Author

Yvette Sanders began her undergraduate research journey in community college and presented at a community college research conference. After transferring, she started working with Professor Bolzendahl, who supported her throughout her time at UC Irvine. Yvette had been interested in researching bisexuality for some time and was grateful for the opportunity to hear and share the narratives of bisexuals and show similarities in their experiences. One highlight of her research was being able to create a safe space for her participants to discuss their sexuality and personal life with her. After graduation, Yvette hopes to pursue a Ph.D. and a career as a professor and researcher.

Key Terms

- Bisexuality
- Identity
- Relationships
- Sexuality

"It's not just a Phase": Experiences of Bisexual Adults within Relationships

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Abstract

This paper assesses how bisexuals negotiate their sexual identity in long-term relationships using a symbolic interactionist theoretical approach. More specifically, I examine how the context of a long-term relationship can influence how bisexual identifying individuals make sense of their sexual identity. Much previous research has examined the struggle of bisexuals to negotiate their bisexuality within their intimate relationships as well as within the larger context of society. However, few studies have focused exclusively on the ways that a long-term relationship shapes sexual identity. Based on twelve in-depth interviews with twelve bisexual-identifying individuals, I find that bisexuals continue to experience common challenges: disclosure of bisexuality, straight passing frustration, and partner-based insecurities about infidelity regarding bisexual partners. Within these themes, I analyze how bisexuals negotiate their identity. Through these findings, I argue that bisexuals, by resisting the dichotomy of sexuality, face significant roadblocks within their relationships and in the negotiation of their sexuality.

Faculty Mentor

Ms. Sanders' paper brings important sociological insight to an understudied and rapidly changing social identity—bisexuality. Social categories of sexuality and gender help people make sense of their lives and interaction but are frequently used as a means of discrimination, exclusion, and even violence. Ms. Sanders finds that respondents identifying as bisexual face challenges identified in previous studies, but also highlights the resilience of her subjects in crafting identities that more broadly rejected binary gender *and* sexual labels simultaneously. Undergraduate students have a passion for Sociology and an insight into their generation that can create really innovative social research. Working together with faculty helps the students see how pressing social questions transform into important social knowledge.

Catherine I. Bolzendahl

School of Social Sciences

Introduction

Persons identifying as bisexual are the fastest-growing segment of the sexual minority population (Compton and Bridges, 2019). The 2018 data from the General Social Survey indicates that nearly twice as many people identify as bisexual (3.3%) as they do gay or lesbian (1.7%). Yet, less attention has been focused on public recognition and discussion of the challenges these sexual minority groups may face (Holthaus, 2014). The core efforts to gain equality for sexual minorities did include bisexual identifying people. The movement's founding acronym "LGBT" referred to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender/transsexual minorities. While both the acronym and the acceptance and rights of sexual minorities have increased a great deal in recent years, bisexuals still feel they occupy the shadows of recognition (Holthaus, 2014). Given these issues, it is important to study and understand how persons make sense of their bisexual identity and how they can formulate full, authentic, and autonomous lives. Though previous research has already identified several challenges faced by bisexual persons, much less has considered the operation of this identity among those in long-term relationships.

In this paper, I investigate these issues through in-depth interviews with twelve bisexual-identifying persons from age 19 to 41. Given the limitations of prior research, I pose the following research questions: 1) how do those identifying as bisexual describe their sexual identity within their relationship; and 2) how do long-term relationships enable or constrain their identity? After consulting previous literature, I move on to explain the primary themes, which include the following common challenges: disclosure of bisexuality, straight passing frustration, and partner-based insecurities about the infidelity of their bisexual partners. Though overlapping a great deal with findings from other work, my interviewees emphasize the unique and different challenges they face given their partner status, which may alienate them from both their partner, their sexuality and, the LGBT+ community. I conclude with a discussion of possible future directions for this research and implications for the growing bisexual identified portion of the U.S. population.

Bisexuality: What Do We Know?

There is a small, but growing body of research on bisexuality, identity, and relationships in the field of sociology. Much of this research focuses on a few recurrent themes about bisexuality and an individual's experiences with being

bisexual: self-identification, negative stigma, invisibility, and assumed promiscuity.

