

Mount Saint Vincent University
Department of Family Studies and Gerontology

Why Bi? Bisexual Individuals' Coming out Experiences

by
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A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Family Studies and Gerontology

April, 2014

Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my four loving Grandparents:
Nanny, Grandad, Grandma, and Grandpa.

Abstract

This research focuses on the coming out experiences of eight women (ages 19 to 43) who identify under the umbrella of bisexual. With an ever growing acronym to encompass different sexual orientations, there is more need than ever to focus on those who fall outside the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Eight women were interviewed and topics of discussion included coming out experiences, social support, discrimination, and community involvement. Critical theory guided the research process, with the intention of exploring bisexual people's experiences as their own group, examining how their sexual identities affected their everyday life experience. The main findings that became evident through the conversations were: the importance of sexual fluidity to a bisexual orientation specifically, experiences with discrimination (mostly from family, and other queer people) and social support (mostly from heterosexual friends), as well as bisexual erasure and heteronormativity as a dominant ideology. Heterosexual privilege may be one of the biggest points of contention between gay/lesbian people and bisexual individuals, because heterosexuality (the most valued of all sexual orientations in Western society) is still a part of the bisexual person's attractions. Also, many stereotypes and dominant beliefs around bisexuality make people question its legitimacy when someone comes out as such. Loved ones may even have their own frustration when they did not "see it [the bisexual orientation] coming" or if the bisexual person in their life has not passed what they have created as a "gay threshold". Coming out is a continual and selective process, and although it has been associated with distress in previous research, it also has many positive benefits such as challenging heteronormative expectations, allowing someone to live and love authentically, and accept themselves for who they are.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people I would like to thank, who have helped me get through not only this thesis, but the past two and half years in general. First, my family (Mom, Dad, Colin, and Grandad) and friends for being supportive and loving me no matter what. I know that my coming out as bisexual was interesting for all of us at first, but hopefully with the help of this research we can all better understand it. Without your support, I would not be where I am today and I love and appreciate you more than words can express.

A *huge* thank you goes to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for funding this project. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work less so that I was able to focus on my first major research endeavor. Your council believed that my research was important and interesting enough to fund which was an amazing feeling—you see and fund amazing research all year round! I feel extremely fortunate to have had not only your financial support, but your interest as well.

Mount Saint Vincent University has been a place I have called home since September 2007, and I would not be the academic or woman I am today without the people within this institution. Thank you to the University Research Ethics Board for accepting my research, to my fellow classmates who were supportive and contributed their thoughts, and all of the faculty in the Family Studies and Gerontology department. Áine, Deborah, and Alan – your dedication to my work and making my research the best it could be has pushed me in ways I never thought I would be able to go. Áine, thank you for your time and effort in reading and (amazingly) editing lengthy draft after draft of this thesis. You helped push my old “positivist” ways to the sideline to invest my energy into the full experiences of the eight women who participated. I see and appreciate research in

a way I never thought I would have during my undergrad. Thank you so so much for being an amazing advisor.

I could not have done this research at all without the voluntary assistance of the eight participants. Ladies, your invaluable experiences and stories are going to help so many people understand the complexity of bisexuality, myself included. I hope that you enjoyed our conversations as much as I did, and I know that you will all be role models to those who are fortunate to come into contact with you. Thank you for your time and effort in this research process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sexuality is a complex human phenomenon that researchers have been examining for decades. This research is especially difficult to conduct because it is viewed to be a private matter in someone's life. Bringing up one's own sexual interests, sexual health, and curiosities have been seen as being "too much information" for most people, yet this silence may discourage any discourse around very important questions and conversations.

Although sexuality is an integral part of everyone's identity, it may be more relevant in the everyday lives of some people compared to others. Individuals with sexual interests that "deviate" from societal norms can feel ashamed or confused about their sexuality, and the silence that surrounds these topics can make those who struggle with these aspects of their sexual lives feel isolated. This includes people of differing *sexual orientations*, which simply defined refers to sexual, romantic, and emotional desire for partners of a particular sex (Wilkerson, 2009). Sexual orientation is multi-faceted and includes physical sexual activity, interpersonal affection, and erotic fantasies (DeCecco, 1981). There is a group of people forming a subset of the population that do not necessarily form romantic or sexual relationships with members of the opposite sex, which deviates from what is generally expected of them. These individuals are often viewed as a collective, being represented by the acronym LGBT. This acronym is inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals. Transgendered individuals face a unique sort of coming out experience: inconsistency with gender identity or gender expression and their biological sex (Walch, Ngamake, Francisco, Stitt, & Shingler, 2012). Transgendered people also experience oppression and discrimination based on this aspect of their identities, but I would argue that there are major differences

between coming out with a different than expected gender identity compared to coming out with a different than expected desire for same-sex romantic partners. Transgendered individuals were not be a focus of this particular study; thus the acronym used is shortened to include only lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals.

One's realization of being LGB can be a very empowering but also overwhelming experience, especially when it comes time to discuss this realization with the people in their life. Disclosure of a sexual orientation other than heterosexual is termed *coming out*, and it is considered a milestone in the lives of many LGB people (Hill, 2009). The combination of overarching expectations of heterosexuality and the embarrassment surrounding sexuality as a whole can create for a daunting environment to disclose a new sexual identity.

LGB people are generally discussed as a collective group in research (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Luhtanen, 2003; Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012); they are all considered sexual minorities and have the common experience of coming out. However, although many commonalities have been found overall in the coming out process, each person experiences this disclosure differently due to many factors, including through the way they identify. For the purposes of this study, I focused solely on those people who identify under the umbrella of bisexual.

In line with critical and qualitative methodologies, my lived experience as a bisexual woman has served as valid knowledge and a springboard for research ideas. As someone who has been involved with rainbow events and pride groups in Halifax for over three years, I noticed that my experiences with coming out were not necessarily congruent with that of my gay and lesbian friends. I had a particular expectation of what

the “gay community” looked like, and did not seem to be able to find anything that I would consider a cohesive community. Anderson (1991) would not be surprised by this. He wrote about imagined communities; communities that are socially constructed, imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of that group (in my case, LGB people). There is no everyday face-to-face interaction in these imagined communities, and one may never meet even the majority of its “members”; the gay community is created via similar interests and identities alone (Anderson, 1991). Not only was my expectation of some sort of cohesive community disproved, but I also realized there was so much diversity in LGB identities. Each identity is unique and certain people may not be as welcome as others, even within these imagined communities.

Although I recognized that everyone has different experiences with coming out, even with a similar identity label, I thought that there would be more similarities than differences in terms of a collective coming out experience. I faced slightly different obstacles with both my straight friends and family members, and also with the gay and lesbian people in my life. Many people in my life did not understand what I meant when I disclosed my bisexuality to them. Some had alternative explanations to what I meant when I said I was bisexual. Straight men and lesbian women had, and continue to have, a number of doubts about dating me. I expected some hesitancy from the heterosexual people in my life but did not expect the comments and concerns from the gay and lesbian people I turned to for support. They told me to “choose a side” or that this was “just a phase”. I began to understand bisexuality as being very different from being gay or lesbian.

Yet when I went to the literature for answers, I was troubled by the fact that

coming out was theorized in stages and that LGB experiences were grouped together. Much of the research was incongruent with my experience and I wondered if there were other bisexual people who were frustrated in a world with such a narrow focus on being gay or straight. Research has found that adolescents with attractions to both sexes are at greater risk of suicide proneness, ideation, and attempts than gay and lesbian individuals (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Lamis, & Malone, 2011). I could not help but ask myself, “what is going on here?” In a world that told me that sexual orientation is either black or white, I wanted to see more focus on the grey.

This study contributes to the literature on LGB experience by separating bisexual individuals from gay and lesbian individuals to understand their experiences from their own words using qualitative methods. Bisexual individuals’ coming out experiences are understood as a separate entity, rather than combining the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals and assuming they are common. The research question is: how do bisexual individuals experience coming out, particularly with respect to social support?

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research there are a number of frameworks that can possibly direct the study, but which framework best suits the research depends on the question. Critical theory is an ideal framework for the current study because of its focus on a group of people who face forms of oppression in their everyday lives (Brookfield, 2005). LGB people face oppression in a number of ways in Western society because of how desire is defined in this culture. There are certain western ideologies around sex, love, desire, and marriage that work to validate only certain lifestyles, while oppressing and alienating others. Western ideology is the common set of ideals created by a dominant group (in this case, heterosexuals) that is then imposed upon other groups (i.e., LGB people) who have been convinced that this ideology is in their best interest (Brookfield, 2005). Hegemony differs from ideology in the way that people who are not part of the dominant group, whom benefit from the ideology, are complicit in upholding that ideology usually subconsciously, or by believing “that’s just the way it is”, and there is nothing that can be done about it.

Ontologically, critical theory is guided by historical realism, or the belief that the nature of the world is “shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values crystallized over time” (Glesne, 2011, p. 9). Comstock’s (1982) method for critical research describes the relevance of studying the “historical development of social conditions” to understand the “current social structures that constrain the participants’ actions and shape their understandings” (p. 381).

Critical research cannot be done without an examination of history, because historically, certain groups were excluded in research in human experience: “the

undecidability of history is understood as related to class struggle, the institutionalization of asymmetrical relations of power and privilege, and the way historical accounts are contested by different groups” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 144). Although Canada has been progressive in creating a more accepting culture for LGB persons (e.g., the legalization of equal marriage) (MacIntosh, Reissing, & Andruff, 2010), there are still historical values and practices embedded in people’s consciousness that affect not only their personal views but also future generations’ views on LGB equality. Critical research plays an important role in examining the way in which the everyday lives of these different groups are experienced, because historically their experiences were irrelevant to scholarly review. Fortunately, in recent history, Canada and certain American states recognize equal marriage and common-law relationships, but there are still many states and countries that do not (Johnson, 2011). Recognition of these relationships has many benefits, including health benefits, income tax, and power of attorney (MacIntosh et al., 2010). Although some countries have made significant strides in creating equality, heteronormativity is still prevalent in these countries, and there are still a number of discriminatory laws in most of the world. LGB discrimination has become so embedded in consciousness that it may seem inviolable.

Critical theory works in a way to help people understand how the world is today, and how it can be improved for the future via enlightenment, helping people to realize the oppression they face, and that things can be different (Brookfield, 2005). The key is to challenge oppressive ideologies that they are complicit in (i.e., hegemony), including those around LGB issues. Ideology is seen as “a system of false beliefs that justify practices and structures that keep people *unknowingly* [emphasis added] in servitude”

(Brookfield, 2005, p. 40). Complicity is what makes ideology hegemonic, and this complicity perpetuates the cycle of upholding dominant ideology purposively created to maintain a given social structure. Gramsci would argue that ideologies are not false, but rather, they are unknowingly accepted, and contain elements of what people perceive as the truth, or the way things should be. Therefore, hegemony succeeds through consent, yet those being oppressed are unaware that they are consenting to their own oppression (Atack, 2006). They live their lives without challenging the very structures and ideologies that are oppressing them.

Hegemonic ideologies foster a *false consciousness*, in which people have unknowingly accepted the way things are, to settle with things even if they are unjust. By doing this people maintain an environment that is oppressive to either themselves or to others, depending on whether or not they are part of the dominant group. False consciousness is generally fostered through what some would deem as subtle messages, but western hegemony overtly and subtly oppresses LGB individuals on a daily basis. Open protests that condemn same-sex relationships and equal marriage, and hate crimes that are afflicted upon LGB people are extreme examples of overt discrimination. There are also more discrete forms of oppression that affect the day-to-day lives of those who identify as LGB. These are events that are detrimental to whole groups of individuals, but may be taken for granted as just a part of life. It is important that LGB people become aware of these oppressive ideologies and structures, and that they stand up and challenge the inequality they face. Heterosexual individuals need to be made aware of the consequences their oppression has on LGB people so that they can make the necessary changes to be caring and compassionate to the LGB people in their lives.

Selected sociological concepts are also helpful to consider. A combination of sociology and critical theory can help us understand the way in which someone forms their own identity, and how they understand what that identity means. *Structuration theory* is one way of looking at how one's identity is formed, examining identity formation through internal and external forces. Each human is their own agent and performs their own actions, which Giddens (1984) refers to as agency. Agency is an active, reflexive process in which each person monitors the success or failure of their actions in any given context. What is also important in structuration theory is that an agent is bound within a structure (i.e., society) and the ideologies within that structure. As a result, the action does not occur in isolation, and one must be conscious of the limitations or constraints within that structure (Giddens, 1984). Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) echo the importance of studying individual identity and their own agency: "critical researchers understand that individual identity and human agency form such a chaotic knot of intertwined articulations that no social theorist can ever completely disentangle them" (p. 146). This is relevant to a bisexual person's coming out and identity formation process due to the stigma embedded within the structure. This is not a linear relationship: structure and agency can affect one another in a bidirectional and reciprocal way. Critical theory fits nicely within the framework of structuration, because it examines structure and the way agency is mediated by structure (and vice versa).

Heteronormativity is the ideology that promotes the normality of heterosexual values and it has been embedded in our culture through media, public policies, language, and our education system (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Smith, 2004; Van Eeden-Moorefield, Martell, Williams, & Preston, 2011). *Heterosexism*, the assumption that

everyone is and must be attracted to members of the opposite sex, is a blatant effect of heteronormativity that places certain people in higher social standing simply because they are heterosexual (Fine, 2011). Rich (1980) argues that a woman's ability to choose her life partner has been invalidated due to this oppressive ideology, and that marriage and motherhood be examined as a political institution. What is it that makes heterosexuality so important not only locally or nationally, but worldwide? Throughout history, women have been treated as vessels for motherhood, objects to be controlled or sold, and depended upon for emotional development; it has been in men's best interests that women opt for a heterosexual identity (Rich, 1980). Therefore heteronormativity is an oppressive ideology for those who do not desire a heterosexual relationship. Heterosexual ideology must be examined in order to understand why LGB individuals face oppression in their everyday lives.

There are heterosexist messages being imposed upon North Americans, through many different channels, including the language used and heard every day. Through expressive language, for example, it is not uncommon to hear someone to refer to something as "gay" when it is being perceived as stupid or undesirable. Homophobic names such as dyke, butch, or fag, are commonly used toward people who exhibit atypical gender behavior as though these behaviors accurately represent their sexual orientation with the implication that these labels are adverse (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005). Although this language originates from heterosexist ideals, many people use these terms without the intention of insulting LGB people. This is a simple example of how oppressive ideologies can become so embedded in our culture despite the harm they cause. These words still carry a negative connotation against homosexuality, and LGB

people are reminded of the underlying heterosexism that exists in their culture every time this language is used. In a climate that values heterosexuality so strongly, it can be difficult to get support as an LGB individual.

I chose critical theory as a framework for my research because the participants of this study were from a group of people that “are oppressed by and alienated from social processes they maintain or create but do not control” (Comstock, 1982, p. 378). Although gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals are generally put together as one cohesive group that face oppression in a heteronormative society, it may be that bisexual people are facing even higher levels of oppression and alienation than gay and lesbian people. Bisexual individuals face unique challenges in their everyday lives that differ from those of gay and lesbian people. They are the unique target of *biphobia*, which is the prejudice and discrimination of people who identify as bisexual (Bennett, 1992). Although lesbian and gay individuals face discrimination from straight communities, bisexual individuals face discrimination from *both* gay and straight communities (Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002). This can be troubling for a bisexual person who is looking for support from people who have experience in coming out and in same-sex romantic attachments. Being told to “pick a side” or that their sexuality is fictitious from the people from whom they seek guidance can make for a very oppressive and isolating experience.

Many bisexual people may not feel welcome in their city’s gay pride groups or collectives, and many do not become involved in pride movements (Knous, 2005). This increases alienation leading some people to question their orientation, which has a number of mental and physical health implications (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Lamis, & Malone, 2011). They may feel the need to pick a side in order to overcome alienation, but

that is not what pride is about: the original gay pride march occurred in 1970 for all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people to celebrate the anniversary of the Stonewall Riot in 1969, the most famous liberation movement for gay rights (Gorton, 2010).

Although bisexual people were still slightly marginalized during the sexual revolution of the 1960s because they were not living as homosexual full-time, LGB pride was originally created to celebrate the lives of everyone who faces challenges in a heteronormative world (Escoffier, 2009). Yet modern day pride groups and marches may not be entirely inclusive of bisexual individuals, because of hegemonic ideologies that can make pride events so unwelcoming. Although LGB people are generally grouped together in research, policies, and social movements, there may be less cohesion between lesbian, gay, and bisexual people than most people would assume; bisexual individuals may be a group all on their own. Critical research aims to liberate those groups that face oppression in their daily lives to help them reach equality and fair treatment.

The ultimate goal in critical theory research is *emancipation*, creating a political and social climate that is equal for everyone (Brookfield, 2005). Bisexuality seems virtually invisible to some with many people not understanding what it is or believing that it exists (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009; Yoshino, 2000). Using semi-structured interviewing techniques with minimal researcher guidance, this research allowed for bisexual individuals to openly share their stories and experiences with their bisexuality, apart from lesbian and gay experience, to help others to understand what it means to be bisexual. Consistent with critical methodologies, the semi-structured interview created the opportunity for dialogue between the participants and myself. Dialogue is an important tool in critical research, so that the participant is not passive in the process of

research, but active in the construction of the data. To keep consistent with Comstock's (1982) method for critical research, dialogue helped me to "develop an interpretive understanding of the intersubjective meanings, values, and motives held by all groups of actors in the subjects' milieu" (p. 380). Discussing what it is like to live every day in a heteronormative society and to discuss any issues without being blended with gay and lesbian individuals will give bisexuality a voice: the first step toward liberation and challenging the status quo. Asking questions about the challenges these people have experienced based on their orientation can help trigger critical thoughts about what it means to be bisexual.

In interviews, questions were asked in a way to help each participant develop or enhance their *critical consciousness*, which Freire (1970) defined as an in-depth understanding of the world and oppressive structures within society. The desired effect from the interview dialogue is that participants be conscious of the hegemonic structures, but also the negative experiences they have had and the detrimental messages that they may have internalized around their identity. Smith (1987) coined the term *line of fault* in which there is a disjuncture between one's personal experience of culture, ideology, and social consciousness and the way the world really is. Again, this comes back to dominant ideologies and the way in which one internalizes the hegemonic messages. Although Smith specifically discussed women and the hegemonic messages as dictated by men when she formulated her line of fault theory, her ideas can be applied to many groups' experiences, including bisexual individuals.

I know from my personal experience that there was a clear rupture between what I thought about LGB people as a collective, cohesive group and what I actually

experienced. Which social relations and hegemonic messages created my line of fault? Seeing pride parades and hearing about pride groups and allies working together to challenge heteronormativity so that all sexualities can be legitimized, but then I was mocked for being bisexual when trying to get involved. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are always grouped together, therefore there is an underlying message that they share similar experiences and values. I thought that I would be welcomed with open arms by my future gay and lesbian friends yet I was not. The dialogue with these women unveiled similar lines of fault within their own coming out experiences. Living with a line of fault from a structural perspective can be extremely frustrating and daunting, not only for those who discover their personal fault lines, but also for those who are trying to support the person. That is why it is important to both identify a fault line and work in a way that does not uphold hegemonic structures so that emancipation can happen for everyone in an oppressed group.

Praxis is the action portion of critical research, which “[tries] to show its subjects how they can emancipate themselves by conceiving and acting upon the social order in new ways” (Comstock, 1982, p. 378). Praxis specifically focuses on how agency can change structure and the ideologies embedded within that structure for liberation, which relates directly to structuration theory. Coming out can be seen as one’s agency to claim their own personal identity, which can be difficult in certain structures, or more specifically, western society and the ideologies embedded within. This research acts as an avenue for a better understanding of bisexuality and the oppression bisexual people face. Knowledge is power, and there is great knowledge to be shared in the first hand accounts of those people who experience what bisexuality is and what it means to them. As a

bisexual person, this research was my way of challenging false consciousness and to increase awareness about bisexual oppression in both the heterosexual and queer communities.

In line with critical research methodology, in the next chapter I review the history of sexuality to understand how western ideologies around sex and sexual orientation have developed. I also examine what challenges LGB people face as a collective, and how bisexual individuals face oppression and discrimination as a group on their own.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

There is a great deal of research on LGB experiences as a group with an emerging body of research literature on the experience on bisexual individuals and experience. This chapter reviews the relevant literature used to shape the research question and appropriate methodology. Historical perspectives on sexuality are first examined to be consistent with the theoretical framework. Critical research is guided by historical realism, which acknowledges that the world is shaped by a complex mixture of our collective societal values which have developed over time (Glesne, 2011). This historical overview will help shape an understanding of why LGB people are facing the challenges they do today.

The second section summarizes the relevant literature on sexual fluidity, which is a particular characteristic that bisexual individuals experience that allows for flexibility in romantic partner choice. Baumeister (2000) defines it as the “degree to which a person’s sex drive can be shaped and altered by cultural and social factors, from formal socialization to situational pressures” (p. 348). The third and final part of this chapter provides an overview of the literature on bisexual individuals’ experiences with social support and coming out, and how their experiences may differ from their gay and lesbian counterparts.

Historical Views on Sexuality

Sexuality is not a topic readily discussed in Western society because of the taboo nature attached, but how has this taboo nature come to be? To understand where we currently are, we have to understand where we came from. This is especially important for critical research; through the lens of historical realism critical theory’s ontology is the belief that reality is shaped by the values and ideologies held throughout history

(Brookfield, 2005). The history of sexuality can be difficult to accurately describe as a result of a lack of documentation or because the information is based on unobtrusive measures and medical reports—just another product of its taboo nature (Landale & Guest, 1986). Through the dominant ideologies and definitions of what was deemed acceptable sex, the dialogue around sexuality has been shaped over decades to characterize what sexuality is today. This section aims to understand how sexuality and gender views evolved throughout history, and how the discourse around those themes has shaped how sexuality is viewed and valued today.

Ancient views on sexuality. What sexuality is today and how it is viewed in society is a result of discourse that has occurred through time and around the world (Brickell, 2006). Ideologies around sexuality’s purpose have evolved throughout time, and each one influences how sex is viewed today. In ancient times, sexuality was a natural phenomenon viewed neutrally, if not positively; it was explored freely and talked about openly. There were a variety of ways people explored sexuality and these ways were not considered deviations from the norm because there was no designated “norm” from which to deviate.

Homosexuality was viewed differently prior to the 19th century because it was seen in terms of behaviour rather than as a sexual identity to which someone was labeled and bound (Klinck, 2005). Sexual orientation was not a concern at the time, and there was no need to label people with an overarching sexual identity. Moreover, sex had many purposes including not only procreation but pleasure and well-being (Soble, 2009). Ancient views on sexuality were quite conservative according to the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible but transformed to be more liberal, where sexuality was enjoyed freely.

The discussion may have started with the Holy Bible, with the story of the first known man and woman, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. Scholars debate on the metaphoric meanings within this story, many of them surrounding gender and sexuality. It can be argued that in a holy book many people have lived and continue to live their lives by, that this particular story has influenced how gender and sexuality today is viewed (Gellman, 2006; Soble, 2009). One of the debates over this particular story is around male domination; whether it was inherent in the beginning of the relationship or occurred after the fall of Adam and Eve (Bird, 1993; Gellman, 2006; Meyers, 1988). In either case, male domination is evident, when God addresses Eve after her sin: “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16, King James Version). In other words, all women following Eve were to be punished from thereon in for Eve’s sin, through difficult childbirth and ruling husbands. This discourse around the original male-female relationship (and ultimately heterosexuality) is a key beginning in the discourse to follow around gender roles for the upcoming generations.

