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A Focus Group Exploration of Sexual Identity Formation in Nonmonosexual Women

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A FOCUS GROUP EXPLORATION OF SEXUAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN NONMONOSEXUAL WOMEN

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Abstract

Nonmonosexuality invisibility in the scientific literature is explored as well as opposing historical viewpoints of nonmonosexuality's origins and nature. A focus group was used to explore the sexual identities of self-identified nonmonosexual women, their own journeys toward sexual identity formation, and the extent to which society has impacted their ability to express these identities. Using Consensual Qualitative Methodology (C. E. Hill, S. Knox, B. J. Thompson, E. N. Williams, S. A. Hess, & N. Ladany, 2005; C. E. Hill, B. J. Thompson, & E. N. Williams, 1997), several themes emerged: (a) defining one's identity; (b) social consciousness; (c) experiences of marginalization; and (d) strategies for managing one's identity in the face of biphobia. Results are discussed in light of focus group dynamics and benefits.

Keywords: qualitative analysis, focus group, bisexual, women, identity formation, social structure

A Focus Group Exploration of Sexual Identity Formation in Nonmonosexual Women

"The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom"

–Wilhelm Hegel

Over the last twenty years, there has been an increase in the interest and research on the topic of nonmonosexuality (e.g. Diamond, 2008; Rust, 2001; Rust, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1993; Savin-Williams, 2004); however, nonmonosexuality still remains underinvestigated (e.g. Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995; Troiden, 1988; Zera, 1992). The invisibility of nonmonosexuality, sexual attraction toward more than one sex, has resulted from sampling procedures. Frequently, investigators, for the sake of convenience, have categorized nonmonosexual women as lesbian or straight (Rust, 2000). This is especially disturbing considering the multitude of studies that show that bisexuality is more common in women and men than is same-sex attraction (Chivers, Reiger, Latty, & Bailey, 2005; French, Story, Remafedi, Resnick & Blum, 1996; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods & Goodman, 1999; Kirk, Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Laumann & Gagnon, 1995; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005; Russell & Seiff, 2002;). There are those who conclude that even women who self-identify as heterosexual and/or lesbian are actually nonmonosexual (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1974; Rust, 1992; San Francisco Department of Health, 1993). Other authors posit that bisexuality is more common in women than men (Baumeister, 2000; Carr, 2005; Diamond, 1998, 2000, 2003a, 2006a; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Garnets & Peplau, 2001).

Various theories have been offered to describe the etiology of bisexuality. There is some empirical support for biological and hormonal causations (Bailey, Pillard, Neale, & Agyei, 1993; Garnets & Kimmel, 1991; McFadden, 2008; Savin-Williams, 1997), psychosocial influences (Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Freud, 1962; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Veniegas & Conley, 2000; Wyk & Geist, 1995), and interactionist models (Berger, 1994; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; McConaghy, 1994). While a review of biological based factors is beyond the scope of this study (Berenbaum & Snyder, 1995; Hines, Brook, & Conway, 2004; Kimura, 1996), social theorists have proposed numerous psychosocial factors which may mediate same-sex sexual attraction, behavior and identity in men and women in western culture. These factors include: women's greater freedom to be emotionally expressive; greater and more negative consequences for men who are emotionally expressive; and the equation of same-sex sexuality in men as femininity and femaleness (Zinik, 1985). It has also been assumed that women's identities are more heavily influenced by social and political factors (Gilligan, 1981; Rust, 2000). These social views have led to negative stereotypes about nonmonosexual or bisexual women and men, such as: they are "fence-sitters" who get the best of both worlds, and they're repressed and in denial about their homosexuality (Rust, 2002).

Traditional negative stereotypes about bisexuality have lead to a phenomenon known as *biphobia*, defined as negative emotions, thoughts and behaviors towards persons who are bisexual (Ochs, 1996). Various hypotheses have been advanced to explain biphobia, including the notion that bisexual persons are threatening because: (a) they challenge the heterosexual/ homosexual dichotomy (Ochs, 1996); (b) they challenge the notion of the cultural idealization of monogamy (McLean, 2004); (c) unlike

heterosexuals, who are presumed to be normal and mentally healthy, gays, lesbians and nonmonosexuals are abnormal and impaired in their psychological functioning (see review by Gonsiorek, 1991); and unlike heterosexual women, who are feminine in their physiology, personality and attractions to men, lesbians and bisexual women are sexual inverts, masculine in their physiology, personality, and attraction to women (see review by Peplau, 2001; Peplau, Spalding, Conley & Veniegas, 1999).

The history of nonmonosexuality

Western beliefs about nonmonosexuality are a result of the shift in paradigm that took place centuries years ago. It was not until the 1500s through 1800s, that people became fascinated with the distinctive characteristics that made one individual different from another (e.g. Weintraub, 1978). A great increase in biographical and autobiographical writings developed during this time, which reflected the new interest in, and emphasis on, the concept of *the self* (Altick, 1965; Weintraub, 1978)- a time when society came to treat each person as a unique, self-contained unit. During the same period, the notion of the *inner-self* expanded greatly (Trilling, 1971). Two developments are associated with this shift toward an expanded concept of the inner self: First, self-knowledge had come to seem increasingly difficult. Confidence in self-knowledge eroded over the subsequent centuries through a series of developments that included the Puritan discovery of the pervasiveness of self-deception, the Victorian fascination with involuntary disclosure, and later the Freudian exploration of the unconscious (Hogan, Johnson & Briggs, 1997). The second development is the evolution of the idea of identity crisis. Although Erik Erikson (1968) coined the term "identity crisis" in the 1940s, the

instant popularity of the term suggested that there was already a broadly familiar phenomenon that it defined.

Historically, most cultures of the world have not required people to create definitions of their own selves that could serve as the basis for their adult lives, and so most cultures have not produced large numbers of identity crises (Hogan, et al., 1997). Likewise, homosexuality in general has not been regarded as an identity in most societies in which it is common (Altman, 1982; Ford & Beach, 1951). For example, in Melanesian societies, in the course of the life cycle, people may engage in sexual contact with the members of the same or opposite sex, and yet there is simply no great concern with classifying people into dichotomous categories of heterosexual or homosexual…they just are; they simply exist (Herdt, 1985). Additionally, the self-esteem of bisexuals in Melanesia is arguably relatively high and their sexuality is egosyntonic (Herdt, 1985). Neither they nor their friends are out to lobby for or against their bisexuality- a concrete example of the manifestations of the self concept in two distinctly different cultures.

Prior to the development of the concepts of the "lesbian" and "heterosexual woman" as distinct types of people in the late 19th century, women in European-derived cultures were defined primarily by their familial relationships with husbands (Katz, 1995). Marriage served chiefly economic and procreative functions rather than emotional functions, and women were expected to form their closest emotional bonds with other women (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). Even if and when these bonds became sexual, women were not seen as "lesbians" because of their same-sex activities or as "bisexual" because of their simultaneous marriages to men, but as "women" because of their familial relationships with husbands and children (Faderman, 1981). Thus, the tacit practice of

bisexuality coexisted with the *nonexistence* of a concept of a (bi)sexual individual (Rust, 2000).

Then however, the late 19th century shift toward viewing woman and men as eroticized individuals produced not only lesbians and heterosexual men and women, but also the *possibility* of conceptualizing bisexuality as a combination of lesbianism and heterosexuality- what Rust refers to as the "bisexual paradox" (2000, p. 2005). This shift resulted in the revision of typical customs that shaped the form of same-sex relationships. For example, in the 1950s, these scripts dictated labeling sexual minority women either "butch" or "femme", a paradigm known as "the inversion model" (Davis & Kennedy, 1989); and in the 1970s, there was a close connection between being lesbian and being feminist, and a corresponding emphasis on equality in love relationships (Rust, 2000). Additionally, this evidential transformation was mediated by western culture's abhorrence of anomaly (Douglas, 1966; Plummer, 1975) and the subsequent and seemingly inevitable adoption of its complimentary "principle of consistency" (Phelan, 1993, p. 775). This principle presumes natural and inevitable connections among sex, gender, and sexuality, where "deviation from gender…is an indication of deviance, either latent or actual, from heterosexuality" (Phelan, 1993, p. 775). These notions about the "naturalness" of the male-female configuration were justified by reproductive necessity (Paul, 1984), and as Bergler (1956, p. 80) predicted, what was leftover after this paradigm shift was a culture that abided with blind faith to "the law of the excluded middle", convinced that one cannot eroticize two love objects at the same time. This view is a fundamental assumption in "the illness model" of bisexuality (see review by Gonsiorek, 1991) as well as Zinik's (1985) well known "conflict model".

In a cultural world in which sexuality is seen as a source of identity and individuals who lack sexual identities are seen as deficient, individuals who do not fit neatly into an artificially imposed dichotomy of sexuality seek to claim the experiential space that can form the basis for nonmonosexual identity. Unfortunately however, society's distaste for ambiguity is reflected in studies by social scientists who refuse to relinquish their presumed immutability of sexual orientation and other parts of human identity. For example, many quantitative researchers have confused and confounded sexual orientation with other variables such as gender identity (cf. Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000), sex (cf. Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Veniegas & Conley, 2000), object-choice, past behavior (cf. Diamond, 1998), or public identity (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). This conflation of terms has led those who have attempted to measure nonmonosexuality, (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Shively, Rudolph & DeCecco, 1978; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994), down a path that has continually come short of capturing the dynamic complexity of a phenomenon that remains to be fully conceptualized (Diamond, 2008; Rothblum, 2000; Rust, 2002; Rust, 1994). This becomes evident when one reviews how the confluence of straight and gay desire in individuals is "explained" by theories that assume a basic dichotomy in sexual orientations.

The history of the concept of *the self*, combined with Western society's abhorrence of anomaly has resulted in several dichotomous views of bisexuality. The prevalence of these dichotomous views is evidenced in disciplines such as sociology and psychology, resulting in a continuing bias toward binary thinking and several dichotomously constructed debates. The oldest of these debates is between biological determinism (i.e.