(Lack of) Identity

A major theme in research on sexual minorities, particularly gays and lesbians, has been a focus on self-identification, or "coming out" stories. Though stigma and violence remain, it is now common for gays and lesbians to self-identify at fairly early ages and with little of the consternation and dismay shown in earlier decades. Major national campaigns encourage self-identifying and embracing one's "true" identity. Yet, the same cannot be said for bisexuals. Research shows that many bisexual persons do not self-identify in broader society for fear of being ostracized, misunderstood, or ignored (Hertlein et al. 2016; Maliepaard 2017; Hayfield et al. 2018). One of the reasons cited for not coming out is the stress associated with educating others. When bisexuals come out to their partners or family, they are bombarded with questions and feel pressured to educate, which acts as a deterrent to self-identifying as bisexual (Hertlein 2016; Hayfield 2018). Bisexuals also tend to come out later in life and experience a slower coming out process than lesbians (Rust 1996). Another issue brought up by Maliepaard (2018), is that bisexuals only tend to come out in situations where it is considered relevant, and otherwise express anxiety about disclosing their sexuality and describe it as a confession. Hayfield and collogues (2014) found that bisexuals feel that they need to be secretive about their identity in order "to be safe and to belong" in LGBT spaces. McLean (2007) found in her interviews that bisexual men and women were selective in their coming out, specifically not coming out to family. Also, they worried about coming out due to the negative perceptions and assumptions that come with the label of bisexuality.

The Promiscuity Label

Another important and overarching theme is the devaluation of bisexual persons' monogamous relationship goals and experiences. Bisexual persons in relationships are more likely to have their partners believe they will be non-monogamous (Hertlein 2016; Lahti 2018; Flanders et al. 2017; Hayfield et al. 2018; Wosick 2012). Bisexuality is taken as synonymous with promiscuity and even a degree of hyper-sexuality (Hertlein et al. 2016; Hayfield et al. 2018). Some of this stigma is similar to that faced by gay men, who are also framed as having insatiable and non-monogamous sexual appetites. Much of that emerges from social constructions of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 1992). Expectations that it is "natural" for men to reject monogamy and to want to engage in frequent sex and the valorization of highly-sexual, non-monogamous men have contributed to this

framing (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Historically, homosexuality was deemed a psychological disorder needing treatment, and although the psychiatric community has purged this approach and currently condemns it, bisexuals face stigma reminiscent of that approach (Drescher, 2015). In this case, hyper-sexuality ("nymphomania") remains a disorder and is implicitly ascribed to bisexual persons. This may create a "no-win" situation for bisexuals given that any move from one partner to another may be cast in that frame.

No Space for Bi-Me: The LG_T+ Community?

Although bisexuals comprise a sexual minority group facing stigma and marginalization, their identity as such is often not recognized. This is particularly an issue in long-term monogamous relationships with a partner of a different sex/gender. These persons find they are symbolically erased from the LGBT+ community, and not seen as bisexual persons anymore due to their seemingly heterosexual display and partner's gender; this phenomenon is especially apparent among women who identify as bisexual (Hayfield et al. 2018; Lahti 2018; Lahti 2015; Hertlein et al. 2016; Stombler et al. 2006). Hayfield and associates' (2014) interviewees described feeling out of place in LGBT spaces due to their dual sexuality. LGBT persons would attribute heterosexual privilege and say that they are "ingenuine nor legitimate."

Beyond non-recognition, bisexuals may also be actively negatively framed as untrustworthy. In part, this emerged from the HIV and AIDS crisis of the 1980s and the heightened concern for men who have sex with men but who were perceived and identified as heterosexual, because that was one of the ways HIV was transmitted to females (Klesse 2011; Hayfield et al. 2014). This made coming out complicated for bisexuals because there was an association with untrustworthiness and STI/STDs. This has led to generalizations about bisexual people as a whole, their supposed inability to hold monogamous relationships, and their refusal to conform to hetero/homosexual binary (Klesse 2011).

There are strong parallels with work examining identities and belongingness of biracial individuals. Collins (2000) explains that bisexuals and biracial individuals struggle with similar identity-based difficulties concerning where they fit in in society, how they tell people about their race, and what category they choose to fit in. Collins also makes the argument that race, which is socially constructed, likes to be neat and fit into one category but when an individual is biracial, they straddle two (potentially predominant) racial categories. Bisexuals also face a dichotomous system of heterosexual or homosexual where they blur the lines on what our society defines what someone's sexuality is. These two identities exist in a minority culture and are both fluid social constructions that can change depending on the environment or context.