After eating the fruit, both Adam and Eve developed an embarrassment and shame to their naked bodies; they were always nude but after their sin it was as if they were naked (Colburn Jr., 1987; Gellman, 2006). They quickly made themselves aprons out of fig leaves to cover their genitals because of the sexual interpretation of their bodies due to the divine wisdom received after eating from the tree of knowledge (Colburn Jr., 1987). There is a widespread belief that Adam and Eve did not engage in sexual relations before their fall, and that is why the body was never seen as embarrassing. Sex was not in

God's plan for humans (Soble, 2009). Their shame and embarrassment of the body has been depicted in artwork, which has been studied to understand deeper meaning (Clifton, 1999). From this story, sex has been interpreted as a source of self-knowledge; to know sex is to know oneself (Colburn Jr., 1987; Foucault, 1978). This shame felt about the naked body is evident through much of modern history, but it was not the case for the Greeks before the contemporary period (BCE).

The way in which the ancient Greeks lived in 490-330 BCE would be considered a vice today, in which drinking, nudity, and open sexuality were a typical way of life (Boyle, 2006). Through ancient artwork, historians have developed an understanding of how sexuality was viewed during those times. The body was not something to be ashamed of, but to be celebrated; sculptures and paintings of men and women's bodies often included their genitalia (Boyle, 2006). Through oral tradition, stories were passed on from generation to generation, and one story in particular that discussed love and sexuality is from Plato's Symposium. Symposia were men's drinking parties that occurred, for the most part, to celebrate battle victories (Groneberg, 2005). Sex was a common theme of conversation amongst the drunken men, and Aristophanes, a popular comedic writer, explained to the guests one story of longing for one's "other-half". In the beginning, just after Earth was created by the Gods, humans were composed of two brains, two sets of arms and legs, two hearts, and two sets of genitalia. Some possessed all male genitalia, some possessed all female, and some had both male and female genitals (hermaphrodites) (Baird, 2007; Groneberg, 2005). Zeus, the God of the sky, was threatened by the power and intelligence that these humans had, so he split each of them right down the middle. From that point on, it was believed that each half yearned for their

other half, whether it was the same sex, or opposite sex in the case of the hermaphrodites (Baird, 2007). This may be the first consideration of sexual orientation as we know it today, defined simply as a sexual, romantic, psychological, and emotional desire for partners of a particular sex (Wilkerson, 2009). Homosexuality was not considered a deviation in sexuality according to this ancient belief. If someone longed for someone of the same-sex it was because their “other half” happened to possess the same type of genitalia.

In Greece, sexual activity involving a man and a boy was common practice. *Pederasty* in contemporary times is viewed as perverted and even illegal, but in ancient Greece it was an educational method leading a boy into manhood (Boyle, 2006; Percy, 2005). Men were trained as warriors to fight for their country, so there was a societal benefit for young boys to grow into men quickly. Men were often living in camps with many other men, and because the body was nothing to be ashamed of, these men often lived together in the nude (Boyle, 2006; Scanlon, 2005). Moreover, pederasty was not only a phenomenon that occurred only in Greece, but also around the world. Some Native American tribes practiced (and continue to practice) pederasty as guidance into manhood (Stearns, 2009). At the first signs of puberty, a maternal uncle would have the boy stay with him, and penetrate him to make him strong and pass on his semen so that boy could be a fertile male (Stearns, 2009). It was commonplace for men to have sexual relations with other men their age as well, keeping in mind that it was seen as a sexual behaviour and not necessarily a sexual identity. Sexual intercourse between men has often been interpreted as a way to show power or dominance (Foucault, 1985). Foucault also described aphrodisia in men, a Greek word for pleasure. Men did not differentiate

between sexual relations with boys/men or women, it was simply seen as different avenues for exploring one's pleasure (Foucault, 1985). Interestingly, there is no known equivalent of pederasty in women (Boswell, 2006). Same-sex relations in ancient men are a popular topic of scholarly review.

By contrast lesbianism was rarely discussed, reflecting a power imbalance between the sexes at this time (Boyle, 2006). The first famous case of "lesbianism", however, is attributed to Sappho. In 600 BCE she was an ancient Greek poet who lived on the island of Lesbos who wrote about her love for other women. Interestingly, although "Lesbos" is the origin of the modern word lesbian, Sappho was not actually homosexual, but bisexual in practice, with a history of being sexually involved with both men and women (Boyle, 2006; Klinck 2005). This is an example of the homo-hetero binary that is seen in society today, in which bisexuality is simply not included. Although sexuality was more liberal in ancient Greece, gender inequality was evident even in terms of homosexuality, where it was powerful and served a purpose with men, but was simply viewed as behavioural or not recognized at all in women (Klinck, 2005). Lesbianism was rarely discussed and sex between two women did not necessarily possess a higher purpose, but sexual intercourse between men served a greater purpose, whether it was for power or to support the development of a younger male. Yet, homosexual behaviour would soon come to lose its value and be widely unacceptable for both sexes.

Victorian era sexuality and sexual deviance. During the early 19th century, or the Victorian era, rules and regulations around sexuality were strict and very conservative, unlike the ancient period. This was a time where the middle and upper class members of society were extremely shameful about sexuality, confining conversations

around sexuality to the home and it was not seen as something to be discussed by those in the “proper” upper-class. Foucault (1978), a French author who was interested in how history since the post-Victorian era affected modern western societies, described the attitudes around sexuality at this time as the *repressive hypothesis*. This hypothesis dictated that any discourse and education about sexuality was to remain private, if it occurred at all. If sex was to be discussed, it was done subtly: metaphors and pseudonyms were used to make sexual discourse as discreet as possible. Definitions of what appropriate sex was arose at this time, and this sex was between a married man and woman in hopes of having a child (Foucault, 1978). Marriage at this time was not just a product of love, but often a product of contract or mutual understanding (Landale & Guest, 1986). The view of marriage and sexuality back in the Victorian era paints a dark picture, of a life in which marriage and sex were not enjoyed, but necessary.

Which influences shaped the shameful ideology around sexuality at this time?

One aspect of the 19th century was the medicalization of sexual “deviants”.

Sexuopathology or *sexual perversion* was particularly worrisome to psychiatrists and medical doctors with specific behaviours of concern including anal sex, oral sex, pornography, homosexuality, and masturbation (Money, 2003). One of the original examples of the link between mental illness and sexual deviancy began in the 18th century with Tissot, a Swiss physician who believed that mental instability in men was due to a loss of vital fluid through masturbation (Money, 2003). Those individuals who demonstrated a same-sex attraction were being mentioned in medical manuals at this time. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a German sexologist, published *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886, a medical manual that described psychiatric disorders in relation to sexuality

(Bauer, 2003; Money 2003; Urban, 2004). Disorders of sexual deviancy included nymphomania, hysteria, and moral insanity, all of which were believed to be a serious threat to health and well-being (Kauth 2006; Studd, 2007). In this manual, the term bisexuality was used for the first time, whereas the term homosexual was coined by a Hungarian doctor, Karoly Maria Benkert in 1860—but not both definitions originate from a physical disease context (Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2001). At the time of Krafft-Ebing's writing, he was the first to name those people who were sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex (exclusively, and those with some same-sex attraction). This was to be opposite of “hetero-sexuals” meaning “procreative erotic instinct”, from Darwin's Theory of Evolution (Kauth, 2007, p. 50). Bisexuality was viewed as a mental state, in which those who had attractions to both sexes were mentally androgynous, possessing aspects of both genders in their brain (Angelides, 2006). Although there was discourse around bisexuality and homosexuality, these ways in which people were experiencing sexuality were considered deviations from the heterosexual norm.

This manual had a major influence for future doctors and psychiatrists who were working to find a “cure” for homosexuality, as it was later deemed a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) (2nd ed.) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1968 (Drescher, 2012). It is important to keep in mind that these diagnoses had no stable medical basis because science and technology were not developed enough at this point to truly investigate cause and effect. The only real public discourse around sexuality was between a patient and their doctor, therefore medicalization served an agenda that had little scientific relevance, conveying the dominant beliefs at the time.

Religious and scientific views of sexuality. The medicalization of sexual

experiences cause fear and shame around sexuality, and the Catholic Church's views on what constituted proper sexuality also narrowed the perspective on what was deemed appropriate sexual experience. Catholicism was the dominant religion in Canada during the Victorian era and had a great deal of influence on how Canadians lived their lives during this time (Miller, 1985). Celibacy was seen as the ultimate sacrifice to Christ in order to be a perfect Catholic (Benagiano & Mori, 2009). By the end of the 18th century, canonical law and civil law aimed to control the sexuality of everyone, including married heterosexual couples. The Catholic Church had very narrow ideas about sexuality, and if sexual behavior was to occur between a married heterosexual couple it should only occur with one purpose in mind: procreation (Foucault, 1978).

In 1844, the vulcanization of rubber made for more effective condoms, and they were mass-produced, but the stigma around contraceptives at the time made it even more difficult to have sexual intercourse with one's partner simply for pleasure; using a condom went against the ideology of what constituted appropriate sex between partners and there was a sense of guilt around that (Gamson, 1990; Soble, 2009). The Catholic Church determined the division between appropriate and inappropriate sex, with appropriate sex only occurring within heterosexual matrimonial relations, preaching standards such as how often, when, and why a couple should have intercourse. This very narrow definition excluded a number of sexual practices: sex for pleasure (married or not), masturbation, indulging in fetishes and of course same-sex sexual relations. It was a difficult point in history for sexuality to be enjoyed and explored freely.

Although it seems like so much was against sexual expression, science was developing and challenging religious dogma on many items, including sexuality. In the

earliest qualitative study done on sexuality, the Mosher Survey, a sample of married women from 1892 to 1920 (at the end of, and just after the Victorian era) were asked about their sexual attitudes and practices. Interestingly, the data were not released until 1970, when Stanford historian Carl Delger discovered the interviews, further exemplifying the private nature of sexual discourse and sexual research during that time (Landale & Guest, 1986). Nearly the entire sample reported their rationalization for engaging in sexual intercourse as reproduction, love, and necessity (Landale & Guest, 1986). There was a definite focus on heterosexual relationships and sexual intercourse for procreation. Unfortunately there were not many research studies done at this time on sexuality because of the shame and embarrassment surrounding the subject.

Sexual uprising. At the end of the 1800s, sex research focused on biological or medical aspects of sexual drive and underpinnings for behaviour (Bullough, 1998). At this time physicians were seen as the utmost experts on sexuality, because their offices were where sexual discourse was most likely to occur. Moreover, researchers who wanted to study sexuality at this time often sought education in the medical field where it would be most accessible and safe to do so (Bullough, 1998).

Funding for sex research became more available, and Alfred Kinsey came on the scene. Kinsey was a scientist with a PhD in biology from Harvard, but he was interested in cross-disciplinary work and so designed and directed a course in marriage and family at the University of Indiana (Bullough, 1998; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). This would signal the beginning of a major change from a medical/biological way of discussing sex to a more psychological, sociological standpoint. He openly discussed sex and talked with his students about their sex lives, with much uproar from other faculty

members. Despite such resistance, Kinsey received major funding in 1941 and interviewed about 18,000 individuals about their personal sexual behaviour and values (Bullough, 1998; Kinsey et al., 1948).

One of his major findings was quite surprising. The prevalence of individuals who had both same and opposite-sex sexual relations was much higher than anyone could have expected. Fifty percent of self-identified heterosexual males reported having at least one same-sex sexual encounter (Kinsey et al., 1948). Kinsey developed a sexuality scale from zero to six; zero being strictly heterosexual, six being strictly homosexual and everything in between (one to five) representing a different degree of bisexuality (Bullough, 1998; Fairington, 2008). He expressed discomfort with rigid sexual orientation labels (much like the ancient Greeks) believing that sexuality should be defined in terms of behaviour, rather than identity. Kinsey wanted to demonstrate how fluid sexuality could be, not just a division of homosexual and heterosexual individuals but that sexuality could be more complex and dynamic (Kinsey et al., 1948).

Although most of the scale is dedicated to some degree of bisexuality, Kinsey avoided use of the term because of its historical basis in biology, the subject in which he was trained. Bisexual meant a plant or animal species that reproduced using both male and female anatomy (what is known as a hermaphrodite today). However, Kinsey's close colleague, Beach, argued for use of the term because of the way it was used in Krafft-Ebings *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Kinsey et al., 1948). Because it was individual sexual acts that Kinsey was interested in, it was either a homosexual or heterosexual act, depending on if the partner for the particular sexual experience was of the opposite or same sex (Kinsey et al., 1948). Kinsey's conceptualization of sexual orientation would likely be

taken as overly simplistic today.

DeCecco (1981) is one researcher who openly critiqued Kinsey's approach to operationally defining sexual orientation (in terms of behavior and numbers) in a number of ways. First, he offered a very comprehensive definition of sexual orientation, including components of physical sexual activity (or behavior, in Kinsey's framing), interpersonal affection, and erotic fantasies. Thus, he differed from Kinsey by looking at not only the behavioural components of sexual orientation, but also the social and psychological aspects. Second, he took issue with Kinsey's scale, as it examines sexual orientation as a fixed state, and measured solely on the basis of sexual behaviour. DeCecco argued that sexual orientation is labile, which became a trend in future research on sexual orientation (i.e., sexual fluidity, to be discussed in a later section). Finally, DeCecco noted that in order to use the Kinsey scale, one must assume that there is a perfect negative correlation between homosexuality and heterosexuality, because they are not measured independently. He argued that there is not necessarily a direct trade-off between heterosexuality and homosexuality, therefore it cannot be measured on a single continuum. Although there are some criticisms about Kinsey's methods, no one can deny the significance his research had on shaping the dialogue and values around sexuality and sexual orientation specifically. It is a prime example of how a change in scientific knowledge and technology can influence world views on sexuality to change as well.

The medicalization of sexuality began to develop a pro-sexuality approach with the evolution to a scientific method from Catholic dogma. Disorders were no longer being diagnosed on the basis of deviant sexuality (e.g., masturbation, homosexuality), but rather a lack of sexual exploration was seen as cause for psychological and physical

distress for some people. One of the biggest contributors to psychological sexual development was Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst who believed that children needed to progress through psychosexual stages in order to be healthy functioning adults later in life (Freud, 1910; Garcia, 1995). His theory was not widely accepted until after his death, with people like his protégé, Wilhelm Reich, passing on his theory and beliefs. Reich argued for the importance of the orgasm, believing that sexual repression and control over libido resulted in distorted psychological development (Escoffier, 2009; Reich, 1974). The tables were turning and exploring individual sexual desires was becoming more of a possibility with each liberating change in sexual hegemony.

Nevertheless, prior to 1970, being gay or lesbian was considered both a mental disorder and a criminal offence. Men who engaged in sexual intercourse with men were convicted as sex offenders (Chambers, 2010). Canadian Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau fought against this discriminatory law in 1967, but it did not pass. Trudeau then became Canada's Prime Minister in 1968, and with this new influential role he and the Liberal government changed the law in 1969, allowing consenting adults to make their own sexual decisions in the privacy of their home (Chambers, 2010). The medicalization of homosexuality as a mental disorder changed shortly afterwards. It was not carried on as a diagnosis in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1973, another huge victory for LGB people (Pillard, 2009). Sexuality was something worth fighting for, and the ideology, although not completely changed, was being discussed among a more diverse population, shaping more liberal definitions for sexuality for everyone.

Canada, the United States, and parts of Europe began to experience some

resistance to the ideology of the dominant culture; people wanted change. With the Food and Drug Administration's approval of the oral contraceptive pill for women in 1960 and the widespread use of condoms among men, people began enjoying sex without the threat of an unwanted pregnancy or disease (Brown, 2011; Soble, 2009). Moreover, people were actively questioning Catholic dogma and political leaders, beginning to bring about change for themselves and future generations. At this time, Catholic resistance to sex was still evident, and at the state level, sex was something to be monitored, but sex outside marriage was not illegal. Women began to have premarital sex with their fiancés during their engagement, and this has been linked to the beginning of the slow separation of sex and marriage (Brown, 2011). One can see this separation beginning in the 1960s with single women having an unplanned pregnancy and then eventually marrying the father, to those women unexpectedly getting pregnant and opting for abortion in the 1970s (Brown, 2011).

The resistance of dominant ideologies continued with LGBT people who wished to express their love freely. Inspired by the women's movement and the broader sexual revolution that was happening, gay liberationists placed a lot of emphasis on the power of "coming out", making it the center of their political strategy (Escoffier, 2009).

Unfortunately, those who identified as bisexual or something other than "full-time" homosexual were still marginalized during the liberation movement. The purpose of the movement targeted those who identified as gay "full-time" and those who were not 100% gay were perceived to be "indecisive" about their identity (Escoffier, 2009).

The Stonewall Riot of July 1969 is a popularly cited event that put queer politics on the map. Hundreds of gay and lesbian people resisted arrest after police raided the

Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in the Greenwich Village (Bell, 2006; Meyer, 2006). For the next three days, thousands of people gathered in the streets and destroyed the city. They could no longer sit silently in a discriminatory society. It is viewed as one of the most pivotal moments for gay liberation and gay rights (Bell 2006; Meyer, 2006). Dominant ideologies around what constituted sex and love was no longer the rule: people were creating their own definitions.

Modern sexuality has been shaped by many historical forces. Today, sexuality is portrayed everywhere: in advertising, media, and entertainment, yet it is still a sensitive issue. This suggests that Foucault's repression hypothesis still stands, although it looks different than it did during the Victorian era. There are still a number of shameful ideologies that surround sexuality, yet it is inherent in our identities as human beings, creating an overall mixed message surrounding sexuality: we cannot talk about something that we all experience. Heteronormativity still prevails as the dominant ideology (Motschenbacher, 2011) but gay rights have been improving including the legalization of equal marriage in Canada and certain states in America (Bowal & Campbell, 2007; Chanen, 2004; Citron, 2007). There is still a long way to go. Men who have sex with men, for example, are still banned from being able to donate blood for five years on the basis of their sexual history (although this is even considered a step in a more equal direction, considering prior to 2013 they were banned from donating blood for life) (CBC News, 2013; Josefson, 2000), and the legal age at which one can consent to anal sex is higher than the age to consent to vaginal intercourse in many countries, including Canada, and it is illegal in certain countries altogether (Avert, 2011). These are just some of the mixed messages around sexuality that are evident today.

In summary, from the earliest recordings of history, researchers have been able to study how sexuality, and particularly sexual orientation, has been interpreted throughout time. Sexual orientation was not a concern in ancient Rome, where sex was simply behavioural. The deviant thinking around same-sex sexual relations came later when dominant ideology dictated that sexual intercourse should be between a married heterosexual couple for the purposes of procreation, and anything outside of that was considered criminal or an illness. After some major victories in the gay communities, LGB people were able to express their love more freely. With a more liberal view on sexuality, research has increased in this area giving rise to new ways of thinking. One's sexual orientation is understood now not as a criminal trait or illness, but a complex part of who someone is, and research on sexual fluidity has opened our eyes to how dynamic one's orientation can be.

Sexual Fluidity

Since the sexual revolution in the 1960s, more people have been able to explore their sexuality freely and openly. There are a number of diverse ways in which people express and explore sexuality, such as through sexual practices, sexual partners, and number of partners. Sexuality, and more specifically sexual orientation, historically, has been researched from a biological perspective (Bem, 2000; Mustanski, Chivers, & Bailey, 2002) but recently *social constructivism* approaches have come to the surface. Sexuality is a complex, socially constructed phenomenon that is different for everyone including how one's sexual identity is formed. More recently, sexual fluidity is a concept used to describe the changing sexual interests of an individual over time and it has been given two different names in the literature: *erotic plasticity* (Baumeister, 2000; Benuto &

Meana, 2008; Hyde & Durik, 2000; McElwain, Grimes, & McVicker, 2009) or *sexual fluidity* (Carr, 2009; Diamond, 2008; Fahs, 2009; Subhi et al., 2011). For the purposes of this research, I will use the term sexual fluidity, which Baumeister (2000) describes as the “degree to which a person’s sex drive can be shaped and altered by cultural and social factors, from formal socialization to situational pressures” (p. 348). Before I discuss sexual fluidity in-depth, however, I will describe the research done prior to Baumeister’s (the person who developed the concept) research that influenced the way in which the theory of fluidity was developed.

Social constructivism vs. essentialism. A literature search on sexual fluidity or erotic plasticity revealed very little research with those keywords in the title. Instead there were studies about bisexuality that looked at sexual fluidity as part of an analysis, without naming it as such (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977). Researchers were not discussing sexual fluidity as the broader concept it is today, using it simply to describe changing orientation in sexual minorities (Diamond, 2008). However, although little research was done on sexual fluidity specifically, a number of studies and theories have influenced the way in which we understand sexual fluidity today (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Kinsey et al., 1948; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995).

Although the most famous scale used to measure sexual orientation is the Kinsey scale, as previously noted it is only useful for looking at one’s orientation at a particular point and time (at the time they rate themselves, there is no place on the scale for discussion of past attractions and behaviours). The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid was the first measure of sexuality that had a dimension specific to time (Diamond, 2008; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985). With this scale, individuals were able to distinguish between

past, current, and “ideal” or potential future patterns of attraction, identity and behaviour, allowing researchers to monitor the fluidity overtime (Klein et al., 1985). One flaw with this particular scale however, was that it could be difficult to accurately predict one’s future attractions, but it would be interesting to look at predictions and then perform another assessment after a certain length of time has passed to see if the prediction and actual orientation were congruent with each other.

Sex researchers debated about which theories should shape their research for some time. This debate became extremely heated in the 1990s between essentialism and social constructivism (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Essentialism became the dominant way of thinking with the rise of the scientific revolution and positivism, which focuses on truth as the essential nature of things, or the “realities which lie behind the appearances” (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998, p. 10). Characteristic of positivism, this paradigm was guided by the belief that there was a constant, static, and inevitable truth. Recently, social science researchers have only used this term to show how opposed they are to that way of thinking. Researchers are more likely to be in favor of social constructivism, which, defined simply, gives merit to any social influence that can alter social experience (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). This theory places merit on a dynamic truth and that it is constantly being socially constructed (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). In terms of sexuality, much research is being done from a constructivist point of view because biology is no longer seen as the sole determinant in sexuality.

Although the terms fluidity and plasticity were not being used prior to the year 2000, research was being conducted on the changing identities of sexual minorities, a portion of how one defines sexual fluidity today. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995)

interviewed a sample of 80 women about their transition into lesbianism after a long time of identifying as heterosexual, examining the contexts in which these transitions occurred. This research aimed at combatting *heteronormativity*, in which being heterosexual was considered the natural state and any other orientation was a deviation (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). These researchers concluded that for women, the question was not “am I a lesbian?” but rather “do I want to be a lesbian?” This question dismisses *essentialist theories* about orientation, that sexual orientation is static and solely biologically determined, which was the dominant way of thinking about sexual orientation at the time (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 102). Psychological and environmental influences how sexuality is experienced: differently by everyone. Baumeister (2000) pulled from these two theories when he looked at sexuality in men versus women, interestingly using both theories; one for men and one for women.

Sex differences in sexual fluidity. Since the sexual revolution and women’s rights movement of the 1960s, women have been able to explore their sexuality as never before. Yet, the typical definition of the double standard entails men being sexual beings, whereas women focus more on relationships and love (Lyons, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2011). Men are expected and even sometimes applauded when they are sexually promiscuous whereas it is socially costly for a female to act in such a way. Although this double standard stands, it is evolving (Lyons et al., 2011; Schleicher & Gilbert, 2005). Moreover, when it comes to sexual behaviour without adhering to a sexual identity, women seem to have more freedom to explore members of both sexes than men do (Baumeister, 2000; Subhi et al., 2011). For example, when a woman is sexually involved with another woman it is considered sexy in today’s culture, whereas it

is not the case for men. This is because the standards for what is sexy are set by men in a heteronormative patriarchal society such as Canada. Not only is the double standard evolving, but it may be reversing in some aspects of sexuality, in favor of women.