"essentialist perspective", stage models) (for critiques and reviews see De Cecco & Elia, 1993 and De Cecco & Shively, eds., 1983/1984) and sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1999; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Paul, 1985; Peplau, et al., 1999; Rust, 2000; Weinberg, Williams & Pryor, 1994). Another dichotomy concerns the debate over whether bisexuality is an evidence of illness ("illness model) (Cory & Leroy, 1963) or a healthy and normal sexual identity. The third debate concerns evolutionary psychologists' belief that sexual identity is related to biology, versus those who describe themselves as social constructionists, who believe that sexuality is a result of psychosocial influences. The fourth debate consists of a tension between the postpositivist practice of labeling and defining, and queer theorists' who are averse to labels and binary thinking. Lastly, there is a debate between "priggish" moral standards and post-Victorian erotophobia, and nonfundamentalism and erotophilia. Historically, discussions and debates about bisexuality are fraught with contradictions.

Throughout history, several notable figures in psychology and sociology have argued that human sexuality comprises a vast spectrum of identities and behaviors. Among these are Wilhelm Stekel (1922) and John Money (1988), who believed that all humans have an innate nonmonosexual disposition, and Laumann, et al. (1994), who supports the claim that traditional models of heterosexual development need revision, as well as nonmonosexual models. Money and Tucker echo this view in their declaration that "in reality, people are infinitely varied along the spectrum in between, all capable of bisexual behavior" (1975, p. 16), adding that the degree of nonmonosexuality varies in intensity from one person to the next. In Weeks' words, "prominence of fluidity as a metaphor for sexuality raises…questions about the salience of bisexuality in science and popular

culture" (1977, p. 163). Several authors (i.e. Baumeister, 2000; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990; Money & Tucker, 1975; Rust, 1992, 1993) argue for a broader and more flexible conceptualization of bisexuality, i.e. that human sexuality is malleable, situation-dependent, and socially constructed.

Regardless of whether nonmonosexuality is indeed innate, one thing is clear: a critical reexamination of how sexual identity orientations have been defined is needed. Qualitative approaches allow sexologists to "go back to the drawing board" and to hear what nonmonosexuality means to those whose voices have been previously muffled by alternative agendas. The purpose of this study is to explore through the focus group format, perceptions of nonmonosexual women's sexual identities using an in-depth analysis. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore how nonmonosexual participants understand the meaning of their sexuality in relation to their psychological, social, and political worlds.

The majority of prior research on bisexuality has been quantitative in nature. This approach parallels a postpositivist paradigm, and related ideology and axiology. The postpositive tradition is one in which sexuality is cast into a binary of "straight" or "gay" typologies. It was only in the last five years that quantitative researchers began seeing nonmonosexuality as potentially and meaningfully variable across the life span (Diamond, 2005). On the other hand, very few qualitative scientists have attempted to publish studies on nonmonosexuality at all, outside of the collection of *reviews* of nonmonosexual literature (Collins, 1998; Gonsiorek, 1991; Herdt, 1985; Morrow, 1989; Murphy, 1983/1984; Rust, 2000; Zinik, 1985). Notably, two exceptions exist: Paula Rust's article entitled *Too Many and Not Enough: The Meanings of Bisexual Identities*

(2001) and Cashore and Tuason's *Negotiating the Binary: Identity and Social Justice for Bisexual and Transgender Individuals* (in press). Rust's research (2001) focuses on varying bisexual and non-bisexual identities adopted by International Bisexual Identities, Communities, Ideologies, and Politics (IBICIP) respondents and exploring the meaning of bisexual identities for USA residents who identify themselves as bisexual. Cashore and Tuason examined the experiences of identity and agency toward social justice of bisexual and transgender individuals through semi-structured interviews. The present study is unique though, because no previous studies have asked about the personal meaning of women's sexual identities and how social inequalities impact their lives, through the focus group interview technique.

Research Paradigm

The paradigm guiding this qualitative research is constructivism-interpretivism (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ponterotto, 2005) theory, and is the context within which Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) is used as a methodology. The qualitative researcher, in capturing the essence of sexual minorities' experiences, becomes a "bricoleur" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5), which is considered to be congruous with constructivist theory paradigm. According to constructivist theory, reality is historically and socially relative and is a culmination of the participant's subjective view, the social environment, and the co-construction between participant and researcher (Dilthey, 1894/1977; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). Also, the researcher's principles, personal knowledge and biases, in accordance with constructivist theory, cannot be eradicated from the research process. This often results in a personalized rhetorical, since the methodology of

constructivist research necessarily includes becoming engrossed in the participant's beliefs and perceptions of events (Ponterotto, 2005). The present study includes the historical and cultural context of the present-day United States, grounded in nonmonosexual women's experiences. This research seeks to explore and understand the meaning of each participant's personal definition of nonmonosexual identity, including her interpretation of her own place in society. Additionally, this study seeks to explore how social structures and our current heterosexual hegemony limit participants' sexual self-expression. Asking individuals to reflect upon ways in which they are oppressed, is a form of consciousness raising, and it is also the first step in creating systemic change in social institutions. And systemic change means that you are revising the political and social change of society.

Method

Participants

The study sample was comprised of four nonmonosexual women. [Note that I do not presume that females are inherently more sexually fluid than males; rather, my choice to study women is based on research that shows that gendered social roles belie the fluidity in men (Golden, 1996; Rust, 1993).] The first criterion for participation was that participants self-identified as nonmonosexual women. The descriptor "nonmonosexual" was purposefully chosen to recruit participants because it is less commonly known and bisexuality, as noted previously, often evokes negative stereotypes. A second criterion for the study required participants to be a minimum age of 35 years, with the intent of capitalizing on the experiences of women who, by the time of the study, had already experienced established patterns of identity multiplicity. This criterion sampling

(Polkinghorne, 2005) increased the odds that those who volunteered would be information-rich cases (Patton, 1990).

Two women identified as "bisexual", one identified as "fluid bisexual", and one identified as "unlabeled". These various self labels reflect a larger pattern of multiple trajectories of sexual identification, as noted by researchers (Diamond, 2005; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Peplau & Garnets, 2000/2001). In addition, there was considerable variation in terms of the age at which participants identified as nonmonosexual (*range* = 12-52). Likewise, although all participants married at some point in their life, two had divorced, and two had remained in their first marriage. Findings like these and others like them contradict linear models of sexual identity formation, and support the fluidity of the experiences and identities of bisexual individuals as conceptualized by sexologists (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1999; Klein, 1993; Meyer, 2004; Rust, 1996).

Participants ages ranged from 35 - 55 ($M = 45.5$). The mean age of identifying as nonmonosexual was 23, although the range varied, from age 12 to age 52. The racial composition of the focus group consisted solely of European-Americans. In terms of annual income, one participant reported to have an income of below $35,000, two claimed to have an income of between $35,000 and $50,000, one reported to have an income of above $50,000. The median annual income was $58,800. In general, respondents were highly educated. In terms of educational attainment, one had obtained a doctoral degree, one had two masters' degrees, and two had some college education ($M = 17.75$). In terms of religious affiliation, one participant was Non-Catholic Christian; one participant described herself as having "an individual relationship with God"; one was agnostic, and one participant was Buddhist. In terms of political affiliation, one

participant was a Republican, one was a Democrat, one was "other" and indicated she tended to support both Democrats and Independents, and one was a Libertarian.

The demographic form (Appendix A) included the following items: (a) "When you think about your orientation today, what one term do you use most often to describe yourself?" and (b) "If you could pick as many labels (out of 20 listed) for your sexual orientation as you wanted, which of the following would you choose, and in what order 1 being most fit?".. This item was purposefully designed to allow participants maximum degrees of choice in describing their sexual orientation. Of the 4 participants, one identified as "bisexual"; one identified primarily as "bisexual" and secondarily as "unlabeled", one primarily identified as "bisexual" and secondarily identified as "heterosexual-identified bisexual"; and one participant identified as "bisexual", "unlabeled", and "open". None of the participants described themselves as transgendered. Three of the 4 participants had children.

Most respondents had complicated relationship histories. For example, one respondent had previously been married to a man, legally divorced, been involved in a long-term committed romantic relationship with a lesbian, followed by three years of being single and practicing celibacy. One participant had been married to a man twenty years, and although had previously been in a simultaneous relationship with a woman, had not been in a committed romantic relationship with any woman for six months. Two participants were married and had never been married prior to their current marriage; and one woman was married and had been previously divorced twice. Two women had been married for several years to their husbands, both whom were practitioners of polyamory, and one whom associated feelings of compersion, that is gaining pleasure from her

husbands' outside romantic and erotic activities.

Purposive Sampling

Understanding that the participants for the current study would come from a narrowly targeted and stigmatized population, and that different women use markedly different criteria for labeling themselves nonmonosexual (Golden, 1996; Rust, 1992, 1993), multiple recruitment methods were employed to locate willing participants. Recruitment methods included advertising the study and soliciting participants through networks of online communities' websites; 22 local GLBT-friendly bars, churches, and support group organizations—in person, online or over e-mail; and through the snowball sampling procedure. Although the participants reflect a small sample (N = 4), this multi-collection approach avoided a common limitation in sexual minority research by avoiding typicality of the participants (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). All participants were interviewed vis-à-vis using an open, semi-structured focus group method.

Researchers as Instrument

As the principal investigator, my biases are born out of being a bisexual female and having the desire to understand how nonmonosexual women experience their identities. I consider myself an advocate for nonmonosexuals. I would like to impact political, economic, and social systems and institutions within public policy and resource allocation. My experiences as a bisexual woman are valuable to the focus group process, helping participants feel more comfortable self-disclosing their identities, feeling better understood in terms of their experiences, and delving deeply into exploring their own identities. Being a bisexual woman also provided a solid foundation for the data analysis process, especially when it involved gradations of identity experiences. Being a sexual

minority herself, Megan Wakeley anticipated that participants would have a solid understanding of their sexual identities, and would contribute rich material for the field of sexual minority research. On the basis of his own experiences as a Filipino-American gay male, Alvin Urbano expected participants to talk about their explicit sexual experiences without such a sophisticated and intellectual tone. The undergraduate female students, Rebecca Carter and Jessica Tozy, had no preconceived knowledge or prior experiences with nonmonosexual women, except for casual acquaintances. These women expected participants to talk about their struggles in trying to fit into heteronormative American society and their experiences of discrimination.

