female identity was the way gender is expressed. The participants were often most comfortable in their gender expression, regardless of the way that expression may signal to others what their sexual orientation may be (Anderson, 2020). The literature has suggested that both femininity and masculinity in bisexual women is associated with higher body satisfaction compared to lesbian women, which could suggest that a balance in these arenas is a comfort level for this population (Steele et al., 2019). In addition, bisexual women have also been found to be less conforming to traditional gender expression than either their heterosexual or homosexual counterparts (Sandfort et al., 2021). A deeper look into the function of gender expression in bisexual women could help explain the role it plays in their identity formation.

Comparison to Existing Models

The models of Weinburg et al. (1994) and Brown (2002) were not fully supported by the findings in this study. This was mostly due to the reliance on a stage model, which does not describe the majority of the participants' experiences with their bisexual identity. The concepts of both Continued Uncertainty and Identity Maintenance in the models were not absent necessarily, but merely facets to the larger journey that these women underwent throughout their lives and not universal to every woman.

Bradford's (2004) model was also not entirely fitting to the data provided here but was more closely related than the former models. In many cases, most of the participants in this current study did question their reality, invent their identity, and maintain that identity but this did not often occur in a staged manner but a dynamic one. The greatest difference was the absence of the stage of transforming adversity, which lends to social activism and leadership (Bradford, 2004). There were instances of social activism and role model behavior in some of the participants, but for at least one, this was one of their first experiences and not the last. There were others that were in positions of power with youth, where they used that authority to have conversations about sexual orientation and gender. However, they did not conceptualize these experiences as an ending point to their journey, rather a privilege and unique aspect of their individual lives.

The work of Farr et al. (2014) and Diamond (2008) were much more supported by the findings of this study. There did appear to be a "core bisexual identity" within the participants, but they felt more freedom with and were open to the fluidity and flexibility that came with such an identity. Wandrey and colleague's (2015) work on the more public persona of bisexual women was also supported in this current dynamic model, specifically around the experiences

and decision-making process of coming out or disclosing a bisexual identity. Homophobia, biphobia, misogyny, binegativity, "passing," and disclosure refusal were all aspects discussed by these women and had varying impacts on their identity formation. Those concepts colliding together into an individual that is comfortable with their inner identity is the basis for the model created.

Implications

As stated in Chapter 1, this study focused on the usefulness such a model, and other data gathered, could have to bisexual cisgender women, academia, and clinical practice. Therefore, the implications for prevention, clinical practice, and future research will be discussed here. The implications for prevention are centered on the high level of reporting participants had around the negativity of their identities stemming not from within, but without. Clinical practice implications are split between how clinicians could be more supportive, validating, and educated on the diversity of the bisexual experience and how different clinical concerns have impacted a bisexual identity by the participants in this study. In conclusion, there is some discussion around how this study can give direction for further research in this area. However, this is not a discussion of future research that should be done, rather suggestions for frameworks and understandings around bisexual cisgender women.

Implications for Prevention and the LG and Heterosexual Community

As discussed previously, societal views of bisexuality are often negative, harmful, and destructive to those who identify as bisexual. The experience of dual discrimination is also a unique one that only other bi-type identities (e.g., biracial) could fully understand. The study conducted here only further cemented the damaging role the view of others can have on bisexual cisgender women and, according to them, bisexual men as well. Representation, education, and

awareness are likely avenues in which moves can be made for more acceptance and understanding of bisexual identities.

The final question asked of these women during their interviews gave a unique look into how societal views of their bisexual identity directly impacts them and their environment. They have ideas on how those negative experiences could change. In a very general sense, each participant was angry about how society viewed them but that also came with a heavy dose of hope that they could live to see that worldview improve.

Relatedly, these women were not asking for segregated spaces or preferential treatment. They were asking that people empathize with a struggle that their own community may understand more than they admit and that others stop and think before creating wildly off-putting stereotypes about their lives. The ability to think of this like Lucy may be helpful for us all, with the idea that this is just "the Golden Rule," and to treat everyone with the same respect and curiosity that you would want from others.

Implications for Clinical Practice

The discussion with one participant surrounding autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and the lack of social scripts available for queer women points to a specific clinical gap that can exist for those with ASD. This was also discussed by narratives within work done by Mendes and Harris (2019), with one narrative complaining that scripts for dating and sex were mostly centered on cisgender heterosexual people with ASD. Another participant did discuss her work with those with ASD and how she tries to bring her unique worldview into play in order to avoid situations where assumptions are made about sexuality and feelings about intimate relationships. There are ample instances of the literature looking at the rate of gender expansive identities and non-heterosexual identities within the ASD community, but there was a lack of qualitative literature

on how these individuals navigate an already complicated dating world as queer individuals

(Dewinter et al., 2017; George & Stokes, 2018a; George & Stokes, 2018b).