Implications for Long-Term Partnerships: Symbolic Interaction

All of these themes have important implications for how bisexual persons form and maintain healthy relationships and a sense of positive self-identity. Sexuality studies, in general, focus on the interactions and interpersonal constructions of these lived experiences. Despite these big themes, people have to interpret those structures within themselves and internalize these interactions. In general, society has a set structure of sexual scripts that reflect gender stereotypical roles such as what a man does and what a woman does in sexual situations (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). West and Zimmerman (1987) discuss how there is a male and female role within relationships, and each is to act out their gender for the pairing to work. This idea, when extended to bisexuals within relationships, complicates things due to the idea that the relationship is not always going to be a stereotypical male and a stereotypical female, but rather a bisexual who may present their gender differently than the one assigned at birth. This results in a lapse in how we define what a heterosexual relationship looks like.

This further relates to sexual scripts of the male being the dominant, aggressive pursuer of sex, and the female being the delicate, emotional receiver (Pennington 2009). These sexual scripts influence how we observe interactions between couples, but specifically, we notice when couples do not fit into the stereotypical script of male/female relationships. This, extended to bisexual relationships, holds the same kind of rebellion against this dichotomist script. Bisexual relationships are not defined by the gender of the partners; a bisexual in a relationship, regardless of their partner's gender, is still bisexual. These sexual scripts influence how one negotiates our cultural standards and ideas, whether negative or positive. This not only holds implications for how we define what it means to be a bisexual within a relationship, but also more micro-level implications of how the bisexual internalizes and negotiates their sexuality within this larger context of heterosexism.

Extrapolating from the above themes, bisexuals face many challenges in trying to develop sexual scripts in their relationships. Gustavon (2009) finds evidence that partners reject their bisexual partner as a "bisexual traitor" and the partners argue as to why the bisexual partner was attracted to someone of a different gender from them. The non-bi

partner feels frustrated and inadequate for their partner. In this case, the bisexual interviewee describes herself as "unreliable" and attributes this to the image of bisexuals. Ultimately, Gustavon says that there is a "duplicity inscribed in bisexuality" and that this leads people to believe that bisexuals are ultimately untrustworthy. This is echoed in findings by McLean (2007) that partners of bisexuals often rejected their partner's bisexuality but also claimed the bi person was not self-aware and could not be trusted.

In a highly sexualized culture, it may be presumed that being stereotyped as promiscuous and highly sexual could be seen as a plus for partners who would be expected to welcome threesomes and sexual experiences outside of their relationship. Research does not support that, and Lahti (2015) found that with her participants, the idea of an "imaginary third" threatened the integrity of the relationship and acted as a stressor for the other partner. This sets off a larger problem such that the bisexual has to offer assurances to quell their partner's worries, but the stressor still stays in the back of both their minds. Klesse (2011) wrote that bisexual relationships can exist and they can be monogamous but that they tend to be more polyfidelitous in nature (Wosick 2012).

Data and Methods

Participants
Because I was interested in bisexuals within relationships, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve bisexual identifying individuals about their experiences within long-term (both monogamous and nonmonogamous) relationships. Out of the twelve individuals interviewed, the gender distribution was four females, four males, one transgender male, one nonbinary, one agender, and one genderqueer. The race distribution was eight Caucasian and four Asian (Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese). Nine of the individuals were currently in long-term relationships (four married), all except one of the nine were married to people of the opposite gender. The age distribution ranged from 18 to 41 years old with more individuals over the age of 22. All participants were gathered from the Southern California area except for one, who was from the Midwest.

Recruitment
This study proactively searched for participants who identified as bisexual and were of wide age distribution. The recruitment process involved a flyer to promote the study which was sent by email to sociology professors, graduate students, and my social networks. The flyer included requirements to participate, contact information, a small explanation of what the study would consist of, how long the interview would take, how I would record the interview, and incentives offered. The participant requirements were that one had to identify as bisexual, be 18 or older, and have been in a romantic/intimate relationship for at least four months (either currently or in the past). The research process was described as a 60–90-minute interview that would be recorded. The compensation/incentive provided was in the form of a $20 gift card to either Starbucks or Target (the participant was allowed to choose which one they preferred). To respond to the flyer, participants emailed the contact provided and a time was set up that worked for the researcher and the participant.