Sex differences have been discussed and debated both by scholars and laypeople alike. The old popular saying “men are from Mars, women are from Venus” is a simple example of how people have come to understand men and women: not so much through their commonalities, but what makes them different from one another. From socialization (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012) to personality (Lippa, 2010), psychopathology (Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2010), and intelligence (Lynn & Kanazawa, 2011), differences between males and females have been examined in multiple ways throughout history. Sexuality is no exception: many aspects of sexuality have been compared and contrasted between the two sexes including sexual interests, and more specifically how those interests change over time. The way in which someone enjoys and practices their sexuality is not necessary static throughout the life course.

One of Baumeister's (2000) most influential findings, which many researchers have studied further since his work, is the sex difference in fluidity between men and women, which he termed the *theory of differential fluidity*. He suggested that men's sexuality was more rigid, determined by biology (essentialist) whereas women's sexual interests were more likely to be shaped by sociological factors (social constructivist) (Baumeister, 2000). He hypothesized that this difference was due to a women's weaker sex drive by rationalizing a combination of biological differences between men and women. Women have lower testosterone levels than males (at least one hormone that has been found to be responsible for sex drive), and possess two X chromosomes (as opposed

to a male, who has both an X and Y chromosome) that could carry different prescriptions of behaviour and the environment would determine which of the two would be expressed (Baumeister, 2000; Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). With little to no research to back up these claims, a number of researchers decided to explore sexual fluidity further. Some of their findings added to Baumeister's theory whereas others created more questions than findings.

Sexual fluidity research does not simply focus on the way in which someone's sexual orientation changes throughout their life, other aspects of sexuality have been examined as fluid. *Sexual arousal* can be defined as an emotional state instigated by external (e.g., audio/visual) or internal (e.g., fantasies) stimuli and manifested through physiological, behavioural, and emotional changes (Chivers, 2010). *Sexual desire* is strongly related to arousal, which is the strong need or wanting of sexual intimacy, often with preferred people (Prause & Graham, 2007). These are two areas of sexuality that have demonstrated considerable sex differences in fluidity. First, research has shown that men display a high level of category-specificity in their sexual desires; if a man self-reports that certain people, objects, or situations arouse him most (e.g., studied by monitoring change in sexual orientation overtime) this will be evident through his physiological-sexual responses, and he is less likely to be physically aroused to anything that deviates from those categories (Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Steinman, Wincze, Sakheim, Barlow, & Mavissakalian, 1981). Second, men generally know what is arousing to them at a young age, around puberty, and a male's sexual interests have been shown to be more stable than the interests of women.

Interestingly, a woman's self-reported arousal is not necessarily congruent with

her physical signs of arousal when measured with a photoplethysmograph (a small instrument inserted into the vagina used to measure sexual arousal physiologically) (Chivers, 2005; Steinman et al., 1981). Also a female's arousal is less category specific than her male counterpart; when a woman says that certain people, things, or situations do or do not arouse her, it is not necessarily evident through her physical arousal. For example, a heterosexual woman can report that she is not aroused by a female-female sexual video but may send a different message through a photoplethysmograph.

It is not surprising that a man's self-reported arousal is strongly correlated with his physiological arousal. The physiological sign of a male's arousal is physically evident—an erection can be seen with the naked eye. Little boys are intrigued by their penis as an extension of their bodies and they explore their genitals from an early age. This is not as common in young females, whose genitals are internal. Girls and women alike may require prompting to explore and their genitals for the first time. It is also a matter of socialization as well, where boys are viewed as naturally sexual and women are supposed to be more conservative in all aspects of their sexuality, and in most cases are (Benuto & Meana, 2008; Diamond, 2008; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994). Sex differences have become a major area in sexual fluidity research, as Baumeister has highlighted, but not everything he has claimed in terms of fluidity has been taken as truth.

Although Baumeister started the dialogue on sexual fluidity specifically, it quickly became a topic of debate with many researchers questioning his findings, theory, and methods. According to the theory of differential fluidity, biology plays more of a role in men's sexual interests, whereas women are more sensitive to environmental factors (Baumeister, 2000). Andersen, Cryanowski, and Aarestad (2000) argued that biological

and social factors combine to create how sexuality is experienced for both sexes, and that the two cannot be teased apart, criticizing Baumeister's findings as too simplistic.

Andersen and colleagues were not the only researchers questioning Baumeister. Benuto and Meana (2008) directly tested Baumeister's theory of differential fluidity on a sample of ethno-culturally diverse college students using acculturation as the dependent variable, a process of adopting cultural practices, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of the dominant culture. In terms of sexuality, North America is more liberal in terms of sexual practices and dialogue compared to Hispanic and Asian cultures, therefore Benuto and Meana (2008) tested to see if acculturation would exert more of an effect on the sexual attitudes of women than men. Past researchers have suggested that acculturation has affected sexual attitudes of both Hispanic (Amaro, 1988) and Asian samples (Brotto, Chik, Ryder, Gorzalka, & Seal, 2005), but gender differences were never explored. Although acculturation did have an effect on attitudes, Benuto and Meana did not find any significant differences between males and females. Although other researchers have found inconsistencies when examining sex differences in terms of fluidity, Baumeister has opened the doors to a very interesting sexual phenomenon that many researchers have gone forward to continue developing. This includes how sexual fluidity relates to how a person's sexual orientation can change over their lifetime.

Sexual fluidity and sexual orientation. Research on sexual orientation suggests that it is determined early in childhood and remains stable throughout life (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005). This is due to a number of studies that looked at sexual orientation from different angles: the ineffectiveness of sexual orientation conversion therapy (Haldeman, 1994), developmental gender-atypical

behaviour in childhood links to homosexuality (Bailey & Zucker, 1995), and biological etiology of homosexuality (Mustanski et al., 2002). However, because so many people have reported change in their long-standing sexual orientations, this viewpoint has shifted and so has the research focus. Now environmental influence is not ignored as having an important role in the formation of one's sexual identity; research findings suggest a more complex interaction between biology and environmental factors. Recent research on sexual orientation has found that it is not something that is necessarily stable (as essentialist theories may dictate), but subject to change throughout the lifespan (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2008; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). For example, Diamond's (2008) longitudinal study involving 79 non-heterosexual women found that 67% had changed their sexual identity once and 36% changed theirs twice over the ten year period. Additionally, Rosario and his colleagues (2006) year-long study, in which bisexuality was focused on as a transitional phase from heterosexual to homosexual identity formation, found considerable levels of change among a proportion of the participants who had once identified as bisexual and eventually came out as gay/lesbian (although it is important to note, that this was not the case for all bisexual individuals in the sample) (Rosario et al., 2006).

Sometimes the change in someone's sexual identity does not naturally occur, rather it is a product of an intensive therapeutic process. *Conversion or reparative therapies* were developed by psychotherapists and religious authorities to convert homosexual individuals into heterosexual people at a time when homosexuality was seen as sin and/or a disease. Reparative therapists believed that homosexuality was a developmental disorder that could be "cured" through stronger gender identification. For

the most part this therapy has not been proven to be successful in changing someone's orientation (Haldeman, 1994; Spitzer, 2003). In fact, participating in this type of therapy has been shown to produce negative results by and large, by increasing self-loathing, hopelessness, and depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Although most researchers have not found conversion therapy to be beneficial, Spitzer (2003) found 200 self-selected individuals who had reported a degree of long-term change after engaging in reparative therapy. Using structured interviewing techniques, Spitzer discussed pre and post therapy experiences with his participants. In order to participate in this study, participants had to have been predominantly homosexual for many years prior to therapy, and have had long-term change since therapy. Many of the participants had motives for entering therapy, so it is difficult to generalize reparative therapy's effectiveness to all gay men and women. Nevertheless, Spitzer's was one of few studies that showed effective results in reparative therapy. Due to the exclusionary criteria, all participants reported significant change in homosexual orientation post-therapy, although reports of complete change were uncommon (Spitzer, 2003). However, Spitzer recently recanted this study, publicly apologizing to the gay community for "making unproven claims of the efficacy of reparative therapy" (Spitzer, 2012, as cited in Ralph, 2012). Most of the sample was male (143 males versus 57 females), which made this the one study that found that men could also be sexually fluid (although more radical change was observed in the women overall) (Spitzer, 2003). Since Spitzer recanted his theory on reparative therapies, research focusing on sexual fluidity in men is needed in order to understand the ways in which it differs from women.

Diamond (2008) focused on sexual fluidity in women because, as this paper has

shown, research had shown that sexual fluidity was more evident in women than men in terms of sexual interests. Her sample included 79 women with varying degrees of same-sex romantic interest, and she followed them over ten years. What she found was a remarkable amount of change in sexual interest, and most women at some point in the study described their orientation as “unlabeled” (Diamond, 2008). This reflects how these participants became aware of their own sexual fluidity, and that their sexual experience and interests over time did not necessarily fit within the confines of rigid sexual orientation labels. Diamond argued that our limited understanding of sexual fluidity, even in terms of women alone, is because past researchers “have just gone about studying it all wrong” (p. 52). She called for more longitudinal studies to monitor change over time and to choose all women with some form of same-sex sexual interest, not just those who label themselves as a sexual minority; researchers miss out on an important sub-set of data if they exclude self-labeled heterosexuals, assuming they have no same-sex attractions or sexual experiences (Diamond, 2008).

Most of the literature on sexual fluidity focuses on sex differences or exclusively on women. Because women are more sexually fluid, they are less likely to have very strict ways of expressing their sexuality. Being more sexually fluid may speak to why it is more women are bisexual. In a national health statistics survey in the United States, 2.8% of women aged 18-44 claimed to be bisexual compared to 1.8% of men of the same age range (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). Although these numbers may not be fully accurate due to the sensitive nature of sexual orientation and the lack of a universal definition of bisexuality, the fact that women are more sexually fluid could speak to a larger proportion of them being bisexual.

Bisexuality

As mentioned previously, sexual orientation is formed by a number of different aspects including behaviour, romantic longing, sexual attraction, and arousal. Bisexuality can be a difficult concept to define, because it means different things to different people. The bisexual label is being adopted by some people who are looking to deconstruct rigid sexual orientation labels such as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual (Rust, 1992). Moreover, it is not only these different meanings that have made it difficult to define bisexuality but there are there are a number of other sexual orientation labels derived from bisexuality or have meanings that are relatable: *pansexual*, *omnisexual*, *queer*, *non-heterosexual/hetero-flexible*, and *unlabeled* (Obradors-Campos, 2011). Pansexual or omnisexual (which can be used interchangeably) are labels that encompass all aspects of sexuality. These labels do not only focus on the biological sex of the partners of interest, but are inclusive of transgendered individuals, who have a desire to live and be accepted as the opposite sex (Pimenoff & Pfafflin, 2011). Pansexuality does not focus simply on sexual relations that require coupling, but other sexual interests such as masturbation, fetishism, and fantasy (Drobac, 1999). Pansexuality is often associated with a “kinky” lifestyle because of a lack of discrimination when it comes to the sexual interests or partners of interest but in actuality, it is simply a way of defining one’s broader sexual interests. Queer, once used as a derogatory word but since been re-claimed by some LGB people, is another broad orientation label that describes anyone that differs from the heterosexual norm (Chang, 2005). What is interesting about the queer label is that it neither discloses the sex of a preferred partner nor the biological sex of the person identifying in this way; it is the most vague of the non-heterosexual labels. The definition of queer could be used to

describe non-heterosexual/hetero-flexible, which does not necessarily rule out any opposite-sex attractions, but someone identifying in this way does not ascribe to a strict heterosexual identity. Last but not least, an unlabeled person prefers not to ascribe to the confines of any one sexual orientation because they believe that their sexuality is fluid and ever-changing. Similar to the other orientations, unlabeled individuals fall for the person without basing their attraction on the person's gender (Brooks & Quina, 2009). These categorizations of sexual orientation are highly related and research that focuses on any one of these labels should be inclusive in their samples of all these related orientations (Diamond, 2008).

Sexual fluidity is especially relevant to the study of bisexual/pansexual/unlabelled populations because of their ability to be emotionally and sexually attracted to someone regardless of their biological sex. Therefore certain people could be in committed relationships, participate in fleeting sexual acts, or be attracted to a number of different people, not simply those of the opposite sex; they are flexible and fluid in their sexual attractions. The study of sexual fluidity is an imperative when looking at bisexuality because of the fluid and flexible nature of a bisexual person's identity and sexual behaviour, but fluidity can occur in any population.

Due to the composition of the word, the pre-fix "bi" (meaning two) assumes that the individual is attracted to male and female individuals—the two biological sexes (Halperin, 2009), but there have been more inclusive definitions of what it means to be bisexual. In previous research on bisexuality, authors have used varied definitions in order to conceptualize this complex orientation. Kinsey interpreted bisexuality as a combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality (Kinsey et al., 1948). Rust (2001)

interviewed 917 individuals with both same and opposite sex attractions to create an all-encompassing definition of bisexuality that came from the people who identified in this way. The conclusion was that “bisexual identity reflects feelings of attraction, sexual and otherwise, toward women and men or toward other people regardless of their gender” (Rust, 2001, p. 63). This definition is inclusive of same and opposite sex attractions, as well as attractions to transgendered individuals, but does not mention non-coupling sexual interests as other labels have included (e.g., pansexual). With so many terms with related definitions, it can be difficult to understand what bisexuality really is. However, for the remainder of this thesis, bisexual is used as an umbrella term inclusive of all these orientations because of its familiarity with a broader audience than the others.

Beliefs about bisexuality. Just as there is no single definition for bisexuality, people have different beliefs as to what it means to be bisexual. There are a number of people who do not believe that bisexuality is a legitimate sexual identity, with some past research refuting its existence altogether (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009). Some of this is due to an increase in performative bisexuality, which is when heterosexual women engage in temporary, experimental, or transient same-sex sexual behaviour for male attention (Fahs, 2009). Other thoughts around bisexuality and those who identify as bisexual have often been negative and dismissive; it can be difficult to believe that someone can actually love someone despite their gender. Fence sitting, confused, immature, and promiscuous are just a few labels that have been used to describe bisexual people (MacDonald, 1981; Ochs, 2011). Bisexuality has been viewed as a transition phase in which one identifies as bisexual for a period of time to gauge the reactions of their friends and family members and once comfortable, ultimately come out as gay or

lesbian. It has also been viewed as having one foot in the closet: people who identify as bisexual are actually gay or lesbian, but are too afraid to fully come out and identify as such (MacDonald, 1981). Bisexual people have the ability to “hide” their homosexual feelings if they wish to avoid discrimination or a difficult situation, because they are still attracted to members of the opposite sex (Matteson, 1995). It is almost seen as an easy way out by some people in the gay and lesbian population, who by definition, do not have romantic relationships with people of the opposite sex and cannot hide from the discrimination they face.

Bisexual people have also been associated with the spreading of the HIV/AIDS virus, because of the broad association of promiscuity and jumping from male partners to female partners (Eliason, 1996; Satcher, Durant, Hu, & Dean, 2007). This belief partially comes from a small sub-set of the bisexual population: Heterosexually-identified African-American and African-Canadian men who have intercourse with men and women but do not disclose their same-sex sexual interactions to the women they are with. This is referred to as men on the “down-low” (Millett, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005), and it has been cited as one of the main reasons for an increase in HIV/AIDS in African-American and African-Canadian women. Yet, this is not true for most of the men who have sexual intercourse with members of the opposite and same sex. Therefore, not only do bisexual individuals come out in an environment that is heteronormative (as do gay men and lesbians), but they also come out in an environment that does not take bisexuality seriously or believes it is dangerous and immoral. It can be difficult for bisexual individuals to find support with these existing stereotypes.

One label that has been confused with bisexuality is *polyamory*, another sexual

and romantic practice that has been contested and misunderstood. Polyamory, the opposite of monogamy, is where one person pursues multiple relationships whether they are deeply emotional, strictly sexual, or some combination of the two (Klesse, 2006). A common misconception about bisexuality is that all bisexual people require both a male and female partner to be fully satisfied in a relationship but this is a very broad generalization (Rust, 2000). Certain bisexual individuals may have multiple relationships with partners of the same and opposite sex, but this is not the case for the majority of bisexual people. Because polyamory is also a contested sexual practice—arguably more contested than even bisexuality—this misinterpretation may also play a role in constructing discrimination around bisexuality.

Biphobia and its effects. *Biphobia*, as mentioned previously, is defined as prejudice against bisexuality and those who identify as bisexual (Bennett, 1992). A major contributor to biphobia lies in the very nature of the word “bisexual” itself due to the different definitions, meaning, and stereotypes surrounding it. In a world in which being heterosexual is valued above anything else, many people experience hatred, shame, and discrimination about personal characteristics that they cannot control. *Heterosexism* is the belief that everyone is and must be attracted to members of the opposite sex (Fine, 2011), which can make living life as a LGB very difficult. The extreme hatred and/or fear of gay and lesbian people is *homophobia*, which is most common in heterosexual individuals (as opposed to other LGB individuals) (Fine, 2011). Bisexual individuals also face *biphobia*, which is similar to homophobia but the hatred and/or fear is directed specifically toward bisexual individuals. Although the definition is similar, there are very distinct differences between homophobia and biphobia. Additionally, heterosexism, homophobia, and

biphobia can be internalized by LGB individuals as well, making it difficult to understand or accept being a sexual minority (Frost & Meyer, 2009). All LGB persons are at high risk of threats, bullying, abuse, and assault due to homophobia or biphobia (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995) but biphobia has the additional layer of doubt around whether or not the sexual orientation really exists (Bennett, 1992).

There is also a difference in who expresses the biphobia. Homophobia has mostly come from heterosexual individuals; bisexual individuals face biphobia from both the heterosexual population and from gay and lesbian individuals (Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002). Although gay and lesbian individuals also face challenges living with a sexual minority status, this *double discrimination* is evident for bisexual individuals, with biphobia coming from both communities. Being discriminated against by both the straight and gay people in their lives can make it seem like there is not anywhere or anyone to turn to and a bisexual identity can be lost within the sexual orientation binary.

Moreover, due to the grouping of LGB experiences in research, bisexuality is lost, forgotten, or simply unacknowledged. This happens in everyday discussions about LGB issues. When one thinks of sexual minorities, it is gay men and lesbian women who typically come to mind. For example, if a self-identified heterosexual man who has had romantic and sexual relations with women all his life has one sexual interaction with one man, would people think he is gay or would they think he is bisexual? Although his sexual activity is bisexual in nature (i.e., having both female and male partners) it is likely assumed that the man has lost all interest in female partners and that he is gay because of one same-sex sexual encounter. There are few contexts or scenarios in which someone is assumed to be bisexual. Yoshino (2000) wondered “why we have divided the

world of orientation into categories that tend to suppress the existence of bisexual desire” (p. 359). This is not due to a smaller proportion of people who identify as bisexual some of the largest studies on sexuality (Kinsey, 1948; Masters and Johnson, 1979) demonstrated that the proportion of bisexual individuals was similar or greater than that of gay and lesbian individuals. Masters and Johnson (1979) even make their own terminology for what we know as bisexual today because they saw it as such a prominent phenomenon: someone who is ambisexual is someone who enjoys without reserve, overt sexual opportunity with anyone regardless of gender. Yet, even though there are a great number of bisexual individuals, biphobia and double discrimination are two phenomena that keep this population hidden, and as a result, little research is carried out on bisexuality.

Although common knowledge might state that bisexuality is rare or uncommon, it is the discomfort and uncertainty that surrounds bisexuality in particular that makes this population seem small or nonexistent compared to the gay and lesbian population. Yoshino (2000) calls this the “relative nonexistence thesis” (p. 370) of which he offers a counter-thesis. The invisibility of bisexuality, *bisexual erasure*, is an active practice by both heterosexual and gay individuals. The need to stabilize sexual orientation, to understand where one stands in social order is one of the reasons for bisexual erasure; bisexuality does not fit neatly into a category and this is uncomfortable for most people. Heterosexual individuals have a particular interest in keeping social order because they are considered the most privileged (Yoshino, 2000). Moreover, some gay men and lesbian women dismiss bisexual people because they are not “actually gay” and it is assumed that they do not share the same struggles and amount of discrimination.

Additionally, the term bisexual is not used as often in either mainstream newspapers or magazines as homosexual, and the same is evident in academic research (Yoshino, 2000). More research needs to be done on bisexual individuals and their identity, to fully understand their needs and experiences in order to give them the support they require. This support is most important in a sensitive time in any LGB person's life—coming out.

The Coming Out Process and Social Support

People are assumed to be heterosexual unless they indicate otherwise, and as mentioned earlier the process of doing so is called *coming out* (Hill, 2009). Coming out has been theorized by many researchers and many models have been developed (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Knous, 2005) but these are grand theories that do not apply to all LGB individuals. Stage models assume that coming out is a process in identity development that has an end point, but it never ends. Orne (2011) describes coming out as *identity and stigma management*, in which people make conscious decisions around whether or not to come out in different contexts with each person they encounter. This is a reoccurring process in which LGB individuals “control access to [certain] types of information about their identities” (Orne, 2011, p. 682). LGB individuals are considered *invisible minorities* because they are not identifiable as a minority by their appearance (as is characteristic of ethnic minorities) (Moran, 2007). Therefore they can and do choose to whom they disclose (and do not disclose) their sexual identity.

Orne (2011) argues that coming out should not be examined through a stage-model approach because it assumes that coming out is linear and complete once all stages have been reached. But as new people enter a LGB individual's life, they have to make an assessment about the new relationship with that person and the social context in which

they are in (e.g., professional, academic) to determine whether or not disclosure of their sexual identity is appropriate (Orne, 2011). Orne's (2011) research was done with gay men, but this process may be even more complex for bisexual individuals, who may have different-sex relationships for a period of time that will lead most people to assume they are heterosexual. Do they still disclose to others that they are in fact bisexual or do they wait until they have a same-sex relationship before disclosing that information? It can be even more complex for a bisexual person to come out when only certain relationships (those with same-sex partners) require such disclosure.

Some of the literature on gay and lesbian stigma management describes *passing* as part of the dominant group (heterosexual individuals) as a strategy to avoid discrimination or negative interactions (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004) but for a bisexual individual, heterosexuality is still part of their identity. Balsam and Mohr (2007) compared stigma management between gay/lesbian and bisexual individuals quantitatively. They found that bisexual individuals reported lower levels of self-disclosure compared to their gay and lesbian counterparts, using an Outness Inventory Scale developed by Mohr and Fassinger (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Therefore bisexual individuals were less likely to disclose their sexual minority status to as many people in as many social contexts as gay and lesbian individuals.

Much of the research on coming out has focused on the process being difficult, stressful and anxiety-provoking, some research has explored the benefits and positive aspects of coming out as well (Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). The literature on *coming out growth* describes coming out as "coming to terms with one's sexual identity, while oftentimes stressful, marks a life transition that one has weathered or worked through,

which may foster feelings of personal strength or growth” (Bonet, Wells, & Parsons, 2007, p. 9). Before, during, and shortly after disclosure can feel like the most stressful time of a LGB person’s life, but it is generally perceived as the right decision afterwards: it makes LGB people feel more authentic, honest and reduces levels of stress and anxiety (Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). However, as mentioned previously, coming out does not only occur once in a LGB individual’s life but they must go through the process again as they encounter new people in new contexts (Orne, 2011). Coming out growth can help a person through coming out each subsequent time, as they perceive the process in a more positive way. It can buffer against the stress that comes with disclosure of sexual identity, and LGB individuals who are strongly affiliated with the LGB events learn more from the coming out process, thereby increasing levels of coming out growth (Bonet et al., 2007; Cox, Dewalele, van Houtte, & Vincke, 2011).