Another participant had explored the impact her borderline personality disorder (BPD)

diagnosis had on her experience of being bisexual. Like the concern around ASD, the literature

for bisexuality and BPD was scant on qualitative aspects of how these two identities could

intersect. There were multiple articles discussing rates of bisexuality in the BPD community, the

possibility that queer individuals are at higher risk for a BPD diagnosis, and sexual health and

identity formation of women with BPD (Reich & Zanarini, 2006; Reuter et al., 2016; Thompson

et al., 2019; Rodriguez-Seijas et al., 2021).

The fluidity and dynamic nature of bisexuality will likely require clinicians to be more

fluid and flowing in their thinking of sexual orientation development. It may also require

refraining from well-meaning, but misguided, reinforcement of binary thinking and expected

gender expression in bisexual cisgender women. Clinicians can sometimes become dependent on

structure, timelines, stages of which they can keep close track, and interventions made for each

moment of a constructed developmental model. The data collected here showcases how

comfortable one would have to be with the discomfort that will likely accompany work with

bisexual women, due to the lack of those concepts and trajectories. There was no evidence that

bisexual cisgender women undergo specific timelines or that we could adequately predict where

a woman would be in her journey based on age, when she came out, or if she is currently

partnered with a specific gender. From this sample, it appears that these women would benefit

most from a clinician that is validating, supportive, and willing to learn what these identities

mean to the and the place it holds in their lives.

The literature is clear that bisexual individuals struggle with mental health more significantly than their heterosexual and homosexual counterparts, but would those significant differences exist without the oppression of the world around them is a question we are not in a position to answer (Barker, 2015). However, we do have some evidence that "bi-erasure, biphobia, and monosexism are being perpetuated by therapists' in various ways in the therapy room," and we hold the responsibility to find ways to negate these views in our field (DiBartolomeo, 2021, p. 89). Clinicians could benefit from encouragement to think in intersectional, queer, and feminist frameworks to increase their ability to understand and navigate their client's identities as bisexual cisgender women. By acknowledging their other identities, clinicians can fully immerse themselves in the richness that comes from each of them. Queer frameworks in therapy would be helpful in keeping a healthy skepticism about the binary, while also actively looking at how that binary is influencing their bisexual, female clients. By working in a feminist, relational manner, clinicians could empower bisexual, cisgender women and work to examine how their own positionality impacts their therapeutic relationship and views on this spectrum of sexuality and gender.

Implications for Future Research

The current study was more supportive of contemporary models than the classic stage models, which may lend to the argument that more dynamic, intersectional models should be the way forward for research with bisexual individuals. The use of queer and feminist frameworks were also useful in critical analysis of the binaries these women had to confront for both their gender and sexuality, as well as the allowance of the model to be co-created by their stories and my best interpretation of them. As will be discussed further in the limitations section, focus and effort should be placed on diversifying samples in this type of research to better understand the

differences and similarities in more racially, regionally, and generationally diverse populations compared to those who are often studied more.

<div align="center">

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

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Strengths of the Study

The use of queer and feminist theoretical frameworks was particularly important to center, and focus on, the experiences of these women with both their womanhood and bisexuality. Specifically, there were the empowering statements made directly to heterosexual and LG communities by the participants in the last question asked. Although multiple literature searches occurred, using a variety of keywords and themes, a study that looked specifically at how a bisexual identity and cisgender female identity intersected and developed in one person could not be found.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study included 12 participants, the ability to replicate this study with a larger amount would help support and diversify the findings, while providing more information about the experiences of bisexual cisgender women. This study employed grounded theory, which does typically require continuous data collection until complete saturation is finished. Within this particular sample, saturation did provide enough information to build themes and explore processes of these 12 participants, but the addition of more participants would provide an enriched saturation that was not possible in this study.

Similar to sample size concerns, there were regional, racial, and generational similarities throughout this study. The participants were largely from the Midwest, white, and the millennial generation. Research has suggested that virtual research is skewed toward less racial diversity, fitting with the sample presented in this study (Jang & Vorderstrasse, 2019; Miller et al., 2021;

Watson et al., 2016). The concepts and model discussed here could benefit greatly from more diverse samples including women of color, older women, adolescents, and women in various parts of the country. There is some evidence that bisexual women of color have differing outcomes, compared to their white counterparts (Bostwick & Dodge, 2019). In addition, based on the sample, this model is a largely Western concept and could also benefit from being replicated internationally to compare and contrast experiences.