Research Team

The current study employed a set research team, which was composed of Dr. Tes Tuason, a Filipino immigrant female counseling psychologist, Dr. Lynne Carroll, a Caucasian female counseling psychologist; myself- a Caucasian female bisexual graduate psychology student; Megan Wakeley, a Caucasian female lesbian graduate psychology student; Alvin Urbano, a Filipino-American gay male undergraduate psychology student; Rebecca Carter, a Caucasian female undergraduate psychology student, and Jessica Tozy, a Middle Eastern and Caucasian female psychology student. Undergraduates were used as judges based on their maturity to handle the topic of sexual minority identity development, as well as their strong interpersonal skills. Additionally, most of the team members had formed friendships prior to their participation on the research team, and had developed respect for each other outside of the CQR process. CQR methodology was new for all three undergraduates, and thus they received training prior to analysis. Training consisted of studying and discussing issues from Hill, et al. (2005), during

which questions were explained and clarified. Dr. Tes Tuason is an expert in qualitative research and has extensive experience with CQR, authoring or co-authoring several studies (e.g. Tuason, Reyes Taylor, Rollings, Harris, & Martin, 2007; Tuason, 2008) using this methodology. Additionally, both graduate students had experience using CQR methodology.

I, as principal investigator, served as the facilitator for the focus groups, and Megan Wakeley acted as co-facilitator (as suggested by Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). Seven of the eight team members participated in the analysis. Dr. Tes Tuason and I took turns leading the first half of the analysis, for which everyone was present except for Rebecca Carter, due to scheduling conflicts. The second half of the analysis consisted of me and all three undergraduate team members; although neither of the postdoctoral team members were present, due to scheduling conflicts. Rebecca Carter served as the auditor during this final period. The meetings were healthy exchanges of ideas and opinions, and researchers were not always in agreement. Consequently, there was a check throughout the analysis procedure to ensure that team members felt comfortable being assertive contributing to an equitable discussion before reaching each consensus. All team members, including the undergraduates, expressed themselves freely and without reservation based on perceived potential interpersonal power inequities, as recommended by Hill, et al. (2005).

Procedure

Qualitative Research Methodology As recommended by Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993) a naturalistic study design was chosen as the data collection methodology, given the need for thick descriptions and for researcher-participant

collaboration. Specifically, this methodology was the focus group, complimented by a one-on-one follow-up telephone interview. A focus group approach was chosen because it compliments constructivist and postmodern theories paradigms. The size of the focus group was based upon prior studies and research exploring specifically the question of ideal numbers of participants (Morgan, et al., 2002). Focus groups include dynamic participant-to-participant interaction and emphasize the communal and collectivist nature of women's experiences (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995). Interviewees sometimes feel intimidated than in one-on-one interviews (Madriz, 2005). Additionally, focus groups maximize insight gathered from the interaction between participants and group resistance narratives (Madriz, 2005; Morgan & Kreuger, 1997) and provide a rich sense of self-confirmation and validation, especially to marginalized groups (Morgan, 1998, 2002). The benefits to participants of focus group research should not be minimized. The opportunity to be involved in decision making processes (Race, Hotch & Parker, 1994), to be valued as experts, and to be given the chance to work collaboratively with researchers (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) can be an empowering experience. In groups that work well together, trust develops and the group may explore solutions to particular problems as a unit, (Kitzinger, 1995), rather than as individuals.

Setting the scene. In order to provide a centrally located and neutral environment, the focus group discussions took place in the private conference room of a local public library. This location facilitated an atmosphere of informality. As suggesting by Morgan, et al. (2002), I began by introducing myself as a bisexual woman with the intention of balancing power and creating an atmosphere in which participants felt free to discuss interpersonal issues. The circular seating arrangement, as well as the location itself,

promoted an atmosphere of equality. Expectations for the interview process were clarified, such as: everyone gets a chance to speak, and you do not have to raise your hand to talk.

Space and time. The two-hour focus group was broken into two one-hour sessions, with a ten minute break in between sessions. Pseudonyms were used during the intermission, as a way to reinforce that confidentiality is critical to not only the participants, but the researchers as well.

Data Sources Prior to the interviews, the participants completed a consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and were asked to read the interview protocol. The demographics questionnaire was used to gather information about characteristics such as participants' sexual orientation(s), age, education and educational background, income, ethnicity, religious and political affiliations, and marital status.

Initial focus group. The length of the initial interview was approximately two hours. The entire first interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder. In order to protect their anonymity, all participants used pseudonyms both during the recruitment process, and during the initial and follow-up interviews. At the close of the focus group, women were given the opportunity to make additional remarks. Interview questions were derived through a thorough examination of extant research on identity formation; the history of nonmonosexuality in western culture; shared experiences of bisexuals and other nonmonosexual minority groups; cross-cultural studies on human sexual minority and non-minority development; and conceptual and methodological inconsistencies in nonmonosexual research. The primary investigator developed the questions for a semi-structured vis-à-vis focus group interview with all four participants. The interview

questions (Appendix A) were divided between the first and second phases of the focus group. In the first interview, the questions are subdivided into two different aspects: participants' processes of coming to understand their own sexual identities (which is the most focused part of the interview), and the influence that social structures have on their sexual identity development and expression. Questions were designed to help elicit individualized and personal journeys, and not their general observations of others (Rust, 2001).

Follow-up interview. Follow-up contact was established with each participant via telephone with all but one participant. These interviews lasted approximately 10 minutes each, and took place approximately three weeks after the initial focus group. The purpose of the follow-up contact was to provide the participants with an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the focus group experience. The follow-up interview served three purposes: (a) as a creative secondary approach to auditing; (b) as a derivational yet supplementary source of data- which increased the rigor of the methodology, making results more credible; and lastly, (c) as a form of co-construction between the participant and the primary investigator. The follow-up interviews were not recorded digitally; however, the principle investigator took detailed notes while conducting them.

Other Artifacts Included as artifacts were notes taken during the follow-up phone interviews with each participant. Also included were unsolicited e-mails sent to the primary investigator by participants after the initial focus group session. Three participants continued to provide input through e-mail.

Data Analysis

The digital audiotape of the focus group was immediately transcribed by the primary

investigator and three CQR team members. Each member transcribed one equally proportioned section (30 minutes) of the two-hour recording. Verbatim typed transcriptions were then compiled into a master copy of the interview totaling 31 pages, which formed the basis for all content analysis. One limitation of transcribed data is that nonverbal information is lost. For example, the pacing, the intonation, and the emphasis in the talk are not captured in the transcription (Polkinghorne, 2005). In order to compensate for this limitation, the primary investigator created her own symbol system (see Have, 1999) to capture these elements. The transcriptions were also checked for general accuracy by the primary investigator.

Research design. Data was analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), an relatively new analysis that requires consensus of a research team to identify themes and categories. This method of data analysis was chosen in particular because it emphasizes the use of several judges—a team of researchers—in order to interpret results (Hill, et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997) and because it strikes a balance between the descriptive depth and breadth of constructivist qualitative methods and the postpositivist reliance on hermeneutic consensus (Ponterotto, 2005). As Hill et al. (1997) states, "The consensus process relies on mutual respect, equal involvement, and shared power" (p. 523). Discussion and mutuality among team members on the meaning of the data helps to reduce researcher bias through CQR method exercises four sequential steps, as described in detail below.

Identifying and coding domains. Based on the content of the participant responses in the transcript, the primary investigator identified a list of overarching themes, or *domains*. Team members then read the transcripts and categorized the data according to

these domains.

Core ideas. During the first meeting, the original domains developed by the primary investigator were revised through the recursive process of discussion, which entailed: (a) returning to the raw data; (b) identifying categories, or *core ideas*; (c) comparing one category with another; (d) recognizing when categories seemed to interact and/or subsume each other; and (e) discussing and finally reaching consensus over the domains and categories (Fassinger, 2005) (see *Table 1* for the domains). Core ideas were abstracted from the transcripts and were worded as closely to the participants' responses as possible.

Coding process. Once consensus was reached regarding the initial categories, team members independently recoded the raw data. The team met on another occasion to perform a cross-analysis.

Cross analysis. During a meeting, team members discussed their coding decisions as they went through the transcript. Whenever they reached a difference in opinion in the coding of core ideas, they discussed varying viewpoints until they reached consensus for that particular item. This process continued until all coders had reached an agreement on every relevant statement. Cross-analysis was used to identify the reappearance of domains, as well as the categories within each domain. Then, as core categories were tallied, members switched off to rotate the group facilitator. Tallying was done using an adapted version of CQR's standard protocol. This protocol's frequency counts included the category statement *regardless* of which participant spoke, and *regardless* of single participants mentioning of the theme or category more than once.

Auditing. The follow-up telephone interviews served as a secondary, albeit

unconventional source of accuracy, where the participant acted as the auditor.

Results

The procedures used to obtain results were based upon the guidelines set forth by Morrow (2005). As is consistent with Morrow's model, quotes are included in order to "substantiate the investigator's interpretations" (Tuason, et al., 2007). The analysis yielded the following domains: (a) defining one's identity, (b) social consciousness, (c) experiences of marginalization, and (d) strategies for managing one's sexual identity in the face of biphobia. Table 1 illustrates the domains and the categories. Data is presented according to domain, and then by general categories first and the typical categories second. The bar graphs of Figures 1-4 provide additional illustration of the cross-analysis results, helping to illustrate "what-goes-with-what", as suggested by Wolcott, (1992, p. 96). Data was summarized by adding up the number of times a topic was mentioned, regardless of which participant mentioned it, or whether it was mentioned more than once by a participant. These "frequencies" were averaged ($M = 20$) and the frequency count categories were based upon this average and range. The range (*range* = 100) for the frequency of times a topic is mentioned is reflected in the x-axis of the bar graphs. All categories are illustrated with participant quotations, and data is presented using pseudonyms.