The Interviews
The interviews were conducted in semi-private areas, mostly a study room in a library. Others were conducted at various coffee shops around Southern California. Most of the interviews lasted an hour except three that lasted an hour and a half. The interviews were recorded using the Voice Memos app on the iPhone and were later transcribed. A transcription service was used for ten of the twelve interviews and was then reviewed by the researcher for accuracy.

Method Analysis
All interviews were anonymous and the researcher changed all names to pseudonyms to protect the participants and their personal information. During the interview process, I used grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and an inductive approach. Grounded theory is the method of gathering data and forming theories after, rather than establishing theories and testing them before. This method allows a researcher to offer a more accurate explanation for the data and have a more adaptive approach to the research itself. As I noticed similar topics in the interviews, I chose to alter my research questions or leave room to discuss those topics in later interviews. This method of interviewing allowed more insight into topics that I had not originally included in my interview questions. As a result, this guided my questions to offer in-depth insight into the interviewee's experiences.

I also used a feminist approach to interviews. Using a feminist approach allowed me to approach the interviewees with emotional sensitivity, and open-mindedness to create a positive and comfortable situation regardless of the interviewee's gender (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Initially, I chose not to disclose my sexuality in the interviews but participants asked and I told them. What I discovered was that the participants felt more comfortable talking with me after I disclosed my sexuality and that created an open

and understanding situation. For the following interviews, I chose to disclose my sexuality during the interviews to create a space of understanding.

Finally, I used a symbolic interactionist approach when analyzing the interview data. The symbolic interactionist framework uses interactions on micro and macro levels to analyze how people interact and form their own identities within a larger framework. I approached my data using Erving Goffman's theory of stigma which discusses how stereotypical assumptions of a person can lead to assumptions being made about a group of people overall (Goffman, 1963). This relates to this study because bisexuality faces enormous amounts of stigma which affect the social acceptability of bisexuality. By using this theory, I could analyze data with a broader understanding of how stigma can affect the identity formation of my bisexual interviewees. With this information, I could also postulate about how stigma affects their identity formation within their relationships.

Findings

The main themes that came out of interviews with bisexual identifying individuals were (1) selective disclosure, (2) straight passing, and (3) women bisexual experience. These three themes were expressed by the interviewees in varying degrees but ultimately remained salient thought all of the interviews. Bisexuals within relationships face different roadblocks and overall untrustworthiness due to their resistance to the dichotomy of sexuality and this is centered on these themes.

Selective Disclosure
Interviewees expressed that they selectively disclosed their bisexuality for various reasons, including family non-acceptance, perceived bi-phobia, religious values, anxiety-producing, and worry it would be inappropriate or misconstrued. Family nonacceptance can be a result of conservative culture where parents are homophobic and do not accept alternative lifestyles. Perceived bi-phobia or discrimination was another hindrance to coming out because bisexuals feel that if they come out, that they will face discrimination.

Religion and culture influence a family's views on sexuality and can lead to non-acceptance and lack of understanding. Both Z, 19, and a transgender male and Justin Allen, who is 19 and a cis-gender male experienced non-acceptance from their families. Z's parents, who are Chinese immigrants, warned him of his LGBT friend's influence on him. They worried that if he were to associate with them, that he would turn out to be gay. He brought up his LGBT

friends to his parents as a way to test the waters for their reaction, and it was a negative reaction which resulted in his nondisclosure. Z actively chooses to not disclose his sexuality because he feels if he does, his parents will disown him. Justin Allen's parents, who are traditional Vietnamese and Chinese, view sexuality in a similarly negative light. He feels that if he were to come out to his mother, it would ruin their relationship. His father's brother-in-law recently came out as gay, and his father's reaction was to keep that information "on the down-low" and to not talk about it with family. A very similar situation happened to a cousin of Z who came out as gay to the family and, despite his many academic achievements and overall success, they still saw something wrong with him.

Likewise, Eyalia, 37 non-binary, is unable to come out as bisexual publicly due to her religion. She and her family, who are all Seventh-day Adventists, practice the religion in public, but she describes herself as more culturally Adventist, and sexuality is something that they do not speak of within this culture. If she were to come out as bisexual, she would be ostracized from the religious community and then could not secure a professorship with an Adventist university: "Um, this is just sort of a known thing within my social group, but this isn't something that I put on social media for my professional world to know yet." Her family, on the other hand, was more liberal with the idea of sexuality but still expressed caution for her not to disclose her bisexuality or come out to the community.