The idea that male bisexuality is treated differently, and often more negatively, was a discussion topic for many of the participants in this study. How a cisgender male identity and bisexual identity develop together is an avenue for further exploration of intersectionality.

The proposal for this study prefaced opening a door to exploring how bisexuality interacts with other gender identities beyond cisgender individuals. The lack of gender diversity was necessary to build a foundation for these concepts, but there is a possibility for robust information from those with transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive identities that also identify as bisexual.

Labels, their utility, and their evolution and fluidity were a point of salience within the study. Future research could benefit from looking at how younger generations might be straying away from more descriptive labels (i.e., bisexual, pansexual, heteroromantic) to more vague labels (i.e., queer) and what that could mean for identity decisions, expression, and formation.

The intersection of an LGBTQ+ identity and gender were most prevalent in how their gender identities were expressed, as discussed previously. This intersection, and resulting variability in expression, would be an interesting facet to add to the literature specifically around bisexuality and other plurisexual labels. Also, more updated research on the development of a cisgender identity could also be helpful for those looking to explore this intersection.

Finally, participants were heavily impacted and very concerned with how bisexuality is depicted out in the world. This component of the bisexual experience was one of the only aspects to occur with a clear bidirectional approach to their identity. If they were able to find positive, realistic media it enhanced positive feelings about their identity and gave them an avenue in which to educate others about the reality of bisexuality. If the opposite occurred, it created an internalized negative view of their identity and gave them the perception that others will only view them in that way. Representation in media is becoming more common, but bisexuality is falling behind other identities (GLAAD, 2019). Research is also occurring in this area, but the existence of deeper investigation into the impact of it could be beneficial not only for the literature, but also for prevention and clinical practice.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to qualitatively examine the identity formation journey of bisexual cisgender women. Bisexuality appears to be on an upward trend in society, along with other plurisexual identities, which makes our understanding as academics, clinicians, people who identify as bisexual, and society in general, about what this identity means much more important. The reliance on stage models of identity development is seemingly becoming more outdated and less helpful to our general understanding of identities like bisexuality and does not adequately address the way our identities intersect with each other. There is more work to be done on how we think about and work with those who identify in this way.

The invisibility of identities like bisexuality lent to the name of this document, which was also discussed in Chapter 1. Schrödinger's cat is both alive and dead in the box until you open that box. But that does not refute its existence as a cat, only our understanding of what that

existence entails. This seemed a perfect analogy for how living as a bisexual woman can feel,

with that identity both alive and dead until someone opens the box.

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Appendix A: Screening Form & Demographic Form

Screening Form:

Preferred name

DOB

Gender Identity

Sexual Orientation label(s)

How long have you been "out" as a bisexual woman?

Demographic Form:

Ethnicity/Race

Education level

Religion/Spirituality

Socioeconomic status (historical)

SES (current)

Geographic Location & Type (historical)

Geographic Location & Type (current)

Appendix B: Interview Questions with Common Follow-Up Questions

<u>Definition</u>
1. How would you personally define bisexuality? Womanhood?
    a. Are there behaviors, desires, attractions, required to identify as bisexual?
2. Where did you learn what bisexuality means? Womanhood?

<u>Personal Meaning of Identities</u>
1. What does being bisexual mean to you? Being a woman?
    a. Why these terms and not others?
2. What is good about being bisexual/a woman? What is hard? What is unique?

<u>Timeline</u>
1. Can you tell me about your journey to identifying as bisexual?

<u>Intersection of Identities</u>
1. How has your gender identity, as a cisgender woman, impacted, influenced, affected, etc. your bisexuality?
2. Are there any other identities you consider important or related to this discussion?

<u>Navigating the World</u>
1. How do your identities influence your life?
2. What is your experience with sexual minority stress?
3. How do you feel about the depiction of bisexuality in media?

<u>Disclosure</u>
1. What are your experiences of coming out like?
2. Is coming out important to you?
3. How do you keep your identity visible, if at all?

<u>Impact of Societal Views</u>
1. Have you experienced discrimination based on your identities?
    a. Where? When?
2. How have binegativity, monosexism, misogyny, sexism, etc. influenced your life?
3. Have you experienced binegativity, monosexism, misogyny, sexism, etc. in any of your intimate relationships?

<u>Community</u>
1. Do you have a sense of community in bisexual spaces? Cisgender woman spaces?
    a. Where? When? How was it established?
2. Have you had experiences of isolation, rejection, alienation, etc. from the straight community? The queer community?
3. What would you want the straight and/or queer community to know about bisexuality?

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