Table 1
Domains and Categories From the Cross-Analysis of the Focus Group with Four Bisexual Women

Domains and Their Respective Categories	Frequency Count Category
Defining one's identity	
Considers political views egosyntonic and compatible with her sexual identity expression	General
Desires affirmation from close others	Variant
Desires or possesses the power to self-define	General
Experiences acceptance from close others	Variant
Feels that early exposure to sex education laid the groundwork for her positive identity formation	Rare
Felt relieved after coming out to close others	Variant
Identifies as or manifestations of gender and/or sexual fluidity	Rare
Is aware of developmental stage's influence on her own or others' sexual and self identity formation	Variant
Is aware of sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts' influence on her identity formation	General
Sees non-Western views as having an influence on her beliefs and value	Variant
Social consciousness	
Empathizes with sexual minorities' struggles to fit in in society	Variant
Expresses an understanding of the behavior of those who discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation	Rare
Feels a social responsibility to help educate others or give back to the community	Typical
Feels there is a lack of resources for nonmonosexuals	Rare
Is aware of her own and/or other nonmonosexuals' discrimination against subcultures	Typical
Is raising a child to be strong in their identity	Rare
Feels there is a lack of a distinct, cohesive nonmonosexual community	Rare
Views nonmonosexuals as having a lesser degree of fundamentalistic values as monosexuals	Variant
Experiences of marginalization	
Feels a lack of acceptance from close others	Variant
Feels rejected by or a lack of acceptance from the monosexual community in general	Variant
Has been perceived as an adult social deviant	Typical
Has been sexually harassed	Rare
Has been subjected to inadequate or ineffective anti-discrimination policies at work or school	General

Table 2 (continued)

Has experienced the biases of those who have projected conventional bisexual stereotypes onto her	Variant
Has experienced marginalization based on her diet choices	Variant
Strategies for managing one's sexual identity in the face of biphobia	
Has concealed her sexual identity from others to protect herself	Variant
Is aware of her own cultural assimilation	Variant
Makes conscious decisions to spend time in locations which promote sexual identity expression	Variant
Recognizes her lack of complete control over others' internet usage and thus must manage the blurring lines between her private and public identities	Rare
Strives to be more authentic by challenging social norms	Typical
Strives to self-disclose whenever possible	Rare
Uses her awareness of the negative effects of secret-keeping to justify self-disclosure	Variant

Note: Frequency count was determined by the number of times the category was mentioned in a two-hour period by any of the participants. A category was identified as *general* when its frequency count was n=≥30; a category was called *typical* when its frequency count was n=20-29; a category was called *variant* when its frequency count was n=10-19; and a category was called *rare* when its frequency account was n=1-9. SO = sexual orientation; ed = education.

Figure 1
Defining One's Identity (DI) Categories by Frequency

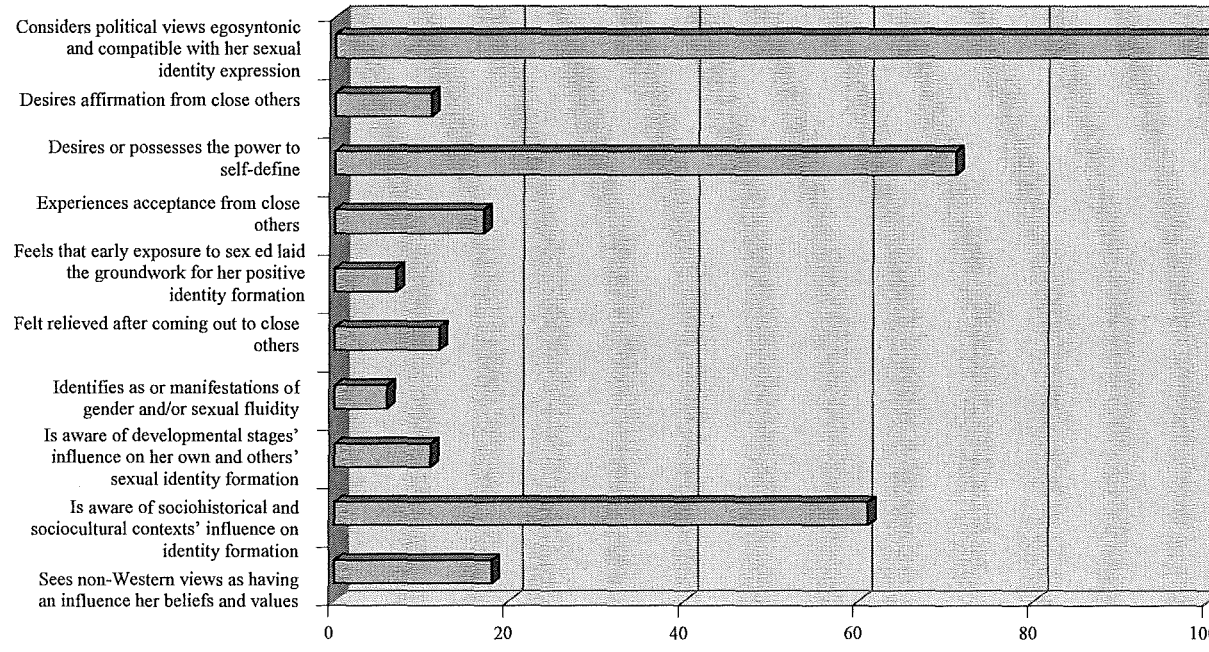


Figure 2
Social Consciousness (SC) Categories by Frequency

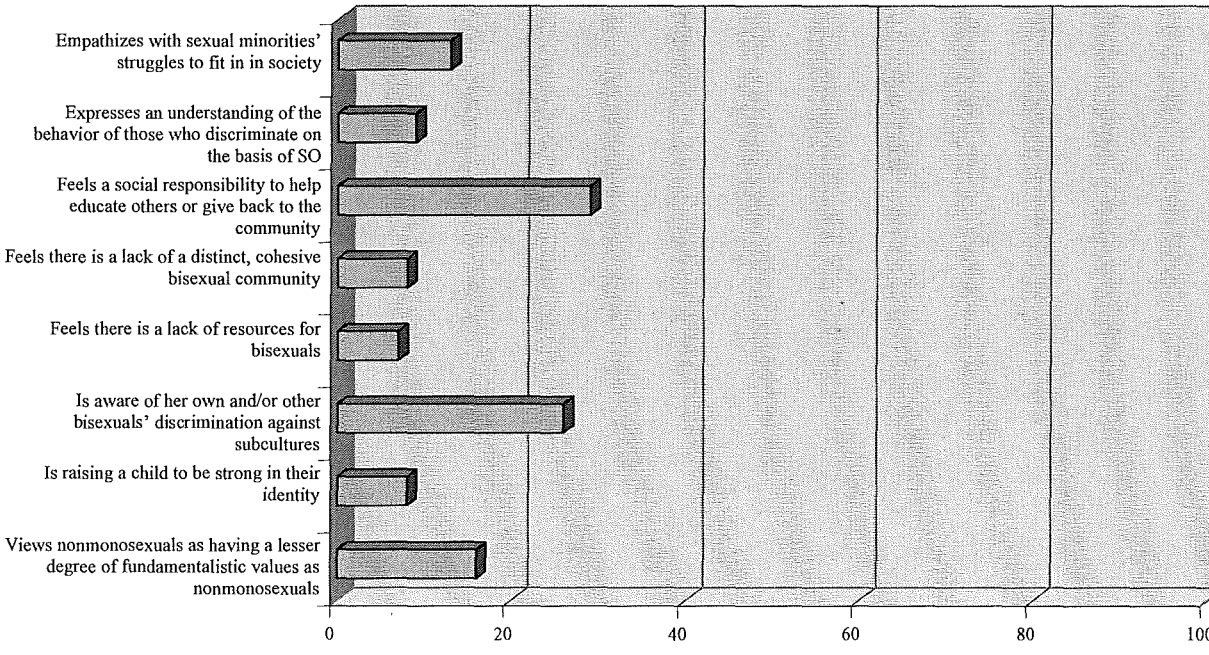


Figure 3
Experiences of Marginalization (EM) Categories by Frequency

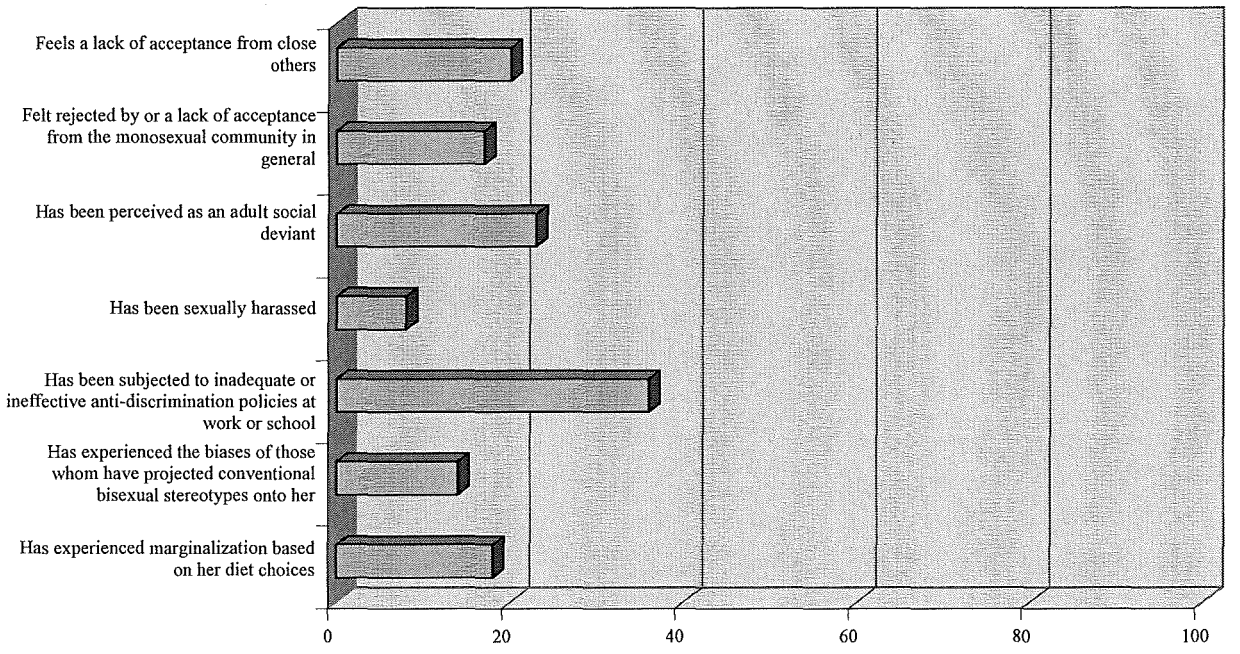
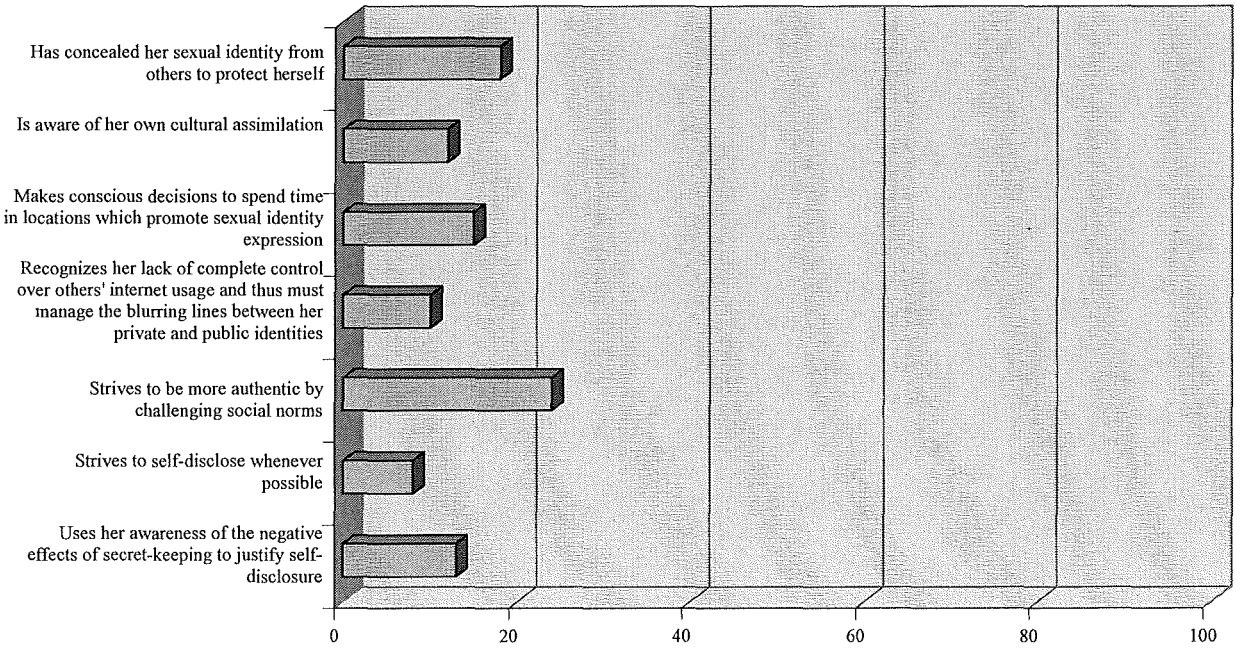