Another instance of family non-acceptance is from Roxy who came out to her mother at a young age and she described what happened and how she felt:

> I came out when I was 15 and I tried to tell my mom that I was bisexual and she was very dismissive.… And I just remember I was sitting on the edge of her bed and I remember thinking, you know, that she has always been so supportive to me about everything that I had always done. And here was the first time where she was really dismissive. And I remember sitting there thinking, well I guess I have to go inward.… I can't share this part about who I am. And I was really nervous. I never really ever came out to my dad. (Roxy, 41, cisgender female)

Roxy remembers internalizing her mother's dismissiveness toward her bisexuality and feeling like she could not share this essential part of herself with her mother. She did not want to come out to others for fear of the same dismissive-

ness or doubt. Due to this, she kept her sexuality to herself and only told a few close friends. As a result, she never told her father until much later in life. Due to these (negative) experiences with family, these participants chose not to disclose their bisexuality and, as a result, felt disconnect because they could not share a part of who they are to their supposedly closest family members.

Another situation that arose was the anxiety that resulted from public situations and disclosure to the public. Gordon, 37 cis-gender male, is not out on any public-facing social media profiles (i.e. Facebook) to avoid being discriminated against. He believes that if he puts his sexual orientation on a profile of any kind, he will be barred from getting a job. He said that he is on the job market currently and he feels that if he discloses that there will be consequences, and he does not like giving people that authority over him: "I actually have a lot of anxiety about coming out to people above me. Because I'm really afraid if that is going to affect how they see me and affect my chances in the job market." He said that he does not tell people of authority (potential employers) because he feels that they will use that against him. Eyalia, similar to Gordon, feels that her bisexuality would hinder her professional life and therefore she hides her identity to prevent discrimination. She goes to therapy to discuss these issues, which have caused her great anxiety. Gordon said this about coming out: "I think it is important to claim bisexuality if I am because it is kind of diminished in a lot of different spheres and it needs representation." He acknowledges and feels that bisexuals need more representation, and tries to represent even though it causes him anxiety to do so. But there is a caveat to this: he only comes out in situations where the topic of sexuality is brought up. He said that he fears this disclosure to be misinterpreted as a "come on" or a way of hinting to others that he likes both men and women. For now, he is only out to select friends and his wife.

Other participants stated that coming out would not affect their current position, so why bother? Sophie, 28, agender person, who is married to a man, said that she does not come out as bisexual to people because they already see her marriage as a testament to her sexuality, so if she discloses that she is bisexual, she will have to do a lot of explaining, which she chooses to avoid. She acknowledges that her relationship is straight passing so she feels that she does not have the right to disclose as bisexual because it won't change her situation in any way. She says:

> I think, what does it mean for me to, let's say, be engaged in the queer community as like a straight passing person. Um, because think part of my hesitation is like, oh, I don't want it like take up space... I don't really think it goes beyond that, you know, in terms of feelings of exclusion when people talk about—when people erase bisexuality. Um, and it does hurt, but, um, I'm not denied things and you know, I have access, right? Like no one's questioning, like my marriage right... no one's trying to like take it away. (Sophie, 28, agender)t

She notes that her marriage is not questioned but she will have to explain to people and potentially justify it if she comes out as bisexual.

This is similar to Jeff, 27, male bisexual, who is married to a woman and said that his status is of privilege (white male) and that he does not want to disclose his sexuality because it does not reflect in his life. When asked how he felt about being perceived as heterosexual, he said:

> I don't know. I think because I'm already in the situation of having to selectively disclose the extent to which it kind of give me like power over my identity and kind of who I want to tell, um, is—I guess sometimes nice. Um, but then there's also the fact that when it does, it does come up. Like I'm always concerned that when it does come up, I'm trying to use that like people can perceive me as just kind of saying that or using that as like trying to make up for being a cisgender white male and kind of playing some sort of diversity card. Like when that's not necessarily what my intention is when I do bring that up. (Jeff, 27, cis-gender male)

Similar to Sophie, Jeff does not want to take up space of other people (other LGBT persons) who feel they have been more discriminated against. He feels that with his privileged status of a white male, he felt uncomfortable disclosing his bisexuality out of the fear that people would think it is a "cop-out" and that he is saying that he is bisexual for attention.