Research on coming out has generally focused on gay and lesbian experiences. Berger (1990) found that two-thirds of his sample of 143 gay and lesbian individuals experienced growth associated while they came out through his quantitative study. Cox and colleagues looked at coming out growth in a sample that included bisexual participants (40% of the sample identified as bisexual) and found that “if an LGB individuals’ environment is positive about same-sex sexuality, and if an LGB person can develop a healthy affiliation with other LGBs, he/she will perceive sexual identity development as an instructive and positive experience” (Cox et al., 2011, p. 131). This particular study looked at coming out growth from a quantitative perspective, using a lengthy Internet-based questionnaire and did not differentiate the experiences of their bisexual participants to their gay/lesbian participants. This may be important because

there is a difference in affiliation with participating in LGB events; bisexual individuals may experience less coming out growth and/or affiliation with LGB people than lesbian and gay individuals. Coming out is a process that is faced by LGB individuals every day, but bisexual people may have a different experience than that of their gay and lesbian counterparts. As previously mentioned, there is little research done on bisexual individuals' coming out experiences, including the beneficial growth they may experience while doing so. But because bisexual individuals are less likely than gay and lesbian people to strongly affiliate with pride groups and events (Balsam & Mohr, 2007) they may experience less coming out growth and have a more stressful time as they navigate through the coming out process.

Little research on the coming out process has focused on bisexual individuals alone: they are either grouped with gay men's and lesbians' experiences (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Luhtanen, 2003; Rothman et al., 2012), or grouped based on the sex of the individuals coming out: bisexual women and lesbians (Bates, 2010; Robohm, Litzenberger, & Pearlman, 2003) or bisexual and gay men (Rosario et al., 2006; Schindhelm & Hospers, 2004; Zamboni, Robinson, & Bockting, 2011). Additionally, when bisexual individuals have been included in research on coming out, they have been only a very small part of the sample. For example, in Bates' (2010) study on African American lesbian and bisexual women's coming out experiences, 16% of the sample was bisexual. In Rosario and colleagues' (2006) study on gay and bisexual men, only 31% of the participants identified as bisexual. The majority of the data from these studies is mostly based on the experiences of the gay or lesbian participants and bisexual experiences may be lost.

Coming out is a process that continues through a LGB individual's life and although it is different for everyone, there are still some major commonalities that have been found through the research. Coming out stage models have been criticized, but there are a number of common aspects among the models that are still relevant to the majority of LGB coming out experiences. One aspect that is common is that the person must establish their sexual identity to themselves and then develop a social identity, or a group membership identity (public vs. private) (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). For bisexual individuals the formation of a positive group identity can be difficult because their identity label falls along a continuum, and it can be difficult to find common others. Their sexual identity is unlike that of a lesbian or gay man, which makes it more difficult to relate to, and these groups have also been known to be unwelcoming to bisexual people (Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002; Yoshino, 2000). This means that there may be less sexuality-related social support in place for bisexual individuals during this sensitive and difficult time in their lives.

Research focused exclusively on bisexual individuals' coming out experiences is often based on auto-ethnographies, showcasing one individual's experience (e.g., Rambukkana, 2004; Suresha, 2005). An exception to using this type of methodology, Knous (2005) focused exclusively on coming out, identity formation, and stigma management in a sample of bisexual individuals. Using sociological deviance theory, and qualitative structured interviewing methodology, Knous (2005) described three stages that someone must go through to personally and publicly identify as a bisexual: (a) the initial deviant act; (b) the labeling of oneself (Lemert, 1967); and (c) being out, proud, and promoting rights (Kitsuse, 1980). This model is a broad generalization, as are all

stage models, and not all bisexual individuals may go through these steps in this order (as Knous acknowledges, not everyone in her sample reached, or intended to reach the third stage). I do not intend to use a theoretical “coming out model” to guide my research. These models assume a universal truth and oftentimes researchers try to fit the experiences of their participants into pre-established stages. Therefore I will focus on the most common themes in coming-out process models: coming out to oneself and coming out to others. This research will also focus on coming out as a continual process of identity and stigma management; around whom and in what circumstances does a bisexual individual come out. Making decisions around who to come out to may be heavily influenced by perceived reactions that person will have to the new sexual identity. A positive and supportive reaction is all a bisexual person can hope for when coming out for the first time.

Social support. Everyone experiences their share of highs and lows as they venture through life’s challenges, and during difficult times most people will turn to those they are close to for support. *Social support*, defined as a “set of perceived or received resources provided by the community, social networks and trusted people” (Lin, 1986, p. 19) has been shown to buffer the negative effects of a variety of stressors, including teenage pregnancy, natural disasters, and identifying as LGB (Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010). General social support also has an important place in the life of a LGB individual. According to *the direct effects model*, social support in the general sense has a positive impact on health and psychosocial well-being regardless of stress levels at any given time (Burton, Stice, & Seeley, 2004). Social support is not only important at the initial disclosure of one’s sexual identity but also as the person continues

to navigate through life with their new sexual identity. It has proven to aid in stigma management, the process of coming out to new people every day, and the day-to-day stressors that come from living in a heteronormative society (Sheets Jr. & Mohr, 2009).

In terms of the LGB population, past research has found inconsistencies in how social support has helped with sexual minority related stressors (e.g., Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Szymanski, 2009). It may be easy to assume that social support will generally benefit anyone who is going through difficulties with their sexuality and mental health but this has not necessarily been the case. For example, Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995) conducted a study with 194 LGB youth (in which there was no separation of differing orientations) and were unable to find any significant connection between levels of family support and the youths' psychological distress. Similarly, in Szymanski's (2009) study of 210 bisexual (comprising only 14% of the sample) and gay men (86% of the sample), social support did not mediate the experiences of sexuality stress and psychological distress. However, researchers have argued that the concept of social support is too vague and believe that there needs to be a separation of the different types of social support to see what kinds of support and by who are the most effective. For example Procidano and Heller (1983) argued that the construct of social support has been too vague, and that there is a need for separation of family and peer support because they can be differentially important depending on the stressor at hand. The more directly relevant the social support is to the actual stressor, the more beneficial the support will be (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Subsequently Doty and colleagues (2010) took this theory a step further, by looking at a more specific type of support for LGB persons, instead of social support in the general sense.

Sexuality related social support is defined as the acceptance of one's sexual orientation and assisting the LGB individual through the stressors they face around their sexual identity (Doty et al., 2010). This is an important distinction to make, because individuals may have a great deal of social support in other areas of their lives, without necessarily having any for their struggle with a new sexual identity. Although sexuality related social support may not be as readily available as other types of social support, it was shown to have the most effect on the LGB youth's distress around their sexual identity (Doty et al., 2010). Previous studies that did not find that social support had a significant impact on LGB individuals' well-being simply were not specific enough in what types of social support were being received and depending on the study it can be an important distinction to make (Doty et al., 2010). With the right social support from the people in an individual's life, developing a new sexual identity can be less frightening and difficult in a world already so unaccepting and this needs to be studied so we are able to better understand the benefits of these supportive acts.

Unfortunately for bisexual people, those individuals who are most likely to give sexuality related social support are other LGB people, but as was previously mentioned, bisexual individuals may not be as likely as gay and lesbian people to receive any social support from gay groups or online communities. In a study done on LGB individuals and their perceived level of social support, other sexual minority friends (opposed to family members and heterosexual friends) were most likely to provide support around sexual orientation related issues (Doty et al., 2010). In this particular article 24% of the sample identified as bisexual or unlabeled, but there was no separation of bisexual/unlabeled and gay/lesbian people to see if there was a difference in the amount of social support

bisexual youth received from their sexual minority friends. Bisexual individuals may receive less sexuality related social support from LGB people, making it more challenging to come out and feel comfortable with their new sexual identity.

Sexuality-related social support is extremely important in the lives of LGB individuals because it is heavily documented that being a sexual minority is strongly correlated with a number of physical and mental health concerns (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; DiFulvio, 2011; Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christensen, 2002; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Lamis, & Malone, 2011). LGB youth and young adults face a number of unique stressors in a heterosexist society in conjunction with the stressors that everyone faces (e.g., financial, peer pressure, family and friend issues). These unique stressors puts them at higher risk for substance abuse (Marshall et al., 2008), physical and/or mental health problems, and suicidal thoughts and attempts compared to their heterosexual counterparts (D'Augelli et al., 2001; DiFulvio, 2011).

Bisexual individuals may receive less social support due to their sexuality: studies have found that they perceive to have less social support from their friends and family than their gay and lesbian counterparts (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Fox, 1995). They do not have their own organized pride events, which gay and lesbian individuals do, and are more likely to organize, be featured, and fully participate in (i.e., Pride celebrations) and may feel excluded from the pride groups. Mohr and Rochlen (1999) found that gay and lesbian people who questioned the legitimacy of bisexuality were less willing to date or even befriend a bisexual individual. Getting involved with the pride events and participation in LGB activities for lesbian and gay individuals can be a great place of sexuality-related social support, but this source of support may not be readily available to

a bisexual person (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Biphobia, double discrimination, and the misunderstandings of what it means to be bisexual are deeply affecting those who identify in this way and there are sometimes serious consequences. Most people experience a number of stressors in their lives; with the added layer of biphobia and discrimination it can make for an extremely isolating experience. They may choose to ignore this part of themselves for a period of time and pretend to be something they are not. Certain LGB individuals struggle with their identity and disclosing that identity to others for their entire lives, but some of the first steps have proven to be the most difficult.

The process of coming out may involve a lot of emotional and psychological distress especially as someone readies themselves to disclose their identity to others (Darby-Mullins & Murdock, 2007). This is especially evident when it comes to one's family members where family support has shown to have a significant impact on self-acceptance, positive identity development, and emotional adjustment (Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001). Without these support systems, coming out can be extremely difficult, and bisexual individuals may develop both physical and mental health problems and are at high risk with alarmingly high rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts (D'Augelli et al., 2001). Stressors that are positively correlated with suicide attempts include conflicts with family over sexual orientation, more specifically around the time of the disclosure (Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994). Unfortunately, those who have attraction to both sexes have been found to be more likely to have greater suicide attempts and ideation than those with same-sex attraction alone (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2011; Jorm et al., 2002). This is a major concern because there are just as many

people who identify as bisexual as there are who identify as gay and lesbian (Yoshino, 2000), which makes for a great deal of people attempting to take, or successfully taking their own lives. This may be in part due to a lack of sexuality-related social support. Therefore it is important to look at bisexual individuals as a group on their own to examine their experience of coming out and with social support at this sensitive time.

Conclusion

Throughout history, LGB individuals have faced their share of highs and lows as a collective. The ancient Greeks were not bound to fixed sexual orientation labels, which allowed for flexibility in their sexual behavior. This flexibility was considered the norm, which is no longer the case in modern day sexuality. From the criminalization and medicalization of homosexuality, to the Stonewall victory in 1969, LGB individuals continue to face heterosexism and discrimination on a daily basis. Sexual fluidity is a concept associated with bisexuality because of the flexibility people have in terms of the gender of their sexual and romantic partners. Bisexual individuals are attracted to and have the ability to form romantic relationships with someone regardless of their sex or gender. Kinsey was the first researcher who brought bisexuality into the spotlight with his groundbreaking findings, and the research in this area has become increasingly popular although there are still a number of gaps.

Most importantly, research has grouped bisexual individuals with gay men and lesbians experiences for the majority of the research. However, although there are many commonalities, there are different experiences between all three groups. Bisexual individuals form only a small proportion of the sample in these cases, and their experiences can be lost. All LGB individuals are at risk of facing discrimination, but

bisexual individuals face unique challenges when coming out and forming their own sexual identity. Bisexuality needs to be studied in depth to fully understand the experiences that these individuals face on a regular basis, separate from their gay counterparts. Coming out research has combined the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals together, even when the sample includes only a minuscule percentage of bisexual people. Coming out research on bisexual individuals has had a number of methodological flaws, by being examined through stage models or auto-ethnographies. Traditionally when researchers have studied their sample as two separate groups to compare the experiences or attitudes regarding LGB individuals they have done it quantitatively (e.g. Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Cox et al., 2011; Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002). Similarities and differences have been found between the two groups in terms of: (a) the perceived levels of sexuality related social support (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Fox, 1995), (b) the ability to belong to and feel supported by LGB groups (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999), and (c) mental and physical health problems (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2011; Jorm et al., 2002). This research looks into these differences by focusing exclusively on bisexual individuals' experiences qualitatively to gain a deep understanding of the unique obstacles that people with both same-sex and different-sex attractions, with a focus on who/what is most supportive.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The methodology used to examine the coming-out experience is consistent with the critical theory paradigm. My goal was to describe the coming out experiences of bisexual individuals as their own group and focus solely on their experiences without comparing them a second group (i.e., gay men and lesbians); comparing with (against) a second group can imply that one group is considered “normative” and the other “different”. Interviews created an environment for dialogue and potential enlightenment, for bisexual participants to be able to acknowledge and discuss their experiences of oppression and the structures that maintain discrimination. In this chapter I will describe the methodology for this research, including the ways in which participants were recruited and how the research was carried out. The interview method will be explained as well as the analysis and coding of the transcribed interviews.

Recruitment

As a bisexual person who participates in Halifax pride and volunteers with particular organizations to increase my knowledge on healthy sexuality, I had a certain advantage in recruiting my participants (ethical implications as a dual-role researcher are mentioned in a later section). Using a purposive sampling method, I selected participants in a non-random way due to a particular characteristic of interest (Bryman, 2008). Purposive sampling procedures were used because they were consistent with LGB research (Knous, 2005; Rust, 2001). This sampling method was used because this particular population is considered “invisible”, as some of the research on this topic has claimed (e.g., Yoshino, 2000).

I advertised the study at gay-friendly organizations throughout Halifax such as the Halifax Sexual Health Centre, and through pride or gay straight alliance groups in

local universities. For ethical and practical purposes, I recruited participants who were the age of majority or above (in Nova Scotia, 18 years of age). If I recruited people under the age of majority, I would have required parental consent from those below the age of majority, and some participants may not have necessarily come out to their parents or have wished to disclose that they were participating in research about sexuality. Also, if participants were at the age of majority, there was a greater likelihood that they were already out, and had been for a long enough period of time that they could discuss a multitude of experiences. Most of my sample consisted of young adults; this makes sense because research shows that people are coming out earlier than ever before (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2003), although I accepted anyone 18 years of age or older, who was willing to recall their coming out experiences. I asked for participants who had both same sex and opposite sex attractions; they did not necessarily have to ascribe to a bisexual identity label. I also accepted people who considered themselves queer, un-labelled, non-heterosexual, and pansexual, which has been the practice in other studies looking at bisexual individuals (Diamond, 2008).

This particular research question required that all of my participants be “out” to some degree, not only to themselves but to at least one other person. However, past research has been inconsistent with how out their participants are when discussing coming out experiences. For example, Rossi (2010) required that all participants had come out to their parents, whereas Cox and colleagues (2011) required that their participants be out to only one person. Many researchers do not even mention any exclusionary criteria about how out their participants must be in order to participate in their study. I contacted one author who wrote a qualitative study on bisexual coming out

experiences, and when asked about how out her participants were, she responded by saying “I had no criteria about how ‘out’ people should be, as the bisexual community here in Australia is very small and very few people are what one would call ‘totally out’. My only criteria was that they had to self-identify as bisexual” (Kirsten McLean, personal communication, August 8, 2012). Thus, because there was no standard for how out someone should be in order to be “fully out”, especially since coming out is a continual process (Orne, 2011), I used very general guidelines in order to recruit participants: same-sex and opposite-sex attractions, and to have come out to at least one person.

I recruited eight bisexual individuals to reach saturation. Certain authors have found saturation with sample sizes as small as four (Romney, Batchelder, & Weller, 1986), therefore lengthy interviews (ranging from one hour to two hours) with eight people was sufficient for this study. Those who were interested in participating in the study were able to contact me via e-mail or telephone (both my e-mail and phone number were displayed on tear-able tabs of paper on the bottom of the advertisement). Some preliminary questions were asked to make sure the person was eligible for the study with regard to how the person identified (or based on their attractions) and whether or not they had come out to anyone. If they were eligible, I sent information outlining the study to ensure that they were fully aware of what the study was about and what it entailed.

Procedure

Informed consent was extremely important in this study because sexuality is a sensitive issue of discussion, especially when focusing on coming out, a time that may have been stressful and difficult for the participant. After making sure each individual was eligible for my study, I sent them the informed consent form (see Appendix A)

through e-mail. Sending the informed consent form allowed the participant to read, in their own time, about the purpose of the study, the way in which it would be implemented, and the roles and responsibilities of both researcher and participant. They were also made aware that I would record the interview using a digital recorder and the reasoning for the recording (i.e., to accurately describe the participants' experiences using their own words).

Incentives were used to encourage participation in the study, but it was understood that a researcher should practice caution when choosing the appropriate incentive for their participants. I gave incentives to encourage participation, and to show my appreciation for giving me their time and experience to the research. Incentives were offered to the participants who I did meet in person for an interview. The participant was able to choose between two incentives prior to meeting in accordance to their taste. Both options were of the same monetary value: a ten dollar gift card to Tim Hortons or to the Halifax Shopping Centre. The ethical considerations for offering incentives are considered in a further section.

I informed the participants that I would use a semi-structured interviewing technique, and I informed them of the general topics that would be covered so that they had an idea as to what sort of questions would be asked and they could begin to think of how they might answer them. Because the topic of discussion was considered sensitive and uncomfortable for some, this may have increased some participants' comfort level when they decided whether or not to participate in the study.

Additionally, because I used a semi-structured interview, participants were also made aware that additional topics could arise as the conversation progressed. The

flexibility permitted in qualitative research is reflected in semi-structured interviews: not every participant has to be, or will be asked the same questions and unique themes may arise with certain participants (Bryman, 2008). When I discovered a new topic that I thought I would like to explore with other participants, I added those questions to my interview guide and made sure to ask those questions in future interviews. This sometimes occurred halfway through the interviews, therefore in my informed consent form I built in the opportunity to have a second interview with my participants, in case there was need for clarification or in order to explore a theme that may have arisen in later interviews. This was necessary to do with three of the participants, sometimes a month after their interview occurred. After reading the informed consent form and interview guide, participants were given the opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns they had about the research.

Participants were reminded that they were able to stop participation at any time or refuse to answer any question that made them uncomfortable in any way. If the participant wished to continue with the research, together we determined a time and place to meet to conduct the interview.

I gave all participants the choice of setting in which they would like the interview to take place. I offered a neutral, private setting (e.g., a private room at Mount Saint Vincent University, in which the door was closed and we would not be disturbed) or the option to choose a setting more familiar and comfortable to them (e.g., their home or a quiet location in their neighbourhood). Three interviews occurred in the participants' homes, three occurred in my home, and two interviews happened in private rooms I booked at MSVU.

A researcher's presence can be intimidating in its own right, especially because it was our first time meeting face to face and I dressed accordingly. The interviews were conducted with individuals from a wide age range (18 and over) therefore I dressed in a way that was professional but not intimidating. Business casual dress was employed for all interviews as a midpoint between too casual and too formal.

Interview

Upon meeting each participant, I spent some time building some rapport and trust. Conversations were casual to allow the participant to get to know me and my intentions with the research; I asked again if the participant had any questions or concerns about the research prior to beginning. Informed consent was covered in-depth with the participant, as well as permission gained to record the interview. I explained that I might take notes during the interview in order to keep track of certain comments that were mentioned that I wanted to return to discuss in depth later in the interview (Bryman, 2008).

After the informed consent and consent for recording were established, I commenced with the interview. The interview guide (Appendix B) was used to serve as a memory prompt and a way to keep me on task when the interview went somewhere unrelated. This interview guide had topics and one or two questions about each topic (e.g., for the topic of "coming out": Who did you first come out to? Can you tell me about that experience? How did people react when you came out to them?). Additional questions and probes were asked, dependent on the conversation. Because general topics were mentioned prior to meeting, the participants likely felt prepared and ultimately more comfortable to start with those questions.

Consistent with critical methodologies, the semi-structured interview created

dialogue. Dialogue is a vital tool in critical research, so that the participant is not passive in the research process, but active in the construction of the data. To keep consistent with Comstock's (1982) method for critical research, dialogue helped me to "develop an interpretive understanding of the intersubjective meanings, values, and motives held by all groups of actors in the subjects' milieu" (p. 380). The goal was to obtain a thick description of the participant's coming-out experiences. As the researcher, I was the tool that has analyzed the data because the interpretation of the researcher has merit, which traditionally, in positivistic research, has not been the case.

Following the interview, a short demographic questionnaire was completed (Appendix C). The pen and paper format allowed the participant to fill out the information in a private matter (which could have been important when it comes to certain demographic characteristics such as age). Questions identified the following characteristics: age, sex, marital status, educational level, age at which same-sex attractions were first realized, religious affiliation, racial/ethnic identity, personal income, employment status, and sexual orientation. Filling out the questionnaire was a way to wind down and allow the participant to process the interview. I remained present and after filling out the demographic questionnaire I invited the participant to ask any further questions. I thanked them with their chosen incentive and let them know that they could contact me at any time via e-mail if they had any questions or concerns.

After each interview was conducted, I wrote extensive field notes: what went well, what needed improving for the next interview, any new questions that came up, and how the participant behaved throughout the interview (Bryman, 2008). With the combination of the field notes, the notes I had taken during the interview, and the digital

recording, I was able to provide a multifaceted depiction of what the participants had communicated in their interview.

Analysis

Each recorded interview was transcribed by me personally. All of the participants were given the option to view a copy of their personal transcript to ensure that I had accurately depicted what was said, and six people requested to view their transcript. However, none of the participants provided any changes or edits to their transcript.

Thematic analysis was used for analysis. It is an analytic procedure in which the researcher creates codes from the data instead of trying to fit the data into pre-established codes (Bryman, 2008). This is an important distinction to make, because much of the previous research on coming out experiences fit the experiences of LGB people into pre-existing stages (e.g., Knous, 2005). A combination of open coding, “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” and axial coding, “whereby the data are put together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories” (Bryman, 2008, p. 543) were used to look at the connections between the codes.

Thematic analysis was conducted through the transcription process using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. This software does not conduct the analysis for the researcher but is a great organizational tool, allowing a researcher to have all the data and transcripts located in one electronic file. I used many features of the software.

For example I used the MAXQDA transcription software to import my audio files and then slow down, pause, and play the recorded interviews. After transcription, I imported the transcripts directly into a MAXQDA project file. I coded my transcripts

using colour coded “code stripes” that differentiated and organized sections of the transcripts into separate codes and sub codes, all of which I created. I created descriptive code memos for what I considered were the most theoretically important codes, stating what that code represented. I also copied and pasted into the memos particular quotes from certain transcripts to best illustrate the code.

I looked at all coded segments through *activation* of codes and documents. When a document and code are activated, they appear in a separate window (the Retrieved Segments window), and I was able to contrast and compare coded segments between documents, and even within the same document. This was helpful for ensuring the trustworthiness of the data, because I could ensure that similarly coded segments were representing the same idea.

I also kept a logbook within the file, which I updated every time a transcript, code, or code memo was completed, altered, or edited in anyway. The log book function of MAXQDA is time stamped to keep a timeline of all the changes made. Finally, every time major changes were completed (i.e., five or more new codes being created, a lot of progress done on a transcript) a new MAXQDA file was saved with a new date, also as a way to keep track of how the research had changed overtime.

Borrowing some tools and techniques from the grounded theory approach, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and have a close relationship (Bryman, 2008). The purposes of this research was not to inductively develop an overarching theory as a classical grounded theory study would aim to create, but rather to use the techniques to organize and emphasize common themes that came from the data (Bryman, 2008). Grounded theory techniques have been used in previous research studies involving

LGB persons (e.g., Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009). Open and axial coding were two coding techniques borrowed from grounded theory, as well as the constant comparison process, where data and concepts were constantly revised and changed to ensure that all data under a given code or concept have a close relation, and examining those relations (Bryman, 2008). Constant comparison is a fluid way of examining the data, which was necessary when adding new data from different sources.