Figure 4
Strategies for Managing One's Sexual Identity in the Face of Biphobia Categories by Frequency



Defining One's Identity

Generally, participants cited that they actively defined their identities as nonmonosexual women. This behavior reflects both the concept of identity multiplicity and queer-authorship, defined as "resisting power structures that define one as abnormal" (Abes, 2007, p. 627). Although participants were well aware of the practicality of reducing their nonmonosexual visibility in environments where heteronormative assumptions had concrete implications and consequences—such as micropolitics in the workplace—they seemed to balance their awareness of social restrictions on one's identity with their resistance to gendered social roles. This pattern is similar to the concepts of liminality, as defined by Abes (2007, p. 627) as "a resistance strategy in which elements of heteronormativity and nonheteronormativity are incorporated into one identity that rejects normalized definitions of either", and performativity, defined by Butler as "creating genders and sexual identities through everyday behaviors or performatives" (1990, p. 627). Abes' term "bricoleur" describes participants, and their tendency to continually invent their own strategies for comprehending reality (2007, p. 632), as well as their preference for and right to an evolving sense of self.

Considers political views egosyntonic and compatible with her sexual identity expression. Participants frequently mentioned that their political views were in harmony with their self concepts. Participants identified with the term "liberal," as illustrated by their explicit statements such as, "I'm the liberal child already." Participants also implied that they were liberal with statements such as stating that they were anti-"White…evangelical…right-wing". Some of the most common topics mentioned were: the meaning of marriage including its practical use and the meaning of wedding vows for

contemporary society. Participants did not necessarily practice monogamy. For many, utility of practical materialism was a substitution for religious principles and nonsense nonpartisan political affiliations. Sam, a 42-year-old bisexual, who moved to the United States from Britain, articulates her political affiliation in the following:

> One of the strangest things- when I came to this country- was filling out a voter's registration form and being asked whether I was Republican or Democrat. And I didn't know which *either* of them was, so…I just checked a box. I think I'm Republican. [group laughter] But I really didn't know what that meant.

Continuing, Sam expresses her confusion over a government which she feels dilutes the voice of its constituents through forced party affiliation:

> Why do I have to be labeled? You know…why do I have to be in *one* party or *the other*? …Or I'm *Independent* and I can't vote in *any* of the primaries? But I *still don't* quite understand that. It's been explained to me, but I still… In England, you can vote for whoever you want, whenever you want. And you don't have to be labeled.

Wanda, a 35-year-old bisexual, addressed federal marriage laws said, "I'm tired of hearing that marriage is this "god defined role". Sam took a slightly more personal approach to explaining her views on federal marriage laws:

> I think, in the future, if we get gay marriage, it's a great thing for people like us, because I think my goal eventually…I'd *love* to be married to a guy and a girl, because that would, for me...I don't see anything *wrong* with it! And that would fulfill everyone…I guess…if they were fine with the whole thing. But that's…right now, that is not even a possibility. If we get *gay* marriage… I'm everyone's nightmare! [laughing]

In agreement with Sam, Wanda elaborated:

> Well…and if that's true, then take it out of the state. You know? If that's true, let's take the secular aspect of it away. 'Cause then… It doesn't have any place in 'separation of church and state'; it doesn't have any place in government; it doesn't have… We shouldn't *need* marriage licenses. It should be a public declaration of a very private institution. And then, everyone will have the same *right*…you know?

Desires or possess the power to self-define. Participants' responses often reflected cathected libertarianism and feministic ideologies, in the sense that not only the state constrains liberties, but more broadly, freedom is constrained by religious beliefs, family structures, and market forces. The adoption of these values seemed to have direct implications for their self-conceptions and guidelines for behavior in terms of sexuality specifically, and self-authorship in general. For example, in Wanda's words:

> I think we may have phrased it, "For as long as love shall last..." You know, but.... And that sort of us gave us the freedom to not feel stifled by these, these *expectations*. Because we really didn't *set* the expectations...which allowed us room to grow together...and...and apart, if necessary...but still be connected.

In another example of self-authorship, Amelia, a 55-year-old fluid bisexual, in reference to parenting her children, declared: "I told them, 'Look...I have *my* life now...and if I want to do something, I *will*. (But) don't *expect* it". Other participants' related comments included: "'I don't label my life, I just live it' is what I am going to say from now on", "I think I'm more comfortable with...just ambiguity", "I'm definitely more fluid and can move between 'em all, and there's not mutually exclusive realities for me", "I prefer "open" as my label because...then *I* get to define what it is!", "I'm *sick* and *tired* of stereotypes!", and 'I don't want to be put in a role!", "I really did *own* my sexuality", and "I agree that words are limiting". Wanda succinctly described her views on the limitations of labels:

> I think Egyptians believe that once you give something...once you know something's true name, it gives you power over it. And I think for *me*, it's like, "I don't want to give you the power to *define* what I am; and create a stereotype; and pigeon hole me; and categorize me.

In agreement with Wanda, Sam draws on her experience as a math education professor to illustrate her aversion to labeling:

> ...one of the hardest things for a student to get is the concept of a limit- that you have a continuum with a whole bunch of numbers on it, but sometimes what you need is somewhere in the middle. And...it blows some people's minds, at first, and it's really hard to wrap your mind around something that is "close enough" but...doesn't really have a label. So...how do you define 'sexuality' if you've got, maybe, a guy who's straight with maybe ten wives, and on this end, you've got those Amazonian women who've had ten husbands, and a few women on the side as well...and in between, you've got all these women who find other women attractive, but who won't go there...you've got men who've had experiences, but think it's gross...? We have *so* many different types! Do we really need to put a label on...? Maybe we should go *away* from trying to label everything, and come out from our boxes, and realize that language is limiting to us. I don't know what the answer is...how to get rid of language...

Is aware of sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts' influence on her identity formation. Participants often responded to the interview questions by acknowledging the significance of their sociohistorical and sociocultural context in defining their sexual identities. They seemed to understand, for example, that nonmonosexual women in their 20s today face a different set of social attitudes and opportunities than women who grew up in the 1950s or 1970s. Participant responses expressed this understanding throughout the interview in various ways. For example, when the conversation turned to marriage, the following insights were mentioned: "I think that the *meaning* of marriage has changed over *time*, but I think that people don't understand *that's* what it *was*"; "I don't like the *roots* of marriage. You know...I don't like the *slavery* aspect...the *ownership* aspect" and "Well, marriage has really only been all about monogamy a lot, sense since Victorian times". In terms of identity formation, participants typically mentioned the influence of history and culture as a factor in their development and self-concepts, such as "I think, with the younger generations, they're more sexually active", "I've lived here my whole life, and...it's *not* as bad as it use to be- I'll put it that way".

Participants observed that, while currently this is not such a thing as a distinct,

nonmonosexual community, this might not have been true historically. For example one participant said, "For *me*, it would've been in the 80s back in England", indicating both a cross-cultural and transhistorical perspective. And Raven, after listening to another person's response to an unrelated question, added:

> That's a serious recognition...that you're speaking about. In nursing, when we study a subject, we always include the environment as one of the ingredients in the mix. And so, it's obvious that the environment plays a big part.

Sam clearly describes her identity by noting significant cultural and historical influences:

> I grew up...um...around the time of the gender benders—that's what really molded my personality I guess. I didn't really have parents; it was just me and my brother. And so I was molded by my peer group and my peer group said, "You can be whatever the heck you want". So I had friends who were transvestites, and...I mean *every*one was so *open* back then. ...the old folks in Britain thought it was a little weird, and everything...but everyone loved *Boy George*!

For scientists, counselors and laypeople alike, being aware of historical and cultural influences is germane, considering implications for research, therapy and self-understanding. Paul (1985, p. 32) succinctly summarized this idea: "The field of sexuality research is at a point where it has the resources to compare critically the current model of sexuality in western society with differing cross-cultural and trans-historical perspectives".