Within this theme of coming out selectively, there have been numerous examples of why bisexuals do not come out to everyone. Family influence, the anxiety of not being believed, not feeling allowed to express their sexuality due to bi-phobia (especially within LGBT spaces), and general dismissiveness.

Straight Passing

Interviewees expressed overarching feelings of uneasiness and annoyance with the assumption of their sexuality. Most of my participants (nine out of twelve) were in relationships with someone of the opposite gender and with this relationship structure, they are perceived as heterosexual or in a heterosexual relationship. Many participants brought up the idea of "straight passing." This is the idea that a person (a bisexual in this context) successfully masks their other or same-gender attraction and hides within a heterosexual relationship. By masking their sexual identity, they receive heterosexual benefits or "heterosexual privilege." These benefits may be experienced in terms of general acceptability of their relationship in society, access to more resources, or less questioning. The interviewees, however, expressed that they do not wish to be straight passing and thought of it as a source of disadvantage rather than a source of privilege. This is demonstrated in the ways that Roxy, who was married to a heterosexual man for ten years, discussed that she did not feel heterosexual privilege that others perceived or assumed her to have. She found it to be a disadvantage:

> And then when I got married, that's when I started to really kind of become aware of all, like the bisexual stereotypes…. I never felt privileged. I always felt when I was married to Alex, I never felt a heterosexual privilege. I always felt like the opposite of that, like disadvantaged in some way because I just felt like I wasn't being visible. I always felt that people were throwing this on me and pushing this, you know, like this heterosexual on me. Right. I never really felt the privilege. (Roxy, 41, cisgender female)

She explained that when she got married, her bisexual identity became more important to her because through her marriage it was less visible so she found herself fighting against this label which she thought to be essential to the image of herself. As she has aged, she does not feel the same frustration she felt in her previous marriage and now she sees her bisexuality as less essential to her image of herself.

Gordon expressed similar frustration with straight passing. He is currently married to a heterosexual woman and commented on what it is like to be in a straight passing relationship:

> I definitely think if anything it has kind of increased my anxiety around because I get perceived in different contexts and not being perceived as bisexual. People think I'm gay if I'm not with her. In just general like life if I'm with her people think we're a straight couple, so um it hasn't really changed my perspective on being bi it's just kind of like highlighted a lot of erasures that happen and um yeah if that kind of makes sense.… Yeah, I've told my therapist about this so much but yeah it bothers me more to be perceived as straight than gay because being perceived as straight means that I'm not part of the LGBT community…so like yeah like I said I feel better about being perceived as gay than straight. It's not right or accurate. (Gordon, 37, cis-gender male)

Gordon expresses that this assumption of heterosexuality causes him distress and has served as a point of anxiety, especially within LGBT contexts. He feels that if he is with his wife in public, others are assuming that he is heterosexual and this causes him anxiety. He has experienced this anxiety for quite some time and would ultimately rather be assumed to be gay than heterosexual because at least then, he will be included in the LGBT+ community to which he belongs.

Similarly, Sophie is married to a heterosexual man and expressed feeling unsure about her bisexuality within her relationship. She came out later in life, about a year into her current marriage, and she expresses that she feels unsure about herself as a bisexual/queer person in the LGBT+ community due to her seemingly heterosexual relationship:

> You know, I am also married and my husband, I have a husband, right? So again, I think it will be different if I were to be married to a woman.… Um, I think in terms of feelings, I think there's still a sense of like exclusion where a lot of times I don't broadcast that I'm bisexual, not because I'm not proud of that, but especially knowing that I have a husband, that there's always kind of this fear that, oh, you're pretending.… And it's like, are you really like bisexual though? (Sophie, 28, agender)

For Sophie, she does not come out (with the exception of close friends) due to worry that those who know she married a man will question her marriage or her sexuality. Similar to Gordon, she also expresses that LGBT spaces are not as welcoming to her sexuality because of her straight passing relationship. Especially being a part of the LGBT+ community, she feels like she can't broadcast her bisexuality due to her marriage and that if she does, then she will be met with skepticism.