An *audit trail* is a key aspect to maintaining the trustworthiness in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009). It is the systematic documentation of the processes involved in the research, and records “theoretical, methodological and analytic choices made by the researcher” (Bowen, 2009, p. 307). Because the researcher is the main tool in qualitative data analysis, they must always be reflexive, thinking about their own beliefs, experiences and biases and how they could influence the analysis. This was of particular importance for this research because I identify as bisexual and have been involved with pride events for some time. As already noted, I used MAXQDA’s logbook function to document any major changes to the research, as well as my decision process around making those decisions. I also met with my advisor a number of times over the research process to use her expertise in qualitative research, and her perspective on some of the data as a heterosexual, second party without breaching confidentiality. My reflexivity journal also brought forth any feelings/thoughts/concerns I had at different stages of the research. The use of direct quotes from all eight women were used to accurately depict what was said during their interview.

All of these tools helped to enhance the trustworthiness of this research, making sure I accurately represented the participant’s experiences with their bisexuality.

Qualitative research “acknowledges multiple realities and the role of social construction in establishing meaning, it is still important to establish some level of confidence that qualitative research represents the meanings of its participants” (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006, p. 443). This was important to me, because I have my own experiences and beliefs around bisexuality and I did not want to impose either of these on the participants, wanting to hear their stories authentically. I did have some expectations around what my findings would be, but I believe that trustworthiness of the research was achieved because there were many things in the data that surprised me, differed from my own experience, and surpassed my expectations overall.

Although my experiences, values, and interpretations are a valid lens for which to examine the research, it was important that I documented the thought processes I had while analyzing the interviews in order to be able to understand where each code came from. My audit trail was updated at every step of the process to reflect the thinking and rationale for each move I made as the research progressed.

Reflexivity is of particular importance for this research because I identify as bisexual and have my own experiences and ideologies around what this means to me. In order to be as reflexive as possible, researchers must “place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process” (McGraw, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2000, p. 68). To reflect on my research practices, I kept a journal in order to document any tensions, confusions, and thoughts that came about throughout the research process. A handwritten journal was particularly helpful because I discuss my sexuality openly. Journaling was a neutral and safe space to ensure confidentiality and privacy of the research, my participants’ experiences, and my

personal experiences. I did not discuss my personal experience in depth during any of the interviews so that I would not influence the participants' responses. If they expressed curiosity, I let them know that I was open to sharing my experiences after the interview was finished. Four of the participants did wish to discuss more personal aspects about my love life and experience as a bisexual woman, adding a little more information about their own experience where it was relevant for them. I included these conversations in the notes I took after the participant left the interview site, but they were neither recorded nor transcribed.

Praxis

One aspect of critical research that sets it apart from purely interpretivist research is the element of praxis, an action that is “self-consciously de-alienating in order to enable humans, as subjects, to reappropriate the world they have constructed” (Comstock, 1982, p. 378). If bisexual people do experience challenges that are different from their gay and lesbian counterparts, praxis will work as a tool to help the emancipation of bisexual people in my community. I am currently an active member in Halifax pride events and I am open to sharing my experiences with my bisexual identity. In this critical project, “life experiences and new uncovered knowledge are engaged in order to generate individual and societal transformation” (McKay, 2010, p. 26). I would like to take the experiences of my participants to the public, including LGB friendly institutions, to develop understanding around the unique barriers that bisexual people may face while coming out.

Ethical Considerations

Discussing the coming-out process can be a sensitive topic for some, especially if

the experience was primarily negative and stressful. LGB people need to actively consider who they do and not disclose their sexual orientation to in order to manage the stigmatization they would potentially face by their loved ones (Cain, 1991). Some people lose friends and contact with family members after disclosure of orientation, and coming out has been found to be a source of intrafamilial conflict (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). As mentioned previously, mental health problems and suicidal ideation often spike around the time people decide to disclose their sexual identity to friends, especially if there is little to no social support (Rotheram-Borus et al., 1994). Discussion of coming out and social support, especially a lack thereof, may have triggered traumatic memories for the individual, causing them discomfort and potential negative emotions. Consequently, careful procedures, which were approved by the University Research Ethics Board (Appendix D), were in place in order to make the participants as prepared and comfortable as possible.

As noted earlier, I advertised the study in certain places that I knew were LGB friendly, leaving my contact information and information on the poster. If interested, participants were the ones to make the initial contact. After this contact, the informed consent form and some topics from the interview guide were sent to each person. No deception was required or involved. The informed consent process was of particular importance so that the participants understood the sensitive nature of the interview and that they were able to stop participation at any time without penalty. The informed consent sheet, included contact information for pro-bono, LGB friendly counsellors/psychologists in case the participant wished to seek help or someone to talk to about the more troubling issues of being LGB, including any memories that they may

have discussed. Passing on the name of gay-friendly community resources have been used as an ethical consideration in similar studies (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2006).

As noted earlier, incentives were used as a tool to encourage participation in this research. According to the Tri-Council Policy Statement on "Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans", participation in any study should be completely voluntary, and incentives should not be so attractive that they could potentially dampen the participant's analysis of the risks of participating in the study (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2012). With this in mind, I chose fairly inexpensive incentives to ensure that they were not used as the reason for participation and that participation was still completely voluntary. Incentives were mentioned in the advertisement in the study, and available, in full, to any participant who met for an interview, regardless of whether or not they withdrew at any point from the research in congruence with the Tri-Council's research policy. However, this did not occur with this research.

Two of the places (Mount Pride and the Halifax Sexual Health Centre) in which I advertised the study were places in which I was involved in as a volunteer. Therefore I had a dual role as a volunteer/researcher within these institutions, which could have served as a conflict of interest. However, as a volunteer with the Halifax Sexual Health Centre, the policies and procedures at this institution placed a great amount of importance on maintaining patient confidentiality and all volunteers were taught what their responsibilities are to maintain that privacy and confidentiality, including myself. Another dual role arose when I was recruiting participants from university pride groups,

where I was an executive member for Mount Pride, Mount Saint Vincent University's pride group. I did not interview anyone who I had a close relationship with, such as a friend or another executive member of Mount Pride.

Confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance when it comes to research that focusing on personal experiences. I ensured the privacy of my participants' experiences throughout the research process. For example, the location in which the interview took place was the choice of the participant, and I provided a private option (i.e., a privately booked room at MSVU). Each interview was done individually, and I did not share anyone's responses or identities with the other were used in place of the participants' names throughout the transcription process, and when quotes are presented.

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter describes the key themes that became apparent through the eight semi-structured interviews. I had the opportunity to have some very honest, authentic, and eye opening conversations with women who shared similar sexual identities, but each of whom had their own unique experiences. The demographics of the sample will first be described, and the themes will be explored and described through the experiences of my sample. Themes are (a) sexual fluidity, (b) coming out, (c) social support, (d) discrimination, and (e) bisexual erasure. These were all important themes throughout the interviews and will be discussed in depth, with the aid of quotes from the participants to illustrate these experiences as these women saw them from their perspective

Participant Description

Eight women between the ages of 19 to 43 were interviewed. One of the participants was 19, five were in their early twenties, while the remaining two were 39 and 43 years of age. All participants were of white, European decent and cisgendered (when psychological gender and biological sex are compatible). Three participants had their bachelor's degree, three had some university/college, one had some experience in graduate school, and one had her master's degree; it was a very educated sample. Five participants were in relationships at the time of the interview (three same-sex, two different-sex), two were single, and one had an open marriage with a male partner. Two of the eight participants identified strictly as bisexual, three identified as queer, one identified as a lesbian/bisexual, one identified as unlabelled/bisexual, and one identified as pansexual/bisexual. The women who had two labels identified personally with the first term, but often came out as bisexual due to pushback or for simplicity. Some started to

realize their same-sex attractions as early as childhood (with three people identifying them at the age of 10, 12, and 15), two participants discovered theirs in their late teens (17 and “late teens”), and one participant at the age of 21. One other participant never questioned her same-sex attractions, remembering them as always being present.

Sexual Fluidity

Sexual fluidity is an inherent part of being bisexual, setting it apart from heterosexuality or homosexuality. In this section I discuss the fluidity of labels and attractions, how one explores their diverse sexual interests, and other people’s reactions to sexual fluidity.

In my literature review, I spoke to the fact that women are more likely than men to express fluidity in their sexual and romantic interests as they age, which may play a part in why more women than men identify as bisexual. Everyone involved in this study was female, therefore I cannot speak to this sex difference from these findings, but there were many examples of sexual fluidity within the sample. Sexual fluidity is a phenomenon that is not inherently unique to the individuals who identify under the umbrella of bisexual, but it may be a more relevant part of a bisexual person’s sexual identity than that of gay/lesbian or heterosexual person. Alternatively, bisexual people may simply be more accepting and aware of their own fluidity. For example, Amy said:

The fluidity of both sexuality and gender expression are becoming far more known and accepted, certainly that’s still small but there is a much broader acceptance that can be fluid and that there are probably far more people that those two things are fluid for, versus those two things are [*sic*] completely stagnant.

One’s sexual fluidity has a lot to do with how they choose to identify or label themselves,

even if their current attractions are primarily directed toward members of the same-sex or different-sex. Jenna, Ann, and Danielle all self-identified as bisexual, although they had a strong preference for same-sex romantic partners. They chose to identify as bisexual instead of as lesbians because they wanted to leave the space to allow themselves to have relationships with men in the future, demonstrating that these women had a sense of the potential that their attractions could change, come the right person. Jenna, who had strong same sex attractions said:

People will be like “ohhh do you think you’re going to marry...” and I was like I don’t really know. Like yes I can see myself like obviously marrying a woman like I wouldn’t still be together [with my girlfriend] if I can’t, but like you know for all I know I could marry a guy you know what I mean and that’s why I would never label myself as gay or anything.

Selena, a participant who had only one long-term relationship with a male for six years, said that she could not discount the feelings and attraction that she once had for men, although she was uncertain whether or not she would ever seek another male partner in the future. Amy repeatedly said that she preferred the vague label of queer because she never wanted to rule anyone out. Fiona only remembered four years of her life in which she identified mainly as heterosexual, while being in a relationship with a “macho”, stereotypically masculine man. After that relationship, she moved to a bigger city, saw all of the beautiful women, and was reminded of her queer self. Therefore these women demonstrated that they had a sense of their changing attractions, and did not look at their sexuality simply in their current circumstances, but also through past, present, and potential future attractions. This was a component that helped them frame their sexual

identity, highlighting the point that a timeline is necessary when looking at sexual orientation and attractions.

Sexual fluidity is discovered through the exploration of one's sexuality, which may include behaviours outside of one's normative sexual experience. This was the case for some of these women, because six of the eight had identified as heterosexual most of their lives. All eight women had explored their sexual attractions and interests in many ways, including through face-to-face interaction, attending queer friendly events/establishments, and using the Internet. Watching Internet porn, more specifically "lesbian" porn, was a way in which a few of them first discovered their same-sex attractions. Selena mentioned exploring her interests through the use of pornography when she was younger:

Cause when I was younger like when I was in high school, um I don't—I'm not a huge advocate for watching porn—but in high school I was like kinda curious like testing the waters or whatever. . . um and like hetero porn never appealed to me ever ever ever so if it was like lesbian porn I'd be like yeah like that's really good and I'm like into it but... hetero porn I've never watched it.

Being interested in female-female pornography was one of the first clues Selena may have had around her queer sexuality. Jessica was a Harry Potter fan, and found other queer people on fandom websites who were making their own queer versions of the characters. She felt safe in this space and disclosed her sexual identity to these people, even meeting with some of them in person. Selena used online dating as a way to find her first same-sex partners. The Internet was a useful tool for coming out and finding social support, because the person could use it in privacy, keeping their identity confidential if

need be. Jessica recognized that the Internet was a great tool for coming out and finding other queer people to talk to when she was asked about how bisexual people can find support: “tell them to get like an unmonitored Internet connection so they can go on Tumblr and make some [queer] friends”. They could reach out to many people from across the world in order to find a safe source of support.

Exploring same-sex sexual interests also occurred with other people who were in physical proximity with the person. The use of alcohol was cited by a couple of the women to help them first physically explore their same-sex attractions. Selena had her first same-sex sexual encounter at a queer bar: “um but yeah so then when I had this drunken experience with one of my acquaintances um we just kinda had this like, we were drunkenly at this gay bar cause we go a lot. . . . yeah um so we end up drunkenly making out and it ended up that we were both really into it and then, so we went like back to her place and like I dunno just kinda fooled around like a little”. Alcohol can disinhibit someone, allowing them to do things that they may not normally do or those in which they are generally not comfortable, so this was not surprising. Consuming alcohol helped with these discomforts, including approaching other women, disclosing one’s orientation, or being sexual with a woman for the first time. Alcohol could be seen as the fuel to start the exploration process, which goes hand in hand with fluidity. Alcohol was not always consumed, however some same sex attractions were simply realized by meeting a particular person (who would generally also be queer), and simply accepting the attraction that they felt.

Some of the participants’ labels were as fluid as their interests. Some of them used to label themselves in one way, and changed their label to better suit their dynamic

attractions. Others used two different identity labels interchangeably depending on the situation, such as who they were speaking to. There will be more on label fluidity when bisexual erasure is discussed, but it is important to mention it here because many people generally identify with one label but may use another, demonstrating another aspect of fluidity.

Although most people's sexual interests change over their lifetime, there were a number of dominant ideologies and narratives around sexuality that seemed to have inhibited these women's abilities for sexual exploration when their interests indeed changed. This may be especially true when one labels their sexual orientation a certain way, works hard to validate that orientation, and then their interests change along the way. Amy shared the reaction of a family friend, who had fought long and hard to validate her own lesbian identity:

We've talked about sexual orientation and all that kind of stuff and I've said, you know, I've been with women and all this kind of stuff, and at one point she just said "you are so fucking lucky." She said "you know if I was ever attracted to men, and I was, there was no way in fucking hell that I was going to ever allow myself to explore that because I fought so hard for my place and I didn't want people to tell me or to have that judgment" and she said "and you're so fucking lucky". . . I just assumed you were just tough ass lesbian who never was into men and I was just cool and she's like "well it didn't matter if I was or not cause there wasn't the space".

Out of all of the experiences with gay and lesbian people shared by these women, this was the one that really stood out to me as demonstrating an important effect of how

discrimination against sexual exploration (and potentially even labels) has on the queer community. Placing a label on oneself and one's sexual orientation can be limiting to how, not only someone explores their sexuality, but also how if attractions change (and chances are they will at some point), someone may feel trapped in the cultural definition of what it is to be a lesbian, for example. All of the work this woman did to fight for her sexual identity might be thrown out the window if she were ever to explore her attractions to men. This can be a benefit to having a vague label such as queer, which leaves everything up to interpretation; not only gender preference for a partner, but also the gender of the person identifying as queer.

Some participants shared some coming out experiences in which overt biphobic remarks attacked both their identity directly, and their ability to be fluid in being attracted to both same-sex and different-sex people. Jenna discussed her own resentment toward women who were able to be romantically involved with a female in one relationship and a male the next:

Gay people, will not date bi people. . . um no but I understand why they don't want to though because *you're really confused when you're bi* [emphasis added] but when you're a lesbian you really have yourself figured out like – I understand though because why would a lesbian want their girlfriend to be attracted to a guy, and the thought that they could cheat on them with a guy, like cheating on someone with like, a girl you're like that hurts... but it's a girl with a guy it's like a stab in the heart.

This demonstrates some potential internalized biphobia, in which fluidity of the gender of someone's partners is seen as a negative aspect of their sexuality. Bisexual people who

have a dating history that includes both same-sex and different-sex partners may be viewed as “indecisive”. Selena faced discrimination from her brother because of his experience as a gay man:

There’s been some tension and conflict with this because for his position as a gay male he doesn’t understand how my sexuality can be so fluid. So he’s just kind of like um “I don’t understand like I don’t understand how it’s a thing” and in his experience, which is valid, but also like really not fair to like impose this on me.

The ability to be fluid, and pass as heterosexual when in different-sex relationships seems to be the biggest point of contention between bisexual people and gay/lesbian people.

Heterosexual people can also be threatened by the fluidity of a bisexual person’s attractions, because it can be difficult to put themselves in a bisexual person’s shoes. This can mean trying to fit them into binary categories (gay or straight) that make the strange more comprehensible.

Some participants had been asked to choose a side, either to stick to their same-sex or different-sex attractions, which means basically asking the person to ignore a whole population of people that they could potentially be with romantically. Fiona said “I do think that there are still lots of myths that if you’re bisexual it just means that you haven’t decided yet which way you’re going to go”. Amy experienced some pressure to decide within the groups she was involved in “I was surrounded by kind of queer community and there was push back, absolutely. . . like ‘well when are you going to decide?’” These are just a couple of examples of how these women’s fluidity in sexual attractions were a cause of discomfort for others, and because of that fluidity people may believe that bisexuality is a phase one is going through, or that the person simply cannot

make up their mind. Certain bisexual people can internalize these sort of messages when it comes to dating, as previously demonstrated by Jenna's quote on page 85 and this can hinder the way in which one explores their sexuality as well.

It should be noted that sexual fluidity is a part of everyone's sexual identity, regardless of sexual orientation, but it may be more accepted and relevant to those people who identify as bisexual. Once someone began to explore their same-sex attractions, they may have begun to realize that there is more to their sexuality than they once thought. Through this exploration, these women began to amalgamate their attractions in conjunction with their different-sex attractions, which triggered a change in their personal sexual identities. After coming to terms with their own identity, they then decided to disclose these attractions to their loved ones, and their coming out processes began.

Coming out

Most of the interview questions were centered around the women's experiences of coming out as bisexual, and how the people in their lives reacted to this disclosure. This theme outlines the process of coming out to oneself, the circumstances in which one may choose come out in, the ways in which these women have come out over time, ending with some of their experiences of being outed by various people in their lives.

In traditional research on coming out, stage models are used and coming out to oneself is generally one of the first "stages" in the coming out process. Although the present study did not follow a stage model of coming out, it is reasonable to assume that coming out to oneself, or accepting one's sexuality and/or attractions, must occur prior to coming out to other people. Coming out to oneself can entail discovering same-sex attractions, accepting said attractions (alongside one's different-sex attractions), and in

some cases, labelling one's sexual identity. After the labelling of one's identity, they may choose to disclose this identity with the other people in their lives. In this study, all eight of the women shared both negative and positive aspects of the coming out process, and although there were many differences between their stories, some clear commonalities were also apparent in their experiences.

Both Amy and Fiona did not remember a time in their lives when they identified as strictly heterosexual, never wanting to rule anyone out. They were raised in large towns with families that were open to homosexuality—both sets of parents had gay and lesbian friends, therefore people having same-sex attractions may have been normalized from a young age.

Emilia, Jessica, and Danielle all denied their same-sex attractions when they first came to realize them. Emilia realized she was into “lesbian” porn, and tried to force herself into watching more heterosexual portrayals. She said, “I was looking at porn really when I first, I was just like, like that woman's kinda... and then I'm just like no no . . . I was just like I need to look at the man, I need to look at the man.” This is an example of how the discovery of a same-sex sexual attraction can be stressful in a heteronormative society, especially when that person has identified as a member of the dominant group for most of their life.

Acceptance of one's sexual identity was viewed as one of the most important steps in the coming out process, according to these women. When I asked if it was important for bisexual people to come out to others, Emilia, who had denied her same-sex attractions throughout her early teens, made the connection between acceptance, authenticity, and happiness: “I feel that if they really want to be happy with themselves

they should accept it, at least. . . they should at least accept who they are.” Others echoed this importance—that coming out to other people was not necessary, but self-acceptance was viewed as the key to a healthy relationship with sexuality.

Some of my participants initially wondered if they were lesbians, and some were just aware and accepting of their same-sex attractions alongside their different-sex attractions. When Ann discovered her first female crush, she simply realized that she was not strictly heterosexual and accepted that as fact. She said that her attractions were “person-specific” and when she came out in this way, other people agreed with her and ended up coming out to her with their own “person-specific” attractions, including her father:

Like a week ago my dad was talking to me about like, um how he thinks it’s really good, that the relationship that I have like... he thinks that I’m doing well and that it’s good that I’m comfortable with the way that I am and that I don’t feel like I have to be anything necessarily and that he feels the same way, like that he thinks about, like, people and I was like, “okay, that’s interesting Dad.”

Ann interpreted this conversation as her father’s attractions being more “person-specific” than strictly heterosexual, and she found this quite interesting. Therefore, coming out to some people can trigger that person to reflect on their own sexuality and attractions.

Some participants chose to come out when their bisexuality was more pertinent in their lives, particularly when they had a same-sex partner for the first time. However, others chose to come out to their loved ones as soon as they accepted their bisexual identity. Waiting until their identity was more pertinent was more of a factor in coming out with regard to their parents and other family members, rather than their friends. On

one hand Emilia, who had not had a romantic partner to date, was anxious to come out to her family because she was afraid that they might see her with a girlfriend and be upset that she did not disclose her bisexuality to them beforehand. Selena, Amy, and Jessica, on the other hand, came out to their parents when they started their first same-sex relationship, and they wanted their families to be included in their relationship by meeting their new partner. Selena, who had just started coming out to her family when we met for our interview, had been physically attracted to women for a long time but had only recently started disclosing these attractions to her friends: “So then it just slowly started creeping its way into the conversation with some people. . . Um and everyone was generally pretty supportive of that but at that point I did not tell my family, like my parents.” She waited until approximately one year later when she started her first same-sex relationship to tell her parents that she was pansexual. The people she was most concerned to come out to were her parents, so they were the last people to know.

Much of the discussion was centered around the participants’ experiences with coming out to different people and in different situations. Something that was very evident with all eight women was that coming out was not a one-time experience for them, but rather a continual process in which they had to decide whether or not to come out with each new person they met, in each new context. This disclosure was mostly dependent on the relevance of their sexual orientation to the situation. Therefore coming out was also very selective, based on if the bisexual person had a partner who was of the same-sex, and if that partner was present (either in real life, or in photos and writings online). Additionally, with these women, it was very clear that coming out was much more necessary if one’s romantic partner was of the same-sex, compared to if their

partner appeared to be of a different-sex. Amy understood this through her own experience:

Can I be more selective with a male partner? Well certainly if I was with a female partner the assumption would be that I was a lesbian and I would be outed just by the fact that we were together right? So that's a given so you know there wouldn't be an option that I would just be out if I was showing up some place with my obviously female partner right? So having a male partner definitely you get to, I can hide if I want.

Coming out can also look different in each of these contexts: it can be just being in public with one's partner and allowing the people around them to make their own assumptions, or by the bisexual person's choosing to actively disclose their partner's gender or sexual orientation directly. However, allowing people to assume one's sexual orientation plays into bisexual erasure, which I discuss in-depth in a later section, where those around the couple might assume that both partners are in fact lesbians rather than bisexual.

Other factors that played into the selectivity of disclosure were how safe they felt to disclose, and how much energy they had that day to have the conversation. Amy felt this strain from time to time, "explaining that . . . depending on how much energy I have in a day, I'm selective. . . it's about being prepared to have a conversation or not a conversation." When coming out as bisexual or queer, one may need a lot of energy to explain what their sexuality means to them, as it is different for every bisexual person. The people they are coming out to may also have their own views on what these sexualities are, so the bisexual person may need to prepare for their response to this information. Sometimes questions are asked, or the legitimacy of the sexual orientation is

attacked based on a number of common widespread beliefs around what it means to be bisexual. For example, when Fiona came out as bisexual to a lesbian friend, the response she received was, “I got from, you know, the talk about, you know... it’s okay to be straight. Like you can still be cool” as if to say Fiona was trying to fit in by coming out as queer. Therefore they may resort to not disclosing their orientation based on these circumstances, or come out in a way that does not give the whole picture.