Social Consciousness

Comments such as "I've learned so much about the way that attitudes of sexuality have changed on a social level" and "I absorb it more on the *universal* level, than I do on a *personal* level" are indicative of participants' social consciousness- that is, consciousness shared within a society. Respondents were typically aware of the many problems that nonmonosexuals face and were empathetically attuned to struggles of

bisexuals. Participants' social consciousness seemed to arise as a response to the many social injustices experienced in their own or the lives of other bisexual persons. At the root of these injustices, according to the participants' views, are the dominant norms of the gender system in western culture. Participant responses suggested a strong resistance to power and authority.

Participants were aware of how different their personal views about sexuality and relationships were from those of mainstream society They also felt obligated to help others understand that nonmonosexual persons do not share a distinct and visible subculture. On the contrary, participants implied that this lack of cohesiveness within the nonmonosexual community itself might help explain why gay, lesbian, and straight persons do not seem to understand and accept bisexual persons.

Feels a social responsibility to help educate others or give back to the community. One common theme mentioned by participants was their sense of obligation to contribute to the progress of sexual minority research- that is, research on nonheterosexual individuals. For example, when asked why they wanted to be a part of the study, Wanda replied:

> I've never done anything like this before and I think that it's really important...in general to the field and to the community. I mean, I just think it...to women and...everybody. I think it's really important (and) it sounded like something that I really needed to do.

Participants also felt a sense of obligation to contribute to the development of social policies affecting the sexual lives of future generations, especially sexual minorities. Wanda saw a deficit in the ability of previous generations to define their identities within the context of history. She claims:

> ...the younger gay people...don't know their history. They...don't have any idea about...you know...Stonewall, and White Knights, and all. I think that politically and historically...it's really a matter of education more than anything else. I feel like we could make a huge difference in the lives of young women, regardless of their sexuality, if we were to have women's studies classes at the junior high level. ...I think we'd see a lot more self-respect in young women...and let them have their own identity and develop that, and realize that there's more to life than just...who's gonna be Paris Hilton's BFF. [group laughter]

Sam talked about her views on the local public school system's policy on teaching abstinence-only sex education in the schools. Although she seemed frustrated with her inability to change the policy, Sam's way of coping with her struggle was to actively intervene to educate her son about sex and relationships. This behavior reflected Sam's understanding of the complexity of the social hierarchies, and her desire to act carefully after weighing all options.

> And...what that means is they teach primarily the 'you should remain abstinent until you get married.' And seeing as the federal government enacted the law that says marriage is only between *one* man and *one* woman, that really marginalizes anybody who doesn't want to get married, who's bisexual, who's gay, who's anything else. ...this whole generation of kids going through this school system, thinking that the *only* right thing to do is to have sex when you're married to a member of the opposite sex. And that really grates me. ...*my* kids are in the public school system. One of them has been through that program. And I felt like I had to *deprogram him* from *what they're teaching him* because they've got facts and figures in there that are just driving me crazy because people who *don't know* what they're *talking about* are making these programs!

Is aware of her own and/or other nonmonosexuals' discrimination against subcultures. Part of having a social consciousness encompasses the ability to recognize biphobia/homophobia/ transphobia in others. Wanda expresses her disillusionment when she sees lesbian and gay persons responding negatively to bisexual persons.

> At first, I thought that...I would be *more* accepted by *gays*. And I was very *surprised* to find the, you know...*contradiction* there. There's this whole...straight people think that you're just gonna sleep with anything that *works* [laugh] and gay people kind of think that you're trying to benefit from

> straight society, while also 'getting your kicks', or (that) you haven't gotten the courage to come all the way out of the closet yet. …apparently I was wrong about that.

For Wanda and others in the focus group, social consciousness entails the ability to recognize one's *own* biases- as well as those of others. Participants frequently recognized their own hypocrisies, especially in relation to transgender persons. For example, Wanda struggles to accept transgender persons, and to move outside of her own binary thinking:

> …for a long time, I really struggled with transgender people. But I *knew* it was something I had to get over. I have some friends who transitioned from female to male and…I almost felt like…that was like…"You're turning your backs on us!" You know, "You're gonna go join the other team!" "You *obliviously* think that it's better to be a *guy*!" And I felt kinda betrayed by that a little bit! And you know, the other way- men transitioning to women- …to be perfectly honest, there was a time when I felt like, "Look…if you're not bleeding, you're not a women!" "You don't *know* what its like. You know, "You wanna put on the clothes, and you want to go do the things…" And I realize *now* they have their *own* struggles; they have their *own* issues. …taking the women's study course really, really changed my mind about gender fluidity. So, really it's not so much…I mean, sexually I've always been, "Everybody do what you want to do". But *gender*, for some reason, I had really kinda stricter gender roles that I really didn't *realize* that I had…

Experiences of Marginalization

Participants were marginalized and felt frustration and helplessness in the face of biphobia. Specifically, they felt limited by public policy, governmental laws, and judicial rulings. In addition, participants were sensitive to the radical stereotypes and fears that others had about bisexual persons. In their discussions, participants distinguished between direct and indirect discrimination, and personal versus professional discrimination. For example, in the context of the workplace, discrimination can be both subtle and blatant. The later entails the denial of material resources and opportunities, resulting in loss of income, sexual stratification, and economic power. Participants also noted the significant ways in which they are personally impacted through loss of self-

esteem and personal rejection by biphobic family members and close friends. They also experienced the vulnerability associated with being a potential victim of hate crimes. Sam colorfully illustrates this point as she discusses her fear of being socially marginalized by her neighbors:

> ...in Jacksonville...if I kissed a girl in the front of my own driveway, and *anyone* saw that, I mean, it would just be this *horrible* neighborhood gossip, and I couldn't even imagine what would happen. So, I guess I've got a *little* social anxiety... I *can not* fathom coming out and being 'the weirdoes that live on the corner of the street'...'cause that's what I would be. [laugh] I'd probably be worse than *that*, and I don't know if it's 'social anxiety'...I think its reality!

Has been subjected to inadequate or ineffective anti-discrimination policies at work or school. Focus group participants were sensitive to the fact that in many cases, there were anti-discrimination policies at work and at school, but these were oftentimes ineffectual. The intended use of laws and policies is to provide social structures that do not discriminate based on characteristics other than qualities related to being able to meet the functions of the job position when making decisions based on the hiring, retention of, or promotion of employees. However, these bona-fide occupational qualifications are not the only attributes which employers take into consideration when evaluating current or potential employees, despite what governing laws and policies state on "the books". Participants mentioned that based on their experiences, good-intending laws and policies do not usually translate to corporate culture, producing a disparate impact on individuals of particular sexual orientations, or on their perceived orientation. The end result of these micropolitics in corporate culture promotes *heterosocial reproduction* (see also Kanter, 1993)- the tendency of corporate executives to socialize with and promote other heterosexuals, resulting in a glass ceiling for gays, lesbians and nonmonosexuals. One example of ways in which anti-discrimination policies are not enforced on the job was

provided by Amelia. She indicates that even though there are no blatant examples of harassment, here work environment is one in which heteronormative assumptions prevail. In another example, Wanda talks about the disparity between her corporate *policy* and her corporate *culture*, and how this transposes into forced assimilation:

> ...people *say* one thing, and then make judgments based on *other* things, and it's just...it's just human nature. They're afraid...and if they're afraid, they're gonna go with the thing that makes them feel most secure. So, my dad used to call it 'playin' the game.' So...I play the game.

After hearing the story about a faculty member at a local university was out as a lesbian, because she felt safe with her colleagues, Sam stated, "Where I work, there is not *that*. They'd *like* to think they have that kind of environment there, but it's not, no". Raven also disclosed several similar stories. She described how her experiences with monosexism and internalized biphobia in the business world not only prevented her from being hired at one job, but literally cost her another. For example, Raven described a friend, also a supervisor, who was insincere in her "acceptance" of Raven's bisexual identity. Raven also described her reactions to being treated negatively in the corporate world because of her sexual identity. In one instance, she relates her experiences during a job interview:

> I know, *pretty* certainly- it wasn't said to me directly, but- I *did* lose a job as a pediatric nurse practitioner for coming out...and the doc was a *friend* of mine. But when that whole transition went down, that was too much for her. She just couldn't get her head around the idea, "What if a parent found out?" And she was starting a new practice, and it wouldn't work. And I also interviewed at a university for a position that was supposedly very proactive and very open and accepting. And I came out in the interview expecting that would be a point of positiveness, and...I didn't get the job. And in part, I think...there was the concern about, 'Well, we're gonna be diverse; we're gonna be open...but we can't be *top*-heavy!'

Has been perceived as an adult social deviant. Focus group participants frequently

mentioned being subject to radical biphobic stereotypes and charges of moral culpability. One such stereotype of bisexual persons is that they are immoral and sexually promiscuous, and sexually opportunistic. Participants shared the epitaphs they heard about bisexuals: "contagiously diseased rapist", "child molester", "sexual addict" (or "prostitute"). Wanda shares her feelings of hurt when a friend assumes that Wanda, because of her bisexual identity, cannot be trusted with children:

> …I've been told by one of my friends, 'I wouldn't leave my children alone with you because of your orientation and your lifestyle.' (That's) a *hell* of a thing to say to someone! It's probably the *worst* thing you can say to someone.

Later in the interview, Wanda describes the reaction of a close friend to whom she has disclosed her bisexual identity. Some assume that this means that Wanda is incapable or unwilling to be monogamous:

> 'Is this a come on? Are you asking *me*?' This is usually their reaction. The people make it about them and its like, all of a sudden, "Are you *coming on* to me?" Oh, honey, don't *flatter* yourself! [group laughter] I mean, it's like…

Amelia, relates to Wanda's story by uttering, "It's like they think it's gonna rub off or somethin'…", with group members nodding and murmuring in agreement. Her statement captures the irrational nature of assumptions about nonmonosexuals. The belief that nonmonosexuals are sexual perverts or sexual predators, and monosexuals their helpless victims—is similar to views many people hold of rapists. This "blaming the victim" is an integral part of heuristics which encourage in-group, out group thinking, which is explored in Goffman's work (1963).