Finally, Brooklyn, 41 androgynous female, has been married to a heterosexual male for almost 20 years and she echoes thoughts similar to Sophie and Gordon about the assumption of her sexuality based the gender of her partner. She commented on the idea of straight passing:

> I wouldn't say that I'm straight passing because I think people that don't know me at all would assume that I'm a lesbian, but people that know me and know that I'm married and have kids assume that I'm straight. So, um, so what does it mean to me? I don't know if it is an important part of my identity, um, because I don't like, I actually don't like passing as straight, um, because I don't feel very straight at all. It's just my life has set up in a very heterosexual way. (Brooklyn, 41, androgynous female)

She expresses that the assumption of heterosexism does not match who she is, and she asserts that she does not feel heterosexual. She takes issue with the term of straight passing because it erases her bisexuality.

The interviewees expressed frustration with the term "straight passing." They believe that their sexuality should not be assumed based on the gender presentation of their current partner. This leads to bisexuals not disclosing their sexuality due to fear that they will be dismissed as not bisexual because of their current partner's gender. These experiences affect their identity and add another barrier to disclosing and explaining one's bisexuality.

Women Bisexual Experience
Under this specific theme, I found similarities within the interviewee's answers to questions about monogamy, open relationships, and trust. With female (born as a female but not necessarily identifying as female currently) interviewees, they shared that their heterosexual male partners were insecure or threatened by their bisexual partner's sexuality. This resulted in a lapse in communication, cheating, and/or constant reassurance needed from the bisexual partner.

The first example of this theme is from Z who discusses that his first partner, who was a heterosexual male, felt insecure within his relationship with Z:

> …I just show him these pictures and I'd be like this girl's kind of cute and he has these insecurities about abandonment so, he just like, you like her, you don't like me and everything. And I was just like, I like you, like that's why you we're together.

And then he'd be like, but you also like girls, it's like that's not the point, so I have to be very careful about what I said around him. He accepted it, but his insecurities kind of like put some limitations.… I didn't like the fact that his insecurities always got the best of him…but I know by sharing these things his insecurities will activate and then like the whole depressive state.… And I didn't want that to happen to him, so I had to limit myself when I was with him and it wasn't as nice as I would hope it to me. (Z, 19, transgender male)

His partner's insecurity put a strain on their relationship and Z felt like he had to hold back part of himself from his partner. Eventually, they broke up, but Z is still cautious about these insecurities in other partners.

Another example is from Brooklyn, who is married to a heterosexual male, and shared similar partner-based insecurities. Her partner acknowledges her bisexuality but she would be interested in an open relationship where she can explore other partners (particularity women) which he is not interested in. She expressed frustration, especially at the beginning of their relationship, where she had to constantly reassure her partner:

> And so, I have no sanctioned outlet for my bisexuality. Um, and so that has, you know, posed a problem sometimes in my relationship, not only, I mean, you know, not in terms of like me cheating or whatever, but just in terms of him worrying that I'll leave him for a woman that has come up a lot in our relationship. (Brooklyn, 41, androgynous female)

She expressed frustration in our interview because she has a very strong desire for sex with women, but due to her partner's insecurity, she feels that she has to repress that. This results in her cheating on her partner, but she does not do it often. She only does it to satisfy her need for women while not compromising her relationship or family life at home. She can separate her cheating from her relationship and says that it helps her feel the desire to have sex with her current partner.

Another example is Josefina who recently came out as bisexual. She is currently in a relationship with a heterosexual male, and this is when she came out as bisexual to her partner. She discussed that he helped her figure out her bisexuality and what it means to her and also what it poses

for their relationship. When I asked about how her bisexuality affected her current relationship, she said:

> So, to be honest, the process was a little problematic. So, I told him that, you know, I think I'm bisexual. I think I'm also attracted to girls. And he was very supportive and accepting. He's like, yeah, that's chill, you know, as long as you know, you're still attracted to me and I'm still attracted to you. (Josefina, 22, cis-gender female).

Josefina's reassurance to her partner was needed for them to continue being together. He then later suggested that maybe she should try being with women, but only in the context of threesomes, which proved to cause more problems in their relationship. Ultimately, they did not follow through with the threesome idea.