Coming out is a complex and dynamic process, and not every instance is the same. Jenna, Ann, Danielle, and Jessica came out as lesbians to certain people in their lives, and/or referred to themselves repeatedly as gay or lesbian throughout their interview. Danielle, who has strong same-sex attractions came out as bisexual to her mother, but as gay to her father, just to keep things simple without having to go into too much detail. When I asked why she came out as gay to her father, she replied “I think because that’s the way he worded it. And it was such an awkward situation I wanted it to be over. I don’t think it’s something I really thought about right away of what I was. I just used the words gay and bisexual interchangeably.” Ann, who had only been in same-sex relationships, referred to herself as a lesbian throughout the interview, even catching and correcting herself a couple of times. Jenna also referred to herself as “gay” throughout the interview, and has a strong preference for same-sex partners. Jessica came out to her parents by telling them she had a girlfriend, but not directly commenting on her queer sexuality, “and they asked, ‘how come you didn’t tell me you were gay?’ and I was like ‘I’m not gay [pause]’ and that was kind of the end of it [laughs].” So she left the specifics of her sexual orientation a little more ambiguous. Selena personally identified as pansexual, but told people that she was bisexual because of a lack of understanding

around the pansexual label. I find it interesting that some of my participants would do this, and it plays into bisexual erasure where the bisexual person is the one doing the “erasing”. The only reason they have to come out at all is because of just a part of their sexual identity (i.e., the part that has same-sex attractions). It could be easier to explain and understand when someone comes out as a lesbian because there is more of a widespread understanding of what that means, or they believe that they can receive more social support from gay and lesbian people.

These women disclosed their orientation to other people in many ways. One of the most common ways from the younger women was through the Internet. Social media, e-mail, common interest forums, and character development websites were all mentioned. Facebook was a major tool that had been used for coming out through use of a multitude of the features on the social media site. Some participants posted lengthy Facebook statuses about their sexual orientation, said that they were interested in men and women in their “interested in” section, posted their relationship with same-sex partners, or pictures of them and their partner being affectionate. For example, this was particularly relevant for Selena who had just come out as bisexual to all of her friends and some of her family, when her partner had to suddenly move away for work. She kept in touch with her partner via Facebook and made both her profile picture and cover photo with hearts and captions that made it evident they were together. Jenna and Danielle both posted lengthy status updates about their sexual orientation to let all of their Facebook friends know that they were bisexual. Emilia, who came out to all her friends and family face-to-face, used online character forums to develop characters and stories, with some of her characters identifying as LGBT. When I asked about other people’s reactions to these

characters she said,

There's mixed reactions from different people like there's maybe one person here who's just like "oh that's fine they have a very colourful cast" and then another person's just like "are you gay? Are you [pause] ugggh" and sometimes they use more hurtful terms for it.

Jessica, who started dating her first same-sex partner while she was away from home, e-mailed her parents to let them know about her new relationship.

Amy and Fiona did not mention use of the Internet for coming out at all, but that may have been because of their older ages. The women in their early twenties have partially been socialized through the Internet and social media sites, and it is a fast and effective way of reaching many people, even from long distances. As a generation, twenty-somethings share intimate daily details about their lives for the world to see, something people from previous generations would likely find issue with in terms of privacy, because they did not grow into adulthood with this level of technological connectedness.

Coming out in person, usually one on one, was also a way in which many people came out to their loved ones. For example, Emilia came out to all of her friends and family members through face-to-face conversation. Ann, decided with her girlfriend to come out to their close friends in small groups, and then the rest of their friends at a dinner they were having together. She preferred having them in small groups because it gave them the opportunity to have a conversation, and ask any questions if they wanted to. Jessica came out to a friend of hers on a band trip when she was sixteen, and found a few other queer students through that disclosure, which formed a support group for her at

the time. Selena said that her new sexual identity would just creep into conversation with her friends, and all of her friends were very receptive and accepting. Coming out face-to-face was generally done with family members before there was any disclosure through the Internet. Although the Internet is being used as a coming out tool, bisexual people still tend to disclose to those they are close to face-to-face, almost making it seem as if their loved ones might be insulted if they found out via social media.

Finally, coming out was not always necessarily a planned choice by the bisexual person. Sometimes they were outed by their actions, or simply by being seen with their same-sex partner, and this was the case for five out of eight of these women at one point or another. Of course, when seen with a same-sex partner many people assume that they are lesbian, and not bisexual, which adds to bisexual erasure. Amy was first outed at work, when she and a female co-worker were caught kissing by the water barrels at a campsite. Ann and Danielle were both outed to their parents because they were caught being physically affectionate with their same-sex partners. Ann was ready to come out, but her girlfriend at the time was not, and the reasoning became clear quite quickly; she faced emotional abuse from her mother for months, after her mother had walked in on them while they were cuddling in bed. Danielle describes being very upset by being forced to come out to her very religious mother before she was ready:

Oh it tore me apart because my mom and I were always really close and like I told her everything. But when she forced me to come out to her I wasn't ready to. So that really upset me because I feel like that's definitely something you need to be ready to talk about... and so that really hurt me. But then when she just didn't take it well like I felt like I couldn't trust her anymore and it really changed our

relationship like I don't talk to her like I used to at all. I still love her because she's my mom and everything but like. . . . I don't think it will ever get back to where it was because of the way she was.

It should be noted that being outed does not necessarily mean that the bisexual person is being perceived as a bisexual, but perhaps a lesbian or gay male: it is the fact that the action is occurring with a person of the same sex that outs their queer sexuality. This may not paint the whole, complex picture of that person's sexual orientation and this will be explored in a later section. Therefore, coming out is not always a conscious choice of the bisexual person, but they can become outed by their own actions, or because someone discovers their same-sex attractions and forces them to disclose, even before they are ready in some cases. This can make the coming out process even more traumatic and stressful.

Coming out can be a stressful time in a bisexual person's life, especially the initial disclosures with those they really care about, such as family and friends. It is not just a one-time process, but something that may have to occur with every new person they meet. This is also selective, meaning the bisexual person can choose which people they come out to. There are a number of factors that can come into play that make it more or less likely that they will have to come out, and sometimes coming out will occur whether one wants it to happen or not. However, once their sexual identity is out there, meaning that they have started to disclose it as a part of who they are, a bisexual person may seek people who are supportive and accepting of their new identity so that they can talk about it openly, and explore it freely. The next section speaks more specifically to the notion of social support, and how important it is for a bisexual person's experience.

Social Support

This section explores an inherent part of the research question, the support one received or did not receive after they disclosed their queer sexuality. I will describe the support these women received from their respective queer communities, their friends, ending with their family members, who were the least supportive overall. Family influence will be more of a focus in the final section on discrimination and bisexual erasure.

Social support was an inherent part of my research question, because it has been shown to buffer the negative effects of stress. Disclosing one's sexual orientation can be a stressful time in one's life and this stress may lead to significant mental and physical distress due to the potential lack of social support. Even when one perceives they will not be supported this can cause distress. For some, this can (or cannot) involve developing a social identity or group membership identity. However, this group identity may change as the person comes to realize and accept their sexual orientation. Bisexual people may have difficulty with group membership because they are neither completely gay nor completely straight, and may have a hard time finding affinity within social spaces that include only gay or straight individuals.

In this study, half of the women were very involved in their respective LGBT communities, activism around queer rights, and queer focused events. These women believed that their sense of belonging within their respective communities was extremely important, not only for themselves but also for the queer people of Halifax and beyond. These four participants were politicized around queer issues and considered themselves activists. For example, Amy described having an affinity to a community that

understands her:

It's really important to me when I'm meeting people, like when I meet, you know people who identify as gay or lesbian or whatever—however they identify—there is an affinity, I feel like okay. Even though I know, you know bisexual queer blah blah it's a whole other conversation, but there's still that immediate affinity. It's like okay... we're at least not dealing with heterosexism here.

This quote demonstrates that even with all of the different sexualities within the LGBT communities, there is still a level of understanding and cohesiveness that makes these groups of people at these events feel safe and connected. Amy had chosen jobs and social opportunities in which she knew that her queer identity would be embraced so she felt safe. So within these groups and events there can be a feeling of security, where being queer is celebrated and accepted regardless of the specific details of one's identity.

Amy made an interesting point around the term "gay community". She believed there were gay communities, not just one, and sometimes those communities clashed: "I always think gay communities or queer communities. I always put an "s" on [the word community] which people backlash against. It's like 'no we need, we need to have a front, you know like a... cohesive front' and it's like well we don't, so let's just be real." There is no cohesive, visual community one can find when searching for sexuality-specific social support, so it is interesting that this community is discussed so much within queer circles and even amongst heterosexual people. Jessica affirms this by describing a divide within the gay communities, radical political queers, and apolitical queers:

It's kind of interesting to me sometimes like when I go to an event and it's like,

you know, a queer event of some sort and the room is full of people that I don't know um and like I kind of realize that it's because... there's like the rad political queers and then there's like the apolitical queers, and they're separate groups... and like sometimes the two meet, but not very often. Um and I've definitely sort of found a home like over here [in the rad-political queer group].

She found affinity within the more politicized group of queer people, and she had been a part of queer activist groups, helping organize events in the city and around Nova Scotia. She believed that this community of queer people had supported her. They still supported her as she explored her sexuality and learned about more queer people and their struggles as a collective group.

Selena was involved with queer activism long before she identified as queer, because she had a brother who identified as gay, and she had always wanted to be supportive of him. However, Selena experienced a lot of discrimination from gay and lesbian individuals (including her brother) when she came out as bisexual. When she was asked about bisexual people getting involved with LGBT communities and events, she said that there is still support that came from the groups of people and that the discrimination happened more on an individual level:

I think on an interpersonal level more than anything, I think in the actual community people don't give a fuck. Cause it's not like, if you're bi like that's somehow identifying, it's not like, like if you disclose that than yes, but otherwise if you go to any event and you're with a man or with a woman I don't think people would give a fuck.

Being present at these events does not necessarily out a person as queer, and anyone

could be present to show support to the event, despite their sexual orientation (i.e., allies are heterosexual supporters of the queer community—an important part of queer activism). Therefore the collective focus is not on any one individual's sexual orientation, and everyone can find affinity and place their focus more on the event. Fiona, who was very involved in sex-positive realms through her career and volunteer work, did however have a difficult time fitting into the “gay lifestyle” of Halifax, because when she moved here she was married to her husband, she did not drink or smoke, and did not hang out at gay bars. However, Fiona had one queer friend who welcomed her with open arms, and congratulated her for coming out, and this reaction resonated strongly with her. She and her family were involved in pride events, and Fiona continued to do sex-positive work in the community.

The other four participants were not involved in their respective queer communities or events, and did not receive social support from these groups or through such events. These four people did not seem interested in getting involved and never really attempted to attend any events. Ann was one of these participants. In fact, she did not support gay pride events (the pride parade specifically) due to hypersexualization and the links made to the queer communities, which did not reflect her personal experience as a bisexual woman. She did, however, discuss a longing to join the “communities of lesbians” she had observed because she did not have many queer friends herself:

I could but I don't, I don't know I guess that's not a huge deal but it's just nice to know that they are there and sometimes I sort of like, want to be friends with them because they're gay, because they're lesbian... um and then I'm like no don't do that, don't just be friends with someone because they're a lesbian so uh know

what I mean? . . . Sort of just like validation that what I'm doing is good and okay I guess.

She wanted to be able to talk about “girl sex” and believed that she would be able to more openly discuss having a same-sex relationship with these groups of lesbians, and that they would most likely serve as a source of support if she were having any trouble in her same-sex relationship. Emilia and Jenna also expressed some interest in being involved in queer-friendly events, but did not have any involvement to discuss at the time of the interview, gaining support from the people who were already in their lives.

Primary sources of support were close friends of the participants. Something most of the participants mentioned was that they surrounded themselves with like-minded people and would probably not be friends with a person if they were not open minded and accepting. These were very important qualities to have in a friend, especially when someone looks to them for support while coming out. It seems as if many people surround themselves with accepting people, and sometimes, queer-friendly volunteer and/or work opportunities, especially when their queer sexuality is relevant and a big part of their lives, including Amy:

I just continued to do that as I've gotten more educated and done a whole bunch of stuff around um my own career and my own profession. Um, so but those were really conscious choices. . . . and when I look back you know, why did I choose those? It's about safety. It's about not wanting to have to explain myself all the time. And when I look back I don't think it was necessarily conscious at the time but it just made sense to me. So I think about that and I think about—huh interesting—how that shaped my career path and shaped my professional path,

and the ways in which I've chosen to explore the world.

Being queer had affected many aspects of how these women lived their lives, including choosing their friends, careers, and queer friendly living situations. Without a supportive environment, being able to love fully may be difficult, and they may have had to remain in the closet in certain contexts just to feel safe and accepted.

Acceptance of one's sexual orientation was one of the most common hopes that these women had when coming out to their loved ones. After they had accepted their own sexuality, they hoped that others would do the same. Jessica capitalized on the importance of feeling accepted: "I think it's part of being a happy queer person is about finding community and like finding a place where you belong and people who accept you." Just being open and accepting of their sexual orientation was considered the most important source of support that a friend could provide. Selena discussed the importance of those who do come out in challenging heteronormative standards and creating space within society for bisexuality to be more accepted:

I think that every instance that someone like identifies as something that's not within like heteronormativity I think it's valuable even if it's just as small as telling one person because that in itself is challenging the status quo, challenging the norm, creating more space for like that to be [pause] more acceptable.

Coming out challenges the status quo, by pushing the boundaries of heteronormativity and creating an environment in which an accepting consciousness can grow. This could be a scary cycle though: coming out creates acceptance, but these women wanted acceptance when they came out. Although it may seem like common sense, there is likely a greater need for bisexual people to surround themselves with accepting and open-

minded people than heterosexual people. It may also be the case that bisexual people need people who are more accepting and open, even more than gay and lesbian people, because of the fluidity of their attractions.

If a friend is going to be part of that person's life, they may witness their bisexual friend in different types of relationships (i.e., same-sex, different-sex) over that period. As mentioned earlier, sexual fluidity is at the core of a bisexual person's identity, and they may explore different interests over the course of their lifetime. Although the majority of my participants described themselves as monogamous, two of my participants described not only a queer sexual orientation, but also a non-monogamous way of expressing their love that can make it even more difficult to find supportive people who accept that person's way of loving. This may be even more challenging if the bisexual person decides to be in an open relationship, which was the case with Fiona and her husband, or if a couple were to choose a polyamorous relationship, which was what Emilia desired. These two participants may have had more difficulty in the coming out process, because it added even more taboo complexity; not only disclosing that they were not heterosexual, but also that they were not monogamous. Take Fiona's experience for example:

I kind of had the same reaction from my mom when you know I told her, um but maybe it's because at the same time I told her that we had an open relationship [laughs]. . . so you know and it was like I'm bi *AND* we have an open relationship so she wasn't sure which one that she wanted to focus on.

This adds to the point that sexuality is not always black, white, or even grey but that there are many different ways for people to explore and experience their sexuality and

romantic attractions.

Friends were the most supportive overall and, in fact, most of them were heterosexual. Jenna was outed by her own actions when she was caught kissing a girl by her best friend, who was more upset that Jenna had not personally shared her same-sex attractions than upset about the attractions themselves. She said that it was okay, and that it did not change their friendship in anyway. Emilia and Jenna, both from the same small town, waited until they left for school and made new friends in much larger towns. They had supportive and accepting experiences with their new friends, which is what they hoped for and expected. Emilia came out to a friend who disclosed her experiences with mental illness, making Emilia feel as though she was a safe person. The information which this friend shared made Emilia feel as though it was safe to also show her vulnerability, and this friend's reaction resonated with her the most "because she said you know if I were into girls or you were a guy I would totally [pause] I would want to be your girlfriend." She had since then developed a close relationship with this friend and they continue to support one another.

Finally, family members were less likely than friends to be supportive in most of my participants' experiences, but there were some instances of love and support from some of their family members. Fiona came out to her husband as bisexual, and together they decided that an open relationship would likely work best for them so that Fiona could still explore her same-sex attractions. This was not only accepting, but also very accommodating of her husband, and Fiona said that it had been a success so far. Her two sons have walked with her and her husband in the Halifax pride parade, and Fiona had normalized same-sex relationships and queer sexualities for her boys. Jessica came out to

her parents over e-mail, and talked about her new girlfriend with them when she saw them over during a holiday. She continued to write them e-mails about queer issues, including transgendered issues, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, and her parents were eager to learn about these interests in Jessica's life. Jenna turned to her aunt when she was asked by her mother to change her "Legalize Gay" shirt when she was embarrassed in front of company. Not only did her aunt support Jenna emotionally at that time, but she also called Jenna's mother to ask what her problem was. Danielle, who experienced some of the worst biphobia from her religious mother, had an older sister who was surprisingly (to Danielle) supportive. Her sister, who understood Danielle's hesitancy to disclose her bisexuality to their parents, offered Danielle some major necessities in case her mother took them away:

She's become like my biggest supporter since then, like she'll always like fight in my corner for that and even when I was like—I failed the whole semester that year at school because I was just like, I didn't know how to deal with it, I didn't know like once my mom found out was she going to kick me out? I was trying to figure out a plan for how am I going to live my life without my mom and. . . But [my sister] just stepped right up and she's like "you know if you ever need a place to go you can always come here" and that made me feel really good cause after that I was like I know everything's going to be okay cause there's at least one person who has got my back no matter what.

Her sister was a huge help because she understood how difficult coming out to their mother would be... she had an inside perspective and was there for her sister in her time of need. Having the acceptance of family was likely one of the biggest hurdles these

bisexual women faced. It was beneficial to have at least one family member who was supportive because they understand the family structure from an insider's perspective and may be the best to understand the challenges that come when they had broken the normative expectations within a family; in this case, when coming out as bisexual.

Nevertheless, it may be challenging to receive this sort of beneficial support as a bisexual person. These women identified many obstacles and barriers when it came to coming out, and getting the support they needed during the process of identity formation. Because they were not gay or straight, they were able to love more freely and their attractions changed over time. Therefore, they found themselves surrounding themselves with likeminded people who were accepting. Acceptance was deemed the biggest source of support, and these people being able to love these women regardless of their sexual orientation was seen as the biggest support of all. Unfortunately however, sometimes when they had disclosed their queer sexuality they were faced with even bigger obstacles and problems than they ever imagined—society's ideologies around what love should look like, which the next section explores.

Discrimination/Bisexual Erasure

Coming out as bisexual can be stressful due to a lack of support, or because of a discriminatory or hurtful reaction from a loved one. These eight women faced different forms of discrimination over their coming out and identity formation process. This section will explore how embedded messages and practices in western society are discriminatory against queer people, parental reactions to their children coming out bisexual, discrimination from the queer people in these women's lives, the need to validate one's sexual identity, and bisexual erasure.

There are a number of barriers that bisexual people have to conquer in order to fully accept themselves, express their love, and gain other people's support. Part of that is on an individual level, and much of it comes from the dominant internalized set of ideologies around love and sexuality that individuals have all been exposed to at one point or another. Heteronormativity is certainly one of the dominant ideologies that affects bisexual people, as well as anyone who has the capacity to love another person of the same sex. From the time someone is born, they receive heteronormative messages about how their lives would unfold: get married (to someone of the opposite-sex, which is generally implied) and have babies the "good old fashioned way" with that person. This ideal was evident especially through the reactions that some of my participants' parents had when they came out to them, further imposing the heteronormative standard of love. This is an example of when internalized heteronormativity is placed on the next generation, which may not be relevant for all children but is generally assumed of all. Education, and being open and inclusive of same-sex and different-sex attractions throughout childhood could ease the coming out process within the family.

Parents were the least likely to be supportive, especially at the time of disclosure with progressing acceptance overtime. This was an immediate concern of Selena's mother who already had a gay son: "I was hoping for one semi-traditional child." Ann was worried that her mother would not be as excited about her future marriage if it was to be with a woman:

That whole experience is going to be totally different like I mean uh we can get married but my mom, like my mom isn't going to be like "ohhh you guys are so beautiful blah blah blah" in the same way. Like it's not going to be the same thing

it's not the same traditional way of doing things and I think, I mean, I'm talking mostly about it from a lesbian perspective but um, bisexual like it's [pause] the same sort of thing you're just not fitting yourself into those of typical like milestones or those typical moments or events that happen.

Moreover, not only does heteronormativity affect how parents feel about their child having same-sex or different-sex life partner, but also their ability to have children. Because my participants were all women, it was interesting to see that they were expected to be both monogamous heterosexuals and to have children. Selena said "like almost like the next thing out of [my mother's] mouth was like 'Selena you better have grandkids', and like she is obsessed with having grandkids and like, wants them." Ann's girlfriend's mother took it a step further:

[Her girlfriend's parents] were like kinda disappointed but were like not upset and like basically like 'oh I wanna have grandchildren' and we were like you can have grandchildren like. . . so that was a concern, the whole grandchildren thing, her mom was actually like "well if you do have kids then you have to give birth to one of them" [laughs].

The expectation that these women were to have children was strong, and this was threatened with the possibility of being with a same-sex partner. Yet there are many ways for same-sex couples to have children, including in vitro fertilization, surrogate mothers, and adoption. Conception is generally painted in one particular way, without making mention of other methods, which makes it possible for many different types of couples to have children of their own. Ann, who knew that she wanted to have children in the future and who had only been involved in same-sex relationships, described the effect that this

standard puts on the ability for parents who want to have children without being able to conceive themselves:

I have some confusion sometimes about what I am and like I have some reserves about being with a woman just because it like it makes things more complicated for a relationship, for an adult relationship. If you want to have children you have to spend like twelve thousand dollars instead of just like... getting busy [laughs] like so that's annoying that sucks and um, you know it would be nice if I didn't have to deal with that.

Not only are these methods of having children taboo at an ideological level, but they are difficult and/or costly to access, making it difficult for anyone other than those who have the "natural" ability to do it themselves. This shows the power that a dominant societal ideology has, by creating a world in which it is much easier to access marriage and children when a couple meets heteronormative standards. Jessica remembered the pressure to present as heterosexual, even as early as elementary school:

Like the first sort of solid memories I can think of that were just like, like having a crush on a friend of mine and we'd like have sleepovers together and I'd be like ooooooh you're so great. Um and like, but there was also like this extremely strong feeling of like this is not okay to act on, this is like not okay to talk to anybody about I can't tell anybody about this. . . . yeah so there's definitely a lot of pressure to conform too.

Even the most queer-friendly of families, such as Amy's, were not exempt from this internalized way of love:

Yeah and I didn't really know how my family was going to respond, even though

[we]'d grown up like with lots of gay and lesbian people in [our] lives. I knew that it was going to be different when it was their own kid.

Parents were certainly the most likely out of all of my participants' family members to be the most distraught or discriminatory, and this had to do with not only their expectations of their children, but also with societal messages and other factors that could alter their ideology.

For example, although most of my participants did not identify strongly with any religion, some of their parents had, and this played into their lack of support. Danielle shared her experience with her mother who was a devout Mormon, forcing her to come out before she was ready yet condemning her afterwards:

She like forced me to stay in the car and tell her and she did not handle it well she was like... from that point for probably the next nine months she, any chance she got she locked me in a room and lectured me on how I'm like, ruining my life and how I'm going to go to hell and just like really really awful about it.

Her mother still had not been able to accept her daughter's bisexuality even after three years, and Danielle feared that their once very close relationship would never recover. Danielle also faced discrimination from her Mormon church community for being bisexual, and this affected her involvement and dedication to some extent: "If you're a homosexual, like acting on homosexual feelings, you'll get kicked out of the church like, and they were going to do that to me. . . and I was ready to do that cause I was like I don't even care anymore."

Ann's first girlfriend was terrified to come public about their relationship and Ann soon found out why:

[My first girlfriend's mother] took us up when she found us in the basement she took us up into the living room and screamed at us for like 20 minutes and I don't even remember what she said but then she called my dad and umm. So we like somehow kept in contact still and like. . . . had to like come up with—if we were talking on MSN um she'd be like “stop” and I have to stop talking because her mom would like come into the room and like um her mom was just not only was she trying to make us not talk to each other she was also just being like super cruel like really cruel to her daughter like I think that it was emotional abuse, because um, she would constantly harass her like about everything like verbally like swearing at her like calling her a slut in [language] okay she's [ethnicity], Um yeah and [ethnicity] are like Catholic right?