Focus group participants were able to quickly identify and categorize some behaviors as biphobic. Raven spoke of the necessity of society to embrace the concept of sexual fluidity. She noticed "It's so important for people to change…and yet change is such a

fear-based concept". The ironic thing about this process of stereotyping, blaming the victim, and then making sense of discriminatory behavior is that some participants went so far as to almost validate the actions of those who discriminate by implying sympathy for what may be perceived as a compulsion to protect oneself. This is reflected in Wanda's statement, "So much that we do is rooted in protecting ourselves from fear. So I feel like fear is what keeps people away from that middle ground".

Participants seemed to think that the radical stereotype of bisexuals as "promiscuous" implied that their lack of morality was equated in other people's minds with bisexuality. As Sam explains, "I *almost* feel an obligation to explain that I'm not promiscuous. It seems to be the first thing to pop's into peoples' minds!" Sam describes how, after her best friend discovered her on a dating website, she reluctantly tried to explain her sexual orientation to her, and her friend proceeded to tell her entire social network of friends that she was "a swinger". Sam was left with having to deal with the social awkwardness of the stereotypes that accompany this label. Sam described how, when out with a group of friends, she was faced with sexually harassment by people she never thought would overstep her boundaries in such a way:

> It's a social *decorum*! If I was straight and single, there's *still* a social decorum that you *adhere* to. It's, you know...you...see if the persons *interested*...and then see if they give something back, you know...? I have been hit on by husbands. I was just at a *comedy show* and I was standing there with my water. I had one friend who's pretty close to me, and she's just like...throwing herself at me! She's got her hands down my boobs! There's no...there's no...it's like it's *disappeared*...because I'm 'promiscuous' or 'swinging'...or *whatever* it is I am!

Raven's insightful response to Sam was, "Well in this way, maybe it's making it okay for them to act on their desires...because (swinger)...is a permission-giving word! Wanda, relating to Sam's anecdotal story about the assumptions of close friends, explains:

> One of my best friends has been like- 'cause I always say things like, 'Well…I'm going to Gainesville to see some friends'...and one of my oldest friends will be like… [using a Southern drawl] 'Are those your *swiiiinger* friends?' And I would be *so offended*! And I would *explain* the difference…and she would just do it every single time!

Focus group participants were surprised and dismayed at the ingrained presumptions about nonmonosexuals. For example, the belief that bisexual persons have poor boundaries and are immoral persons is much like sociotypical beliefs about prostitutes- that they are emotionally insecure women who are desperate enough to have sex with anyone. The radical stereotypes of nonmonosexuals as having ravenous libidos who cannot suppress their sexual inhibitions and control their erotic impulses still persists according to focus group participants.

Wanda described the subtle ultimatums that are given by those who practice polyamory and polyfidelity- a fascinating insight into dynamics between subgroups that monosexuals may not be privileged to:

> As far as the polyamorous side to it…I feel like that's almost like an obligation- it's almost manipulation, *emotionally*. It's like, 'You are going to fall *in love* with me, and if you don't, then you're a swinger, and obliviously, you're just promiscuous!'

Even *within* the world of self-identified bisexuals, there is a subgroup—the polyamorous—who stereotype those who are not *strictly* polyamorous as "promiscuous. Regardless of the underlying motivation for such perceptions, one must wonder— if polyamorous people marginalize those who are nonmonosexual but not polyamorous, how realistic it is for gay or straight individuals to be able to grasp the definition of nonpolyamorous bisexuals without using stereotypes.

Strategies for managing one's sexual identity in the face of biphobia

Focus group participants typically reported using various creative strategies- both planned and reflexive, in order to cope with heterosexism. These strategies included acquiescent acts (e.g., concealment of identity from others as a protection), as well as intentional acts (e.g., conscious decisions to spend time in locations which promote sexual identity expression, staying in the closet, and awareness of the negative effects of secret-keeping to justify self-disclosure). Perhaps the most radical of these strategies is the participants' choice to strive to not be more authentic by challenging social norms. The choice to not assimilate to cultural norms requires at least a degree of agency and a forfeiture of heterosexual privilege. Although one traditional stereotype claims that bisexuals "get the best of both worlds," in actuality, challenging conventional accretions means taking significant social risks (Peplau & Garnets, 2000).

Strives to be more authentic by challenging social norms. Focus group participants often voiced their rejection of binary thinking. For example, one participant indicated "Binary thinking doesn't really work for us" and another stated "I am almost terminally incapable of making a decision that's either A or B". Participants were also aware of the fact that putting their energy toward becoming psychologically integrated is a process. For example, one participant stated, "I'm moving toward that sort of uniformity all the time…like *all* the time" and another mentioned, "I'm trying to be more myself all the time", I really want to be authentic in everything…so I'm working on that". Wanda's husband's family, who is nonaccepting of nonmonosexual lifestyle, works at the same company as her. She discusses how she doesn't feel comfortable coming out at work because of this complicated family dynamic, and the resulting conflicting dimensions of her identity:

> It was just supposed to be temporary job pretty much- until I got out of my feet- and I'm still there like nine years later. So I'm trying to gear myself into a way to detach from that so that I can really kinda just be who I am twenty-four, seven. I mean, because…I think ultimately, that's the goal.

Later in the interview, Wanda traces her own critical thinking skills back to her childhood, when her mother encouraged her to find a balance between the acceptance of social norms and queer-authorship. She describes her struggle to "fit in" and also to be her own person in the following:

> It's *very* important for the families- and not just parents, but aunts, uncles, and everything- to sort of foster this critical thinking in children, and to have them *question* the things that they're being taught. Ya know… 'get the answers right on the test, but *ask questions* in the general discussion.' That was one of the things that my mother *really* drove home with me. Its like, 'you do what you can to pass the test and get the grades, but don't just *swallow* everything that they give you…and *without question*'.

Unlike Wanda, Raven shares her experiences as she struggled to develop and accept her sexual identity in the face of biphobia. She tells about the effects of the effects of this on her self-esteem:

> Throughout my life, I noticed a higher degree of paranoia and social anxiety than I think other people would have identified with, and never really attributed it to the sexual issue *until* I made my transition- and then it was gone. Even though I could walk into the same room, and sex wasn't on the table as far as a topic or anything, it was something I knew on the inside- even unconsciously. Because it wasn't like I was going to a PTA meeting to talk about my *sexuality*…but there was this level of 'I knew I was *different*'. I knew I wasn't fundamentally the same as they were. You know, but it was an invisible difference. I guess when I no longer was living that same way- even though I was walking into the same places and all that- I wasn't like, wearing a button or anything [laugh]…but it did! The paranoia *really* went down, and my level of, I think, confidence, and self-esteem, security…all that went *up* at that point. And I think that *that*, I can trace back to my sexuality- I really do. And, and, in part, probably, that deeper awareness that, at some point, my sexuality would *collide* with it- that conventional, married lifestyle- because they are somewhat incongruent. And when I walked into the environments that…only operated under a conventional heterosexual lifestyle- like the kids' schools, or churches, or those environments where you meet with their friends and parents- that *went*.

> And I felt a lot more capable of feeling equal to the people who were different than me.

Raven's need to come out seems to result from the negative psychological effects of being closeted. Raven managed her bisexual identity by reorganizing her self-concept and riding herself of any cognitive dissonance. Perhaps due to her protracted coming out process, her sense of her own self as a bisexual person was positive. Her positive self concept is illustrated by her job interview and at work- she comes out to her interviewer and then faces the negative consequences for doing so. Once she had made her 'transition', Raven said, "I was okay being publicly demonstrative with my ex and I'm gonna be okay with whomever else I'm with". This deconstruction of heteronormativity and psychological integration is what seemed to facilitate Raven's positive identity as a bisexual person and approach to sexual selfhood.

Results of the follow-up interviews included participants' feeling grateful for having the opportunity to be a member of the focus group discussion. Typically, participants said that the open and honest dialog allowed them to explore the topic of identity formation and social constraints in a more serious tone than with other groups- for example, friends. A few participants hinted that this might have been due to the "professional" expectations set by the study. Most participants noted that the focus group discussion was well worth their time and energy. Also, all participants said that if afforded the opportunity again, they would participate in future studies about sexual minorities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of nonmonosexual individuals in terms of their identity formation in various contexts (Keeton, 2002). It offers a meaningful framework of the experience of nonmonosexuals and the personal

meaning of their individual sexuality; their understanding of their sexual identity, their perceptions of the differences between nonmonosexuality and monosexuality, and private/public identity incongruencies. Moreover, the current study identifies the ways by which nonmonosexuals interpret the influence of social structures on their ability to self-express; and by which their political views support or contradict their sexual identity. It is worth highlighting that in terms of how the participants see themselves, there were three themes that were mentioned by all participants: (1) "considers political views egosyntonic and compatible with one's sexual identity expression"; (2) "desires or posses the power to self-define"; and (3) "is aware of sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts' influence on one's identity formation". These findings are consistent with queer theory which posits that, according to Rust (2000), distilling one's own multidimensional and complex sexualities into sexual self-identities is particularly difficult for bisexuals whose attraction toward both women and men make the development of a singular identity especially complex in a cultural milieu that privileges heterosexual and lesbian/gay identities. Perhaps part of what gives the women in this study the intrepidness to fight intolerance for ambiguity and resist western culture's obsession with labels is the fact that they understood the extent that sexual identities are based on cultural categories, but also that these categories inevitably change over time. This understanding helped them be comfortable with the temporal nature of norms about sexuality, and empowered them to use self-authorship to define their identities in a provisional world.

The unique contribution of this study was its focus group methodology. Although two studies in the past have used qualitative research to examine the meaning of bisexuals through the use of semi-unstructured questions, both of these studies used a

one-on-one interview technique. As previously mentioned, focus groups include dynamic participant-to-participant interaction and thus maximize insight gathered from the interaction between participants and group resistance narratives (Madriz, 2005; Morgan & Kreuger, 1997). Additionally, focus groups provide a rich sense of self confirmation and validation, especially to marginalized groups (Morgan, 1998; Morgan, et al., 2002) which may otherwise not feel empowered when discussing the topic of sexual orientation and identity.