Roxy, 41, comments on the assumption of threesomes/foursomes/group sex of male heterosexual partners of female bisexuals. She says: "So, the part that's annoying about the romantic partner, especially men, it's men. Immediately they want to play, they want a threesome or they'll make assumptions.… And like I said, the men just enjoy playing around." The assumption of threesomes and having sexual experiences with people outside of their relationship is a common assumption within these relationships. Sophie's husband asked her if she would want to try something (experiment with other women): "Uh, so, you know, my husband actually asked 'oh so do you feel the need to have relationships with women or date women.' Um, and I think that was like the moment was, well, my answer then would be like, no." She said that she and her husband are both "very monogamous people." Jeff and his wife had a similar conversation about possibly adding another person to their sexual lives to serve as an outlet for his bisexuality. When asked about his and his wife's discussion of an open relationship, he said:

> We knew another couple from school who was in an, they were like a married couple in an open relationship. So, I think we initially just started kind of talking about them. And then I say just sort of out of curiosity, we just kind of do like a temperature check on each other and the conversation just came out of there. It was more pure curiosity than anything else. (Jeff, 27, cis-gender male)

They do not engage in threesomes because he said that they are pretty "straight shooters," but the topic did come up.

Bisexual (biological) women experience a degree of mistrust from their male partners due to their attraction to both men and women. Their male partners express their insecurities, either explicitly or through their actions, which results in the bisexual constantly needing to reassure them that they want to be in the relationship. This leads to feelings of a lack of understanding and annoyance at their partner's mistrust. There is also an assumption of more sexual adventurousness with bisexual partners, which further contributes to the stereotype of the hypersexual bisexual.

Discussion and Conclusion

The growth in numbers of individuals identifying as bisexual suggests the importance of understanding the experiences and identity of this sexual minority group. The existing research suggested that bisexuals do not feel comfortable coming out in situations where they will have to explain their sexuality or will be questioned. Also, bisexuals tend to be labeled as promiscuous due to stereotypes about hypersexuality. Finally, bisexual persons face more obstacles in the LGBT+ spaces due to the idea that they're not "gay" enough. I aimed to build upon these findings by focusing on bisexuals in long-term relationships. I asked how those identifying as bisexual describe their identity within their relationship and how long-term relationships enable or constrain their identity.

My findings echo those from prior research. Specifically, heterosexual privilege (Hayfield et al., 2014), questioning of one's bisexuality in LGBT+ spaces, especially in straight passing relationships (Lahti, 2014), and finally, bisexual's constant reassurance to their partners that they will not cheat or act in untrustworthy ways (Hertlein, 2016). However, I also find that being in a long-term relationship raises special issues and heightens the tensions found in certain key themes. One issue that emerged repeatedly in my interviews related to the untrustworthiness of bisexual persons. This is a major problem in forming healthy and stable relationships and highlights the broad stigma that bisexuals continue to face. Social constructions of sexuality and the fluidity of gender and sexuality have yet to fully permeate the sexual and symbolic scripts we follow for relationships. The legalization of same-sex marriage may have, ironically, contributed to bisexual marginalization given the growing pressure of homonormativity that emphasizes monogamous, long-term relationships typical of heterosexual discourse and an emphasis on framing sexualities as binary and essential.

Within society, heterosexuality is valued above homosexuality but bisexuality, which is neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality, complicates this traditional value system. Gayle Rubin (2002) posits that there is this idea of the "charmed circle" and the "outer limits." The charmed circle is all activities that are "good, normal, blessed sexuality" which includes heterosexual, married, monogamous, same generation, vanilla, etc. On the other hand, the outer limits consist of "bad, abnormal, unnatural, dammed sexuality" including homosexual, polyamorous, alone or in groups, casual and usage of manufactured objects/ toys. These types of categories display a way of thinking in which heterosexual is placed above homosexual and that bisexual is within homosexual. With this thought process, it goes beyond just categories, but creates a duality within society that there is good and bad in which bad correlates with homosexual and sexual acts that are in sin while good is associated with heterosexuality. Bisexuality is neither entirely homosexual nor entirely heterosexual so there is some confusion as to where to place bisexuality on Rubin's diagram. This reflects how society feels about bisexuals and how their sexuality is somehow between two categories and is not well defined. It is lack of education and stigma about bisexuals that leads to this idea of untrustworthiness.

Within my research, there are limitations that include a small, non-representative sample and some generational differences in my sample. My participant sample size and demographic make-up do not represent the population as a whole. Also, I interviewed a wide age range, which can lead to some unforeseen differences in the experiences of my participants, either older or younger. My recommendation for future research is to have a larger and more diverse sample. This will result in a more comprehensive and complex understanding of the experiences of bisexuals in relationships.

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