This continued until their relationship ended, and Ann was still concerned about her ex-girlfriend at the time of the interview. These are extreme examples of when coming out is seen as shameful, and can cause even a strong mother-daughter relationship to crumble. This might have also occurred if these women came out as lesbians, because the reactions were more specific to their same-sex attractions, but their bisexuality was important to keep in mind because it was an added barrier to gaining acceptance and support for some people who do come out. The value of heterosexuality is already greater in western society above any other sexual orientation, and the layering of messages one can interpret from organized religion around same-sex sexuality can make coming out even more daunting.

When it comes to being bisexual, there are many beliefs that attack the legitimacy of the very ability to be fluid in attractions, as mentioned previously. These beliefs can

include the perception that a bisexual person is indecisive, greedy, promiscuous, or actually homosexual but too scared to fully come out, and this affected the coming out and support experiences of my participants in many ways. Gay and lesbian people were most likely to believe that the bisexual person was being indecisive or greedy, and using their “heterosexual privilege” when they wanted to. Those participants who were involved in their respective queer communities were able to tell me about how this caused a divide between being bisexual and homosexual, and some of the worst reactions from their disclosure came from the gay/lesbian people in their lives, including Fiona, who said:

[Being bisexual] can be perceived as the easy way out so you don't have to catch all the political flack of being a lesbian. You can just be like 'oh no it's okay, I'm only a part time lesbian and then I can go back to you know that heterosexual privilege that I enjoy.' Um I also think that was part of it too is that people get pissed off at you because they're like oh, I work every day at this I get the bad stares.

Amy had some similar experiences:

Probably the most negative response I got was from other lesbians—it was from lesbians and some of it was really fuckin' harsh, like “when are you going to decide? You're just using your straight privilege when you want to” um and it was it was harsh.

These two women were very educated in sexuality and were able to acknowledge that there was a significant difference between being bisexual and being homosexual, and that this difference could cause a divide similar to full-time and part-time employees:

full-time vs. part-time homosexuals. This is true, that heterosexuality can be assumed, especially when one is dating a partner of the opposite-sex, appears straight, and does not necessarily come out in all contexts of their lives, but this is not necessarily something that people consciously abuse. Fiona stated:

No straight person ever wrote in a blog post you know “I’m coming out like straight” like it just doesn’t happen. So I’ve always been confused about the coming out process. . . . I think that because of the privilege that you know for a long time, yeah, I’ve enjoyed heterosexual privilege, so I don’t even think about it, right?

It is a part of their sexual identity, and this can be difficult for “full-time” homosexual people to understand because there is less fluidity in their attractions.

A common belief about bisexuality is that it is a rare sexual orientation, when in actuality it has approximately the same prevalence, if not higher than that of homosexuality. One of the reasons it is seemingly rare is due to bisexual erasure, and certain participants had first-hand experience with bisexual erasure when coming out. Sometimes this occurred when a person was outed, and did not actively disclose their sexual identity, and this could happen in a few ways. For example, one of the most common ways was when they were outed by being affectionate and/or romantic in public with their partner, which caused many people to believe that they were lesbians rather than bisexual. Selena’s mother was example:

Um so like she overheard a convo when that happened like [my brother] and I were talking somewhere and like, I think we were like downstairs or something and she like came down right in the middle and was like “youuu kissed [your

friend]?” and I was like oh like yeah like a drunken thing like ha-ha-ha like. . . and then Mom was like “you’re not a lesbian are you?”

Most of my participants did not bother to correct some of these assumptions, as was discussed in the coming out section. Some participants were very aware of their ability to pass as a heterosexual person, especially when they were dating an opposite-sex partner. There is less of a need to come out when dating an opposite-sex partner, whereas when dating a same-sex partner, one is practically forced to come out, especially in public spaces. Certain participants were not taken seriously coming out as bisexual, and this was especially true if they came out to someone while they were romantically involved with someone of the opposite sex.

Something that was very troubling was the need to validate one’s sexual orientation through imaginary “gay thresholds” that certain people had. When bisexual people who have been assumed to be heterosexual for some time come out to their loved ones, they could be asked things like “would you ever marry someone of the same-sex? Would you ever have sex with someone of the same-sex?” as if there was a certain checkpoint one had to make before they could claim their bisexuality, making it more legitimate. Selena met this barrier when she came out to her gay brother who attacked the legitimacy of her disclosure:

Another fucked up thing is like after I slept with [my girlfriend] then my brother seemed far more accepting. . . yeah like he I think that somehow validated it he’s like, he’s like “yeah I never really thought that you’d actually like, do that like, I thought that this just might be a phase that you were like trying out but I didn’t think you’d actually like do it.”

Although she had disclosed her strong desire to have a relationship with this woman, her brother did not take her seriously until they were sexually together. Selena also felt the need to prove her bisexuality to her mother, citing instances in which she was either attracted to a woman, or physically with a woman to make her identity seem more legitimate.

People also believed that they should have recognized some signs of bisexuality prior to the bisexual person coming out to them. This made it particularly difficult for Selena's mother, despite overhearing the conversation mentioned earlier. When I asked why she thought her mother was not supportive when she finally disclosed her pansexuality, Selena believed that "part of it just was that she said she just never saw it coming so she said that it was harder for her to deal with. . . . um I so she, I think she felt as though there should be some warning signs or something." Coming out was a shock to their friend or family member's system, and some people believed they should have seen some early indicators that the person was in fact bisexual. This is troublesome, again coming down to sexual fluidity, because some bisexual people do not know they are bisexual until they start to realize their same-sex attractions (assuming that they initially identify as heterosexual), and accept these attractions, creating a new sexual identity for themselves.

There is a concept called "gaydar", which is shorthand for "gay radar". It is a feeling or a sense that one gets from someone who they believe has some form of same-sex attraction. This was mentioned by some of my participants, including Fiona who said that she did not look "queer enough" to some of the lesbians who came into her place of work, a sex-positive establishment. When she was pushed to describe what queer looks

like she said that she did not fit the description “maybe I just come across as really straight maybe I—yeah so you know I wasn’t really like funky or cool I never had like, you know, I don’t know like my tattoos don’t show [laughing].” The mothers of my participants seemed to have the most difficulty, compared to the other people in the individual’s life, with their daughters coming out as bisexual, and this not only had to do with their expectations of what their daughters’ love lives would look like, but also because of their heteronormative expectations they were surprised by their daughter’s queer sexual orientation. Again, Selena’s mother was extremely upset about her daughter’s bisexuality and was shocked when she came out, despite overhearing a conversation a year prior about her daughter making out with a female friend. From her reaction of hearing that conversation alone, Selena was afraid to disclose her same-sex attractions to her mother with whom she has always had a very close relationship. Therefore not only were there certain behavioural/sexual milestones one was expected to meet before they can come out and be considered legitimate, but people also believed that they should have been able to tell that someone was bisexual, sometimes even before that person knew themselves.

Bisexual people who are dating different-sex partners can be assumed to be straight, and may not need to come out when they are in public with their partner, because heterosexuality is assumed. As mentioned previously, having a different-sex partner enables the bisexual person to be more selective about coming out. For many people, the relevance of their sexuality in most everyday conversation is low, so there may be many assumptions being made without any discussion of their genuine sexual orientation. This was the experience of some of my participants, and a concern of

Emilia's, who said "I just I don't want people to make the mistake that I'm completely straight or I'm completely gay cause neither of those things are the case." Emilia believed that she was not being true to herself if she were to appear as strictly straight or lesbian. Coming out is a time of authenticity, and Emilia seemed to be very sensitive to this aspect of people understanding her identity fully. Other participants such as Amy, Jenna, Fiona, and Ann could have cared less, however, having more of a "take it or leave it" attitude, without feeling the need to explain or validate themselves any further. Amy said:

You know when you say, and rarely in those contexts do I actually say, well I'm actually a queer woman because [pause] I don't fucking care if they know if I'm queer or not like I'm with [my partner] okay they can make any assumption they want, I don't really give a shit.

This shows some resilience, but at the same time they may not realize that they are partaking in bisexual erasure through passing as a lesbian or a straight person.

I did not expect that bisexual people actually erased themselves and sometimes identified as straight or lesbian in certain circumstances. However, Ann and Jenna were two participants who referred to themselves as gay or lesbian throughout the interview. When Jessica came out to her parents, she said she had a girlfriend and her mother's reaction was to say "I didn't know you were gay". Jessica replied by saying she was not gay but did not explain the difference. Danielle came out as bisexual to her mother, but as gay to her father. When asked about why she came out as gay to her father, after being more specific with her mother she explained:

I don't think it's something I really thought about right away of what I was. I just used the words gay and bisexual interchangeably. I think coming to realize

who I was, was so new that I thought I should be what people thought I was for liking girls because I still wasn't sure.

These are examples of bisexual erasure being perpetrated by the very people it erases.

This is detrimental to bisexual people looking for others who share their identity in order to get support, especially when they are being asked to "pick a side".

Role models are seen as an important source of support, as the bisexual person is being reflected in someone else who may have been out for longer and is comfortable, loved, safe and secure. Jessica, who believed she could be a positive role model for someone struggling with the coming out process, never saw herself reflected in the gay communities prior to coming out, saying "we need role models. Like, role models are so important and seeing yourself in the world is so important." Coming out as bisexual specifically can provide hope for other bisexual people especially if they have been discriminated against by gay and lesbian individuals and think there are no safe people to turn to in the queer communities.

Summary

These women's experiences suggest that sexual fluidity is an inherent part of a bisexual person's attractions, and may be a more relevant part of their identity compared to heterosexual or gay individuals. Additionally, not only are their attractions fluid, but so are the ways in which they identify and explore their sexual interests. The Internet and alcohol were both cited as tools used for sexual exploration. Fluidity was one of the biggest causes of negative reactions and discrimination from the loved ones in the bisexual person's lives. To avoid discrimination, these women chose not to come out to certain people or in certain contexts; coming out was a selective and continual process

over the lifespan. This selectivity can be an act of avoidance or even relevance: some choose only to come out when it is relevant to the situation. It can be less relevant for a bisexual person to come out in all contexts because they may have different-sex partners, making them appear heterosexual to the outside world.

When people do come out, what they look for is acceptance, not only of their sexual identity, but for them as a person. Heterosexual friends of the participants were the most likely to be supportive, with LGB communities providing a great deal of affinity and support for four of these women. Certain family members were also supportive, but the mothers of the bisexual women were the most likely to be discriminatory. Maternal expectations of what their daughter's future lives would look like were seemingly shattered with disclosure of a bisexual identity—a point explored in greater detail in the discussion chapter.

Chapter 6: Reflexivity

Reflexivity was used throughout the thesis process, from designing the research questions and method, to interviewing the participants and analyzing the data. Reflexivity was defined in my literature review section as a process where researchers must be able to place themselves and their practices under conscious observation, acknowledging that they are affected by the research, as well as how they affect the research with their beliefs, experiences and ideologies (McGraw et al., 2000). This was of particular relevance to this study because I identify as a bisexual, or more recently a queer woman, with my own experiences and beliefs around sexuality. It was important for me to be conscious of these beliefs to see how they affected the creation of the methodology and interview process. I believed that my identity as a queer woman, and disclosure of certain relevant experiences was imperative to having in-depth conversations with my participants so that they felt comfortable and safe, creating for a more level playing field between participant and researcher. I wanted my participants to feel as comfortable as possible with the conversations had due to the sensitive nature of the topic, therefore the research was designed with this in mind.

A reflexivity journal was kept in order to keep my moods, thoughts, and beliefs at the forefront of my consciousness. This started early in the thesis process, as I was challenged by my thesis committee to re-evaluate my research design. The original design included two groups, a group of bisexual people, and a group of gay and lesbian people so that I could compare how they differed in coming out and access to social support. My committee urged me to focus exclusively on bisexual experience because this was my first qualitative research endeavor, and I could not even comprehend the

amount of work that would be involved in interviewing a dozen people. My reaction was extremely emotional, and I ended up crying in the middle of the meeting. I fought for both groups even trying to alter the research design so that gay and lesbian people were still included—even a month after the meeting—and had a lot of difficulty letting go my original concept. I was urged by my advisor to start my reflexivity journal at this time, to try and understand why it was so important for me to have these two groups. Over the month, the appeal to having the two groups faded, and I realized that it was pure stubbornness on my part—I felt that my academic integrity was being personally attacked, which made it difficult to take my committee’s advice in a constructive way. My old positivist ways from my undergraduate degree in psychology were bleeding through, still believing that I needed to divide and group in order to understand differences in experience. Writing in my reflexivity journal made it easier to externalize my feelings and thoughts, and I was able to see why I became so emotionally attached to the original design. This is just one of many examples of how this journal helped me problem solve through all of the emotions, ideas, beliefs, and of course internalized ideologies.

The questionnaire created for my semi-structured interviews was created by reflecting on the research question, and asking certain questions of myself that would help me better be able to answer it fully from my own experience. I also included questions that I asked myself when I was coming to accept my sexual identity, as well as questions that other people asked me when I came out to them. I had to use some discretion when it came to asking my participants these questions because I am quite comfortable discussing my sexuality with almost anyone who will listen, but consent was

ongoing and participants were made aware that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to. I feel extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to have the conversations I had with these women, and that they felt that they could share these sometimes intimate and emotional stories with me.

I believe that my identity as a bisexual woman was important in having these conversations. One of the major benefits of participating in this research study was to be able to have a conversation around sexuality, with someone who has a similar identity. In my personal experience, I have not had many opportunities for this to occur. There was some disclosure on my part where I felt it was relevant. This was especially true with Selena, who was just coming out to her family, and her mother reacted similarly to the way mine did. I wanted to let her know that over time my mom became more accepting, and I hoped that this would provide some comfort. Amy made a great point when she talked about the importance of the LGB communities, in that there are a number of diverse identities that fit under the queer umbrella, but the common denominator is a space in which heteronormativity is not the only narrative, and this can be extremely refreshing for non-heterosexual people. My participants knew that I could likely relate to some of the experiences they had in coming out as bisexual, and they certainly were not dealing with overt heteronormativity (of course I should make mention that there are likely internalized heteronormativity, which was also evident through being reflexive). These internalized ideologies were brought to my attention as I challenged my participants to think about their everyday lives and how dominant narratives affected their everyday experiences, as well as through their responses to my questions that had me questioning my own internalized beliefs and influences.

Something that was made clear to me, that I had thought of it prior to interviewing but never gave much appreciation was my own heterosexual privilege. I have been an out queer woman for a little over four years, but since coming out have only been in long-term monogamous relationships with cisgendered men. Although I out myself on a regular basis, either directly or by mentioning my research and interests, I have always had the opportunity to appear heterosexual if I wanted to, and I believe that I have taken that for granted. I am still very open and disclosive about my sexual identity, but because it has made some past partners uncomfortable, I have hidden it in certain contexts. This made me feel less authentic, especially at times when I knew discussion of my sexual identity would upset my partner, and this was something that Amy brought up as well about a past partner of hers. It was a step in the right direction talking about heterosexual privilege because it is not something that heterosexual people are aware that they have, because they have never had to face biphobia or homophobia. Heteronormativity is an internalized ideology that clearly came through my interviews, which made me think about my own experiences with heterosexual privilege, and how different my life might be if I had a female partner. This is an example of something I wrote about regularly in my reflexivity journal.

The reflexivity journal was used over much of the process, mostly around the times of interviewing. I made sure to write an entry before and after each interview, making mention of my mood, any events that were happening in my life, interview setting, initial thoughts and of course how the interview went and any important details about the participant and the conversation what we had. I also wrote a few entries around transcription, coding, and the analysis of the data.

I should mention that this journal served several purposes for me as a researcher: not only was it used to examine my beliefs and feelings around the research process, but it also was used as a personal journal where I expressed my innermost thoughts and feelings. Although some might argue that some of these thoughts and feelings did not have any relevance or connection to the research, I would argue that they certainly did. I had a very difficult summer (2013) mentally and emotionally, due to pre-existing mental illness, grieving a major loss in my family, trauma, relationship difficulties, job loss, and the need for surgery, amongst other things. This affected not only my ability to focus on the research at times, but also how I viewed/analyzed the data, and how I interacted with the participants. Therefore it was important to make mention of my psychological status prior to working on my research. Although I have been working through mental illness over my seven year academic career, through reflecting on my past I knew that it had affected not only my ability to get work done effectively, but affected my ability to do everyday tasks such as reason, make decisions... even get out of bed in the morning. I found it extremely difficult at times to reflect on my participants' love lives because they resonated so much with my relational issues at the time, or made me envious. This was all important to note, and at times it was difficult to discern what was relevant to the research and what was not. Therefore I kept everything together. Not only did I affect the research as the researcher but the research affected me.

Another aspect about being a queer woman having conversations with other queer women is that these conversations have changed me as well. I identified strongly with the bisexual label prior to the interview phase of this research, but now find more affinity with the queer label. It makes more sense to me intuitively, it more accurately describes

my attractions, and I enjoy how vague it is. It almost forces a conversation with other people, because they are more likely to question my sexuality if I use a term they are not accustomed to hearing. I have always used the term bisexual because of (what I thought was) the general understanding around bisexuality, but the further I got into my research, the more I realized that my understanding of bisexuality was skewed to my personal experience and identity and that it can (and in fact, does) mean so many other things.

I now also see LGB community quite differently, not as one collective but I am involved in a number ways with different communities. I have always regarded each community to have the same goals, the same voice, and the same type of queer people. When I reflected on my experiences and spoke to my participants I realized that this was not the case and that there are different goals and people depending on the group, just as there would be for any volunteer/activist event.

Finally, I also have to admit that I believed that I would hear more experiences of discrimination from my participants, and was pleasantly surprised to have a couple of participants that had difficulty naming any instances. I certainly had an idea of the sorts of things I would be hearing about and some of that was the case but my participants were also still able to surprise me on a number of occasions. I hope that the people who participated in this research enjoyed having these conversations as much as I did, and I cannot thank them enough for their participation.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This section connects the findings from this study with the previous literature. As noted in my reflexivity section, much has changed between writing my literature review and my findings section, including my personal beliefs and expression of being a queer woman. However, although much has changed, there are some major links to be made between previous research on bisexuality and this study. This chapter explores the importance of sexual fluidity, social support, the characteristics of coming out, discrimination and bisexual erasure. It also exposes dominant ideologies through the experiences of these eight women in conjunction with previous research. The chapter ends with the limitations of the current study as well as suggestions for future research.

Sexual fluidity is an inherent part of a bisexual person's sexual identity because of the fact that they can choose their romantic partners regardless of gender. Women are more likely than men to be fluid in their sexual interests according to Baumeister (2000), however, I am unable to speak to these differences because my entire sample consisted of women. It should be noted that women are more likely than men to participate in qualitative research as well as more likely to be bisexual, making it more likely that my sample would be comprised entirely of women. Sexual exploration is a means in which people can discover their mutually occurring sexual attraction for men, women, and transgendered people, and this exploration can occur in many ways. Although exploration is not necessarily a part of the definition of sexual fluidity (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond 2008; Fahs, 2009; Subhi et al., 2011), I would argue that it is an inherent part of fluidity and it cannot be ignored when researching bisexuality. The ways in which people explore their sexual interests can give insight into sexual fluidity, and what fluidity and sexual

exploration are up against in western culture. For example, some of my participants stated that they needed to be drunk in order to have their first sexual experience with other women: Why does this occur? I was able to gain insight to these sorts of phenomena by asking about context, or the everyday lived experiences of these women. The participants who were 19 and in their early twenties also reported using the Internet as a way of exploring their sexual interests, either through female-female pornography, character development, or by reaching out to other queer people in anonymous ways. Sexual minority exploration through the Internet is a growing area of research (i.e., Crowson & Goulding, 2013) and will likely be a major focus in the future.

Sexual fluidity is also an inherent part of how a bisexual person chooses to identify. Diamond (2008) recommends including women of many identities, including queer, unlabeled, and pansexual women in research about bisexuality, and I was able to do that in this study. Amy and Ann were two participants who were uncertain if they could be included in the research because they did not feel an affiliation with the bisexual label, so it was beneficial for recruiting participants to make my inclusionary criteria more broad. There were three women in my sample who had strong same-sex preferences when it came to their romantic partners, but they still considered themselves bisexual. This was because they wanted to leave the space open in case they ever felt attracted to a man in their future, although at the time of the interviews, they were not sure if and when that would ever occur. Selena, who had very recently come out as pansexual at the time of our interview, was questioning whether or not she would solely identify as lesbian, but could not deny her past attractions and success with men, therefore identifying in a more open way. This is in line with DeCecco's (1981) critique of the Kinsey Scale due to its

stagnant nature of examining sexual orientation. DeCecco argued that sexuality is labile, and that past and future attractions should be taken into consideration when researching sexuality. These past and future attractions have almost automatically been taken into consideration when the women in my sample chose to label themselves one way or another. The example of Amy's family friend, who was a lesbian and fought long and hard for her identity as a lesbian woman, shows us the effects of labelling oneself with a label that is not so open: it can inhibit one's ability to explore their sexuality and sexual interests, even if they do change over time.

DeCecco (1981) also criticized the Kinsey scale for assuming a direct correlation between homosexual and heterosexual attractions, and that sexual orientation cannot be measured on a single continuum. People often ask bisexual people to quantify their attractions, looking for percentages "60% female, 40% male", which is a similar method to measuring sexual orientation through the Kinsey scale. Although the Kinsey scale has been extremely influential in sexual orientation research, I would agree with DeCecco that it is overly simplistic when it comes to such a complex phenomenon. The three women I asked were unable to provide a stagnant percentage of how gay and/or straight they were, because it was always changing. Emilia pointed out that some days she wants a male partner, and some days she would prefer a female partner. There is not necessarily a direct trade-off between homosexuality and heterosexuality when it comes to being bisexual, it changes with each person that is met. For example, Ann referred to her attractions as person-specific. Therefore she is 100% interested in a particular person, no matter what their gender.

DeCecco (1981) argued that bisexuality could not be examined through sexual

behaviour alone, which is what much of the early research examined. The Ancient Greeks would have argued that sexual orientation has nothing to do with sexual identity (the more psychological/social aspect of sexual orientation), but that sex could be viewed simply as a behavioural phenomenon without ascribing an identity label to that behaviour. Sexual orientation is extremely complex and this was shown through the experiences of my participants. These women expressed physical, behavioural, emotional, social, and psychological aspects of their sexuality, and how their sexual identity has affected them in so many ways. Physically, some of them noticed their same-sex attractions because they were aroused by women, generally by meeting a particular woman or through the viewing of pornography. Danielle says that “she feels nothing” when she is with a man, meaning sexual arousal, although she is one of the participants that keeps her bisexual label because of the potential of having a future male partner. Behaviourally, these women were both sexually romantically involved with partners of either gender, some only having experience with same-sex partners (so far). Psychologically, my participants expressed (and continue to express) their love and their sexual identity in a heteronormative society, where it is expected that they are heterosexual until they disclose otherwise. They have also had to come to terms with their mutually occurring attractions, and develop a new sense of self. Many of them imagined what their social circumstances would be after disclosure, in some cases fearing the worst. Emotionally, some of them struggled before and after disclosure with their loved ones. Everyone in my sample came out, which was a requirement of the research, and coming out has behavioural connotations, as well as social, emotional, spiritual, and psychological. Therefore sexual identity cannot be viewed through a behavioural lens

alone, but as a multi-faceted phenomenon that a person experiences in many ways.