In the current study, some participants were more expressive than others. For example, when Sam shared her thoughts of being sexually harassed, her tone was confusion, disappointment and disgust. The pain she experienced when people she thought were close friends of hers stereotyped her and disregarded her boundaries was apparent during the discussion. In another example of expressiveness, when Wanda talked about her desire to self-define and not be labeled by others, she became excited and passionate, and used a quick rate of speech. This emotion was not felt by all participants however. Those who were more inhibited may not have felt comfortable talking in a group—or there may be other explanations for their subdued emotion. For example, Amelia, who had recently identified as a bisexual person, may have been motivated to participate in the study simply to meet other women she could socialize with after the end of her role in the study. Despite the fact that some participants were more expressive than others, however, the rich interchange of information offered in only focus groups far outweighs its limitations. It is because of this that I not encourage others studying sexual minorities to employ focus group methodology in the future.

Results of the cross-analysis indicated that domain one (i.e. "defining one's

identity") actually may capture just what two things this study set out to explore: how one view's one's own sexuality, and how social structures affect one's expression of that identity. The two most frequently mentioned categories under this domain were "considers political views egosyntonic and compatible with her sexual identity expression" and "desires or possess the power to self-define". Ironically, these two categories are diametrically opposed. That is, the summary of the results indicates that participants are torn between "resisting" and "conforming". From one perspective, their political views resonate with their identities: their political views are synchronized with how they view themselves, and how they express their sexuality. Yet on the other hand, participants' desire to self-define reflects their struggles with accommodating to social definitions. Adding to this paradox, as indicated by the third most frequently stated category (i.e. "is aware of sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts' influences on her identity formation"), participants indicated that they were aware of this paradoxical and ongoing dilemma. That is, their understanding of their own place and time in history was a protective factor for their identity formation. These "resiliency pioneers" grasped what historians and social anthropologists understand: that not only is identity a result of passive culture, but culture is a result of proactive change. It is this insight which gives participants an advantage to navigate cultural pressures in order to self-define.

Limitations and Recommendations

There are three key limitations to this study. The first issue relates to focus groups recruitment methodology, specifically. Although the ideal number of participants for focus groups is four to five (Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1998), the standard minimum number of participants for studies using focus group methodology is ten to twelve

(Morgan, et al., 2002). That is, according to (Morgan, et al., 2002), although the benefits of focus group methodology is captured in smaller groups of four or five participants, in terms of maximizing study benefits, there should be two or three *groups* of focus groups. In coordinating a time to meet for the current study's focus group participants however, it was nearly impossible to find a time that was convenient for all. The women who were willing to participate had busy lives and schedules full of work, family and social obligations. Even with their willingness to be flexible, it still took a great amount of time and energy to collaborate and finalize a time and place that would work with their schedules. My primary recommendation for future research would be to allow an extended recruitment period (i.e., 6-9 months) when researching sexual minorities, in order to conduct 2-3 one-time focus groups. Although follow-up interviews were conducted, following this recommendation in the future would further increase rigor of data sources in future studies which attempt to duplicate these findings.

The second limitation relates to the research topic in general, and the one burden of conducting this study being the exhaustive effort put into recruitment. Recruiting sexual minorities, and of only one sex, was considerably demanding and time consuming. Despite over four months of aggressive recruiting efforts, I identified only ten women who were interested in the study. Furthermore, only four of these ten were actually willing and able to participate. This low response rate is due to the targeted population, in terms of sex, sexual orientation, and age limitations. Additionally, recruitment efforts were more difficult by virtue of geographic location. The southern region of the United States, considered to be conservative by virtue of the impact of the church and military, influenced participant willingness to engage in studies about marginalized groups who

are relegated to the peripheral of mainstream society. This idea was reinforced when, during the participant identifying and recruitment processes, six bisexual-identified women, after being contacted by the primary investigator, chose to not participate due to a fear of "getting caught". Fears about coming out in public are illustrative of biphobia in the South. Thus, the generalizability of the study may well have been compromised, as well as its potential to capture a breadth of data.

Thirdly, participants for this study were selected based on the fact that they typified nonmonosexual women over the age of 35, and their willingness to participate in a study involving a stigmatized subculture. Of course, this study is limited by its reliance on a very small, exclusively female, all White, and middle-class sample. Therefore, it would be unwise to generalize, based upon the restricted sample. In addition, the present sample is not representative of nonmonosexual women as a whole, or even of working class bisexual women in Florida. Future research on diverse samples of both sexual-minority women *and* men is important for determining the generalizability of the findings. Lastly, the fact that participants are from one region of one country implies bias, and cross-cultural research is needed to examine biases of western culture's influence on participants. In sum, larger and more diverse samples are needed to confirm the findings presented here.

Another avenue of further study would be to take an interdisciplinary approach to understanding human sexuality in general, and sexual minority groups, specifically. Applying a Hegelian dialectical synthesis—that is, a framework for guiding seemingly opposing arguments into a solution—to nonmonosexuality would allow science to combine paradoxical philosophies. One example of this is evolutionary psychology's

implied inherent gender differences (the thesis) versus feministic theory, which denies innate gender differences and their accompanying implied "excuses" to treat men and women unequally (antithesis), resulting in a novel development (or synthesis). Reviewing evolutionary psychology, primates are more likely than lower mammals to be different from one another in behavior—thus the inevitable outcome of these evolutionary trends is greater individuality (Buss, 1997). Considering that humans have become progressively more phylogenically individualistic (Buss, 1997), this may *support* feminist and collectivist viewpoints, which shun labels and their political implications. This fusion of traditionally contradicting viewpoints in research, and others like it, may serve as a link between varieties of fields, and act as a catalyst for future research and paradigm shifts.

Implications

Even though the present study is limited in terms of its number of its participants, such cases nonetheless represent more than just idiosyncratic-variation (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990). Rather, results have two important social and scientific implications for understanding the nature and development of same-sex sexuality, as well as how individuals interpret their place in society in terms of social structures: (1) results contribute to critically important information for practitioners and researchers attempting to understand the distinct challenges and meet the unique needs of nonmonosexual individuals over the life course., and (2) results indicate a shift toward a post-structural paradigm to view victimology.

In terms of the first implication, therapists should not assume that a stage model (see Cass, 1979) of sexual development is appropriate for all clients. Practitioners should examine their own assumptions, for instance, that clients are healthier if they follow a set

of predetermined sequential stages. Clinicians should consider how race, ethnicity, and culture may affect the experiences of nonmonosexual clients. Lastly, in terms of implications for social scientists, the current study acknowledges that the individuals who are sexual minorities—whose lives are limited by social intolerance and invalidation—are some of the most underrepresented in sexual development research. However, the meaning and implications of both-sex attractions and behavior within the normative monosexual life course arguably deserves further scrutiny in order to honor the complexity and nature of nonmonosexuality.

Secondly, according to D'Augelli, (2003) disciplinary and community change can not be overcome by changing the individual; rather, it must be addressed at a systems level by changing political, economic and social structures. However, systems are made up of smaller units, and collective change is not possible without individual change. This study's results highlight individual change and its catalytic affect on political, economic and social systems. For example, there were instances in the participants' responses of embracing a relatively new and progressive paradigm of human sexual identity development (e.g. the power to self-define). This paradigm is a reflection of taking the challenge that Talburt (2006) offers, to move beyond the use of queer theory to reify a victimology of sexual minorities. This post-structural paradigm is a fundamental shift from being an onlooker, to being an ally with other nonmonosexuals on their terms. This paradigm shift also offers an alternative view of victimization, and a hopeful identity formation process in which nonmonosexuals define themselves in positive terms of what they value, rather than as survivors or victims of power structures they can not control.

Conclusions

There are benefits to using concepts and categories- the help us to simplify and summarize information. Without concepts, we would see each object and event as unique; we wouldn't be able to make generalizations. Because of this, perceiving sexuality dichotomously is attractively simple. Complicating this issue is the fact that taking an anti-language approach to sexuality is not necessarily the solution to allowing people the freedom of constructing one's identity while experiencing diverse, changing, and conflicting patterns of sexual attractions, behavior, and identification over the life course. As Vygotsky, Piaget and Wittgenstein taught us, there is a precise relationship between language and the development of the consciousness and interpretation of reality. Language is, after all, a tool for a shared context. But as the participants in this study expressed, the risky trade-off for having heuristics available on demand and a revulsion to anomaly is the sacrificing of what Hansen and Evans say is the first and last task of all humanistic research…"to clarify and enhance human experience" (1985, p. 6). Perhaps the solution to the pro-language-constructivist debate is to challenge the *conceptualization* of delimited human sexuality…and with this challenge, our language will follow. Tolerating ambiguity is not enough. Accepting ambiguity is not enough. Western culture must *affirm* ambiguity, if we are to evolve beyond centuries-old categories to the place where we can validate all spaces on the infinite spectrum of human sexuality and gender identity.

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Appendix A

Initial Focus Group

1. What motivated you to want to come here today to participate in this study?
2. How do you feel about talking about your sexual orientation?
   a. How comfortable are you?
   b. For example, did you have relationships with others that provided you the venue to talk openly about this topic?
3. How have your expressions and feelings about your sexuality changed over time?
4. How do you feel being non-monosexual is different than being homosexual?
5. Please describe any incongruence you might feel between your private identity and your public identity.
6. What social structures (for example, laws or policies) if any, challenge your ability to express your sexuality?
7. In addition to capturing the essence of your sexuality, how does your identity label support or not support your political views?
   a. In other words, is there any connection between your identity (sexually or otherwise), and your political views?
   b. Are your political views in congruent with or contradict your sexual identity?
8. Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to talk about?

Follow Up Interview

1. What residual thoughts and/or feelings do you have about the focus group?
   a. Now that the focus group is over, have you had the desire to talk to close family or
      friends about the experience in general?
2. Would you participate in another study like this again in the future?
3. What do you think about the results that came out of the data analysis?
4. Are there any concepts that you think should have been formed into a category or domain that weren't?

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Navy Drug and Alcohol Program Advisor (DAPA) Certification
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Crisis Intervention Counselor Certification
Norfolk Ocean Base, Norfolk, VA
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Navy Sexual Assault Victim Intervention (SAVI) Advocate
Norfolk Ocean Base, Norfolk, VA
October, 1999

Volunteer Experience
JaxCorps Events
Jacksonville, FL
2003-2005

Mayport Clean-Up Project
Mayport, FL
2003-2005

Child Mentor, Take Stock in Children
Mayport, FL
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Coach, Girls on The Run
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