Although the eight women in this sample shared similar sexual identities, they each had their own experiences. Through their unique experiences I was able to identify some commonalities between all eight women. Coming out was a continual process, something these women must have made a conscious choice to do (or not) with every new person they met (Orne, 2011). This also makes coming out selective, because the bisexual person has the choice to disclose their sexuality or not (Moran, 2007). This is consistent with research by Balsam and Mohr (2007), who found that bisexual people reported lower levels of self-disclosure than gay and lesbian individuals, using an Outness Inventory Scale. Whether or not someone came out was dependent on a number of factors, including the sex of their romantic partner, whether or not that partner is present, the relevance of one's sexual orientation to the context, and how much energy they had to have a conversation. Some of my participants were in relationships with women at the time, and it was evident that they would likely have to come out in more circumstances than if they had a male partner. Amy, who had a male partner at the time, talked about her ability to appear heterosexual with her boyfriend's friends because of their relationship.

It is interesting, because while reflecting on my own coming out experiences discovered that I was a queer woman who has only had long term relationships with male partners since discovering my bisexuality, but I will actively disclose my queer identity even when it is not necessarily relevant. Although being bisexual makes me a minority, I am an invisible minority and have to actively choose to come out as such in almost every context. Research on other stigmatized invisible minority groups (i.e., people with mental

illness) found that being in contact with someone who has a stigmatized identity, and then having that person come out with that identity is the best way to challenge stigma and stereotypes around people with mental illness (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Being in contact with someone who is bisexual but who does not fit all of the preconceived stereotypes associated with that identity label can make a person more comfortable with queer people overall. I would argue that I am a friendly, social, approachable person, who is monogamous, in a relationship with a man but who also happens to be queer, so for me to come out in contexts where my sexual orientation is not relevant increases queer visibility. This could help anyone around me who has a negative view of queer people, but has never come into contact with a queer person, realize that there are many types of queer people—many of which do not fit the negative stereotypes. Coming out is a continual and selective process, and while some people choose to be more selective than others, some come out in a way to make space for heterosexual people to be aware that not everyone is straight, and other queer people to know that they are not alone.

Existing literature discusses bisexual erasure at length as a process in which straight and gay/lesbian individuals actively participate in to keep social order (Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002; Yoshino, 2000). There were many examples of bisexual erasure within the experiences of my participants, but they did not always seem to be active attempts at bringing social order. Some instances of erasure were “assumption” based, where they saw the bisexual person with a partner of a particular gender and assumed homosexuality or heterosexuality based solely on that. There were also many instances of active erasure, where the person was questioning or challenging the person’s identity, saying things like “just come out [as gay] already” or asking the bisexual person to “choose a side”. This

type of erasure very often came from the gay or lesbian people in the person's life, much more often than the heterosexual people they came out to.

Interestingly enough, bisexual erasure is an active practice by the bisexual person themselves, either used as a protective strategy to avoid discrimination or uncomfortable conversation, or as a reflection of their current attractions. This is another demonstration of the selectivity of coming out, not only when one's sexual orientation is relevant to the conversation and context, but when it is comfortable and they identify in a certain way at a particular time in their lives. Some of my participants who had strong same-sex preference for romantic partners, referred to themselves as lesbians throughout the interview without noticing. Some of these women came out as lesbians or did not give the full details of their queer identity when coming out. This is further proof that sexual identity labels can be just as fluid as attractions when it comes to bisexual people, and that fluidity is an inherent part of one's sexuality. I would add to the bisexual erasure literature that bisexual people are also active participants in their own erasure, for better or for worse.

Coming out is viewed as an important part of being authentic and providing space for others to also be authentic. One of the last questions I asked each of the women is whether or not they believed it was important for all bisexual people to come out. Many said that it depended on whether or not that person will be safe and supported after disclosure. Selena mentioned that it was important for people to come out as bisexual because it provides space for others to come out, all the while challenging heteronormativity. Coming out inherently challenges heteronormativity because it makes it blatantly clear that not everyone in proximity is indeed heterosexual, which is what is

generally subconsciously assumed. Some of my participants believed that coming out to other people was not necessary, but coming out to oneself and accepting one's new sexual identity is most important. Pre-established coming out stage models (i.e., Cass, 1979) would argue that coming out to oneself must occur prior to coming out to other people. I did find in this study that this was a normative sequence of these events, but nothing else occurred in an orderly fashion amongst these women. It was the importance of coming out to oneself for the wellbeing of that person that was highlighted, and not the start of an expected sequence of events. Emilia, Danielle, Jessica, and Selena all had difficulty accepting their mutually occurring attractions to men and women at first, and they were all at different stages with this acceptance. Each of them however, believed that this acceptance made for more authentic relationships, sense of self, and a more authentic life altogether, as was discussed as a benefit of coming out growth (Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). This increased wellbeing, therefore coming out may be stressful but at the same time a period of reflection and growth.

Coming out is not always seen as a stressful time in one's life, and there are many positive aspects to coming out, including being more authentic and developing more mature relationships. This is in line with coming out growth, defined earlier as the process of coming to realize one's sexual identity, and growing personally and psychologically through the challenges, expectations, and discrimination that comes from being a sexual minority (Bonet et al., 2007). The acceptance of one's sexual identity can be seen as a period of growth for a queer person. Overcoming the potential stress of disclosure to loved ones, and seeking like-minded, accepting, and open friends can further enhance this growth (Bonet et al., 2007). Overcoming the challenges of coming

out, including discrimination, pre-established beliefs, biphobia, and erasure can also help a person develop positively in many ways (Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). The women in my sample were extremely resilient to the discrimination that they did face, and were able to talk to be about some of these difficult experiences, which demonstrated a lot of strength in and of itself. Fiona became particularly emotional when she talked about the queer friends she lost after coming out to them, but still lives authentically as a queer woman in many ways despite the fact that she is married to a man. Although coming out can be a stressful time, especially around the initial disclosure, it is clear that it can also be seen as a period of growth and authenticity for the person. If the bisexual person does experience difficulty, either with accepting themselves or having others accept who they are, they may reach out to the people they know for support.

Social support is viewed as one of the largest buffers for stressful situations. Acceptance of someone despite sexual orientation was seen as the best support anyone could give a bisexual person at the time of disclosure. This is consistent with research on sexuality related social support, where it is not just a general type of emotional/psychological support being provided because of a pre-established relationship, but acceptance of one's orientation specifically that has been viewed as most helpful (Doty et al., 2010). This is also the case when they come out to themselves: what one really needs is to be able to accept their sexual identity. However, this may be easier said than done when it comes to other people being accepting of a queer identity, but what I found is that many of my participants actively surrounded themselves with open and accepting people and places. For example, Amy worked for companies run by queer people throughout her life, Emilia first came out to a person who showed her own

vulnerability by sharing her experience with mental illness, Jenna and Emilia both waited until they moved from their small town to larger towns before disclosure, and Jessica and Selena were strongly affiliated with queer groups in their communities.

Research that used stage models to describe coming out, discusses group identity formation as a part of the process of disclosing and accepting one's sexual identity (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). Because bisexual people do not fit neatly within the confines of a heterosexual or gay sexual orientation label, other research has suggested that bisexual people may have difficulty forming a group identity because their attractions are more fluid, and they often face discrimination due to this on top of the many stereotypes (Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002; Yoshino, 2000). Something that was common within the coming out research was pre-established stage models, and many of them believed part of coming out included developing a social identity or group membership (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). There was a clear divide in this study, I would argue that half of my participants did find a group identity in which they were supported and accepted by LGB people, whereas the other half did not necessarily surround themselves in these communities, each of them with their own reasons. This falls in line with the argument against the use of stage models, because everyone experiences coming out differently. This is evident through many aspects of the coming out process, including group identity formation. These eight women, who shared similar sexual identities, had very different needs and desires when it came to this aspect of the coming out process.

Cox and colleagues (2011) found that finding affiliation with other LGB people will help create a more positive experience while developing their new sexual identity,

but this was not necessarily true for half of these women. Some only needed to know they were queer, which may have in and of itself created enough of a group identity, whereas the other four women became involved in their respective queer communities, and this was what was helpful for them. Interestingly, heterosexual friends of these women were the most likely to be supportive, so it makes sense that not everyone needed to be involved in their respective queer communities to find support. Although past research has found that heterosexual individuals may be more biphobic than gay/lesbian people (Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002), this was not necessarily the case in this study. Coming out is about looking for acceptance and support, not necessarily group identity. It is more about safety, security, and being able to be authentic, and how that is accomplished is different for everyone.

Exactly half of my participants experienced social support from their respective queer communities, and were extremely involved in those communities. Amy made a good point by saying there is not just one big “gay community” of Halifax, and that she always makes sure to add an “s”, to demonstrate that there are many queer communities in Halifax. This is in line with Anderson’s (1991) writings on imagined communities, where people perceive themselves to be part of a collective, a cohesive group, but in fact there is no one tangible group. There is no face-to-face interaction on a daily basis, and generally speaking a queer person does not have the opportunity to meet all members of this “community”. Instead, there are multiple, smaller communities of queer people. This is contrary to the popular belief that there is one overarching gay community in Halifax. Jessica provided as specific example when she differentiates between the rad-political queers and those who are not so politically inclined. Amy mentioned that these groups

can clash from time to time.

I believed that bisexual people would be unwelcome in these queer groups or communities, and was genuinely surprised to find very contradicting opinions on this topic within my sample. Research that focused on coming out experiences in bisexual samples found that people on either end of the sexual orientation spectrum may actively discriminate against bisexual people, for a number of reasons that have been mentioned previously (Mulick & Wright Jr., 2002). Half of my sample found affinity, belonging, and purpose in queer groups and organizations. They felt that their involvement in these groups was for the good of all queer people, and they felt comfortable at rallies, protests, and celebrations. When I asked about discrimination from these groups, Selena believed that any discrimination happens more on an interpersonal level, and that any discrimination one faces when being a part of these groups is on an individual basis. Of course, institutional levels of discrimination have been recognized as well, to the point where programs have been developed and put in place to help educate people on their internalized heterosexism, and homophobia/biphobia/transphobia. The Ally Program, for example, was developed as a two session, four-hour (or less, depending on the perceived need) workshop for members of university communities, to recognize the unique issues LGBT students face at multiple levels of society, from the societal and historical, to the individual (Henquinet, Phibbs, & Skoglund, 2000). LGBT students work alongside the supportive faculty to share their own experiences with many levels of discrimination due to their queer identities. After the workshop, university community members who have taken the training are given pink or rainbow triangle stickers that state that their office or classroom is a “safe space” (Fox, 2007; Henquinet et al., 2000). These stickers are meant

to be visible markers that the person posting is a 'safe' person for LGBT people to approach and talk to, including about issues around sexual orientation. Of course, this is a voluntary workshop, and only certain people would take the time to take this type of training. Moreover, although these ally programs are a sign of a moving consciousness around queer issues, they are not a perfect system. There are a number of "isms" that can overlap to create a very different experience from queer person to queer person, including racism, classism, sexism, and ableism just to name a few, and the ally programs need to consider the complex combinations of such characteristics. Also, certain universities have been given these stickers ahead of time for anyone who would like to post one, regardless of education or experience with queer issues (Fox, 2007). Although it is not a perfect response, it does create visibility around queer issues at an institutional level, and has gained more recognition and use since its inception in the early nineties. Although the discrimination or biphobia is coming through a particular individual, the complex intersectionality of all levels of society cannot be disentangled, and ideological values can bleed through from society, to the institution, all the way to the individual: it just cannot be separated.

These women recognized individual levels of discrimination, especially when it came to the discrimination they faced from the gay/lesbian individuals in their lives when they came out. This is inconsistent with research on social support in LGB groups, which found that other LGB people would be most likely to provide sexuality related social support (Doty et al., 2010), although Balsam and Mohr (2007) believed this support would be less likely available to a bisexual person compared to a gay or lesbian individual. The women who were heavily involved in their queer communities had

experienced some discrimination or pushback from some of the gay and lesbian people in their lives, yet they continued to be involved. Instead of backing down, which some people might (and I admittedly did for a period of time), this added fuel to one's political fire, and it did not stop these women from spreading their message of love and equality regardless of sexual orientation.

Coming out has been viewed as a time of stress for LGB people, with many psychological, emotional, and even sometimes physical consequences (DiFulvio, 2011). In other literature it has been viewed as a period of growth, especially if one overcomes adversity or discrimination due to their sexual orientation (Bonet et al., 2007; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). The four women who have been actively involved in queer communities have spread the message of equal rights and love for everyone, alongside people who may be preaching the same thing, but act and think quite differently. They have a queer identity and have grown within this new identity to make their voices heard for all queer people, despite their experiences with discrimination within this group. Take Fiona, for example, who lost three queer friends when she came out bisexual. She was deeply hurt by their reactions and the loss of friendship, but continued to be out, loud, and proud through her work and family. She was still involved in Halifax Pride, with her husband and two children, and continued to be a sex-positive role model in Halifax. Therefore not only does society and larger institutions have an ideological effect at the individual level, but these four women believe that this influence is bidirectional, and that they can change society and larger institutions through their community work and activism around queer issues.

Although gay, lesbian, and bisexual people generally associated together as one

collective group (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Luhtanen, 2003; Rothman et al., 2012), bisexual people differ from gay and lesbian individuals because they have the ability to express their love with the opposite-sex. This can make them appear heterosexual to the outside world, and they may be able to avoid discrimination or backlash because of this appearance. Fiona and Amy discussed heterosexual privilege, which is something a bisexual person still possesses that a gay or lesbian person does not, meaning that they can fit within the normative expectations of love and relationships if they choose to. The ability to appear heterosexual is a major point of contention between gay/lesbian and bisexual people.

A common belief about bisexual people is that they are actually homosexual and just too afraid to truly come out of the closet; they still want to hold on to their heterosexual privilege. This is described as “passing” in the literature on stigma management, which has a negative connotation, as though someone is intentionally and actively trying to avoid discrimination and/or biphobia (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). I would argue that it is not necessarily always a strategy for avoiding discrimination (although it certainly could be), but more so that their sexual orientation is less relevant in those circumstances and they may not need to come out. Or because the person is bisexual, opposite-sex attractions are still part of that person’s sexual identity and they may be in relationships that appear heterosexual. They have the ability to be selective with whom they come out to, and they may choose not to do so to avoid discrimination, or a difficult conversation. Therefore it may be that bisexual people have a foot in heterosexual privilege that causes gay and lesbian people to be discriminatory or biphobic.

Heteronormativity is the ultimate hegemonic message in LGB research (Motschenbacher, 2011), and it is a hurdle that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people all face when they start to come out. Another difference between being gay/lesbian versus being bisexual is the beliefs and stereotypes associated with these labels in society at large. Bisexual people are also different in that they are much more fluid in their attractions, whereas gay and lesbian people, by definition, have a strict set of same-sex attractions. It is clear what it means to be a gay man or a lesbian woman for most people, whereas with bisexuality there is more variation. On top of that, most of the participants identified as straight for the majority of their young lives, coming out in their late teens/early twenties, so it may have seemed as if a sexual switch had been turned on at that point (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2008; Fahs, 2009).

I found that many of the women in this sample had to prove or validate their bisexuality through what I call “gay thresholds”—usually something behavioural with someone of the same-sex that was considered “gay enough” to make it a legitimate part of one’s sexual identity. Selena had to be sexual with her girlfriend before she was taken seriously by her gay brother, and Jenna was asked if she would ever actually marry a woman. Also, if someone else was unable to “feel” or “see” the bisexual identity themselves before disclosure with their “gaydar” they may not take the bisexual person seriously. The bisexual person may then have to go through this gay threshold in order to demonstrate their sexual identity. The issue with these thresholds is that they are different for everyone, they are generally quite discriminatory (even if the person does not mean for it to be), and it demonstrates that there is a behavioural standard to achieve when it comes to sexual identity. This is not surprising, because sex has been viewed as a

behavioural phenomenon throughout most of history, with only recent research focusing on its more psychological, emotional, and spiritual realms, and research should continue to focus on sexuality as a multi-faceted phenomenon that not only occurs within a person, but within that person inside a structure (i.e., society).

Nevertheless, what came through as the most dominant themes in terms of coming out, and gaining social support as a bisexual, were authenticity and acceptance. Coming out as bisexual allows that person to live and love more authentically. Being authentic comes with some major benefits, which can make coming out bisexual more of a period of growth, especially when coming out in a world that expects one to be heterosexual. I should make it clear that there is a difference between tolerance and acceptance. Tolerance has more of a negative connotation, putting up with something that makes one uncomfortable but not necessarily taking the time to hear the person out or learn about what they are trying to convey—it is passive. The acceptance I speak of looks more like an action of approval, actively listening to what the person has to say and sometimes even taking time to learn more about the new sexuality that person is learning to accept. Acceptance for my participants after disclosure occurred when the relationship between those people was not negatively affected, although it looked differently for everyone. With some of the women, there were discussions around their sexual orientation with their loved ones so that they could understand better. For others it was simply creating some time and distance to allow the loved one to process the disclosure and what that means to them.

This is consistent with Oswald's (2000) work on relationships with bisexual and lesbian women: acceptance occurred in many forms depending on the relationship, the

religious (or basic) beliefs of the other person, and their experiences with other queer people. Acceptance was when Jessica's parents asked questions about transgendered people, willing to learn about their daughter's interests. It was when Fiona's husband agreed to an open relationship, and her family walked with her in the pride parade. Even in Danielle's case, her older sister stepped in and told her that she would support her no matter what, even if her parents ended up kicking her out of the house. Being supportive is loving that person no matter what their sexual orientation and the willingness to help them through the more difficult times in whichever way they can. As long as the queer person is able to find some people within their environment to be supportive, or at least not threatened by a queer sexuality, they may experience the formation of their new sexual identity as a positive experience, or even a time of growth (Cox et al., 2011). Acceptance and willingness to have open and honest conversations around discomfort, misunderstanding, and sexuality in general is a great way to even enhance the bond one has with the queer person in their life, allowing them to live authentically within that relationship.

It may be difficult to live authentically as a bisexual person in western society because of the dominant ideologies in which people's lives are embedded. Not only are the expectations of heterosexuality prominent, but the expectations of upholding traditional family structure are also entangled within one another. There are many unique factors in the family structure with a female-female partnership that can create different types of family that is not completely socially understood or accepted.

Bisexual people have perceived less social support from their family than gay and lesbian individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Fox, 1995). This is unfortunate, because

family support has been shown to have a significant impact on positive identity development and emotional adjustment, so some of these women are missing out on an important source of support (Johnson et al., 2001). Heteronormativity is prevalent throughout western society, through media, advertising, religion, and tradition. Everyone, no matter their sexual orientation, can internalize these messages as truth. Although parents may not have been purposely sending the message of heteronormative lifestyle, they had internalized this to some degree themselves, and they passed these ideals on to their children. They become shocked and threatened when their children come out to them, because their own dreams and aspirations for their children seemed as though they will not come to fruition. Parental expectations can be a strong deterrent in coming out, not wanting to disappoint the parents or change a close bond in anyway.

The people who were the most likely to be biphobic were mothers, mostly because of their internalized heterosexual expectations that they had for their daughters. This has been found in previous research, that parents have certain heterosexual expectations of their children that are then shattered by virtue of their child coming out with a non-heterosexual identity (Savin-Williams, 2003).

Dominant ideologies played a large part in this biphobia, including maternal expectations of (a) their daughter's love life/wedding, (b) their daughter being a mother themselves, and furthermore (c) their daughter's future children coming from both her and her partner's biological bodies. Because all of my participants were women, it became very apparent that there was a major entanglement of sexual orientation, marriage, and motherhood for their parents. Heteronormativity is extremely dominant throughout western culture, and it "fuses together a gender ideology, a sexual ideology,

and a family ideology into a singular theoretical complex” (Oswald et al., 2005, p. 144) so it is impossible to fully detangle its influence on each of these women on any one aspect of their lives. This has to do with the major structures that have been dominant and pervasive for centuries, which is evident through the lens of historical realism.

Historically, women’s rights and women’s sexuality have been placed on the backburner; women have been viewed as currency, as homemakers, and vessels for childbearing; motherhood historically has equaled, and I would argue still equals, fulfilled womanhood in our culture (McQuillan, Greil, White, & Jacob, 2003; Rich, 1980).

Sexuality has not been framed from a female perspective throughout history, sometimes not even being included in the conversation and research, but women are now able to explore their sexuality more freely without these maternal/matrimonial expectations than they ever could before. This may not have been the case for the generation of my participants’ mothers. If this aspect is examined from a structuration perspective (Giddens, 1984); my participants are expressing their own agency within the confines of expected matrimony and motherhood. Although some of them do wish to have children and marry someday (and one participant in fact is married to a man, and they have two children together), my participants realize that their families may not appear as expected, either because of a same-sex marriage, no marriage, having children with the help of technology, or not having children altogether. Interestingly, if a queer pair of women would like to have children, they may not have as much access as a white, middle-to-upper class woman who is infertile may have (Kissil & Davey, 2012). This demonstrates institutionalized discrimination for queer couples, and is a real life manifestation of what Ann was concerned about when it came to overcoming difficult

barriers, financially and ideologically, to starting a family with another woman. Therefore in a world that expects these women to want and do certain things in life, and to love in a particular way, they still demonstrate agency, allowing them to live in a way that is more authentic to them.

For whatever reason, coming out as bisexual is associated the deterioration of the “nuclear family structure”, although this should not necessarily be the case. One of the participants was married to a man with whom she had children, and a few of my participants mentioned that they wanted marriage and children, although Ann pointed out how this may be more difficult for same-sex couples. Oswald and colleagues (2005) believe that coming out unveils the unconscious binary opposites, which affect how a family is viewed: (a) real males and females versus gender deviants, (b) natural versus unnatural sexuality, and (c) genuine families versus pseudo families. One of each of these poles represents what is considered “normative” for a western family, to which the majority of people hold as moral standard (Oswald et al., 2005). The discomfort with bisexuality seems to come indirectly from these dominant ideologies around family, marriage, and having children because it is so embedded and normalized, it is not at the forefront of our consciousness. This discomfort than comes more directly from the dominant messages around what love should look like, and the ability one has to be attracted to people of the same-sex and different-sex simultaneously.

Sexual fluidity is an extremely important component of anyone’s sexuality, but it seems more relevant to bisexual people, or at least is more accepted by that person. The shaping of one’s sexuality can require exploration to know what one really enjoys and who they are truly attracted to. Sexuality is part of everyone, yet it still has a taboo nature

in western culture, especially when one does not follow a monogamous, heterosexual lifestyle. Although it can be a point of contention between heterosexual, gay/lesbian, and queer people, it is important to look at the dominant ideologies that surround love, and understand that sexuality is not all inherent; we are shaped by both biology and our environments. Some people are straight, some are completely gay, and some have periods of each or are able to love without focusing on gender. Bisexual people are not necessarily indecisive, they are in fact making a decision, which is to be open and love someone based on characteristics other than their sex and/or gender. They make the decision to be truly authentic to themselves, and then they decide to be authentic with other people and disclose their sexuality with the people in their lives.

I met my line of fault (Smith, 1987) when I initially came out as a bisexual woman. I was excited to be able to date people regardless of their gender, because I knew it was the most authentic way for me to express love. But few people shared my excitement when I came out to them. Lesbian women turned down my advances based on what they perceived as my “indecisive” sexuality. I was scared to become involved in my local LGBT groups and movements because I was worried that I would meet with more discrimination. My participants demonstrated their own fault lines, some of which were similar to my own. Sometimes it was a more positive experience than they had of expected, for example, if the bisexual person was worried about coming out as bisexual and how that might impact their life and relationships negatively, when in fact it was a positive experience and they were supported. There were also some negative experiences with fault lines; for example, Selena, Fiona and Amy all believed that the queer people that were already in their lives would be sources of support when they came out, but in

some instances it was quite the opposite. Negative experiences with fault lines were exemplified through some of the experiences of discrimination these women had with their queer friends and their own mothers. Expecting queer people to be accepting of their friend's queer sexuality, or coming to a mother who is supposed to unconditionally love their child, and then they are faced with disbelief, shock, or even emotional abuse and abandonment. Through discourse, these fault lines were explored with my participants, although in some cases they were already discovered and recognized.

Coming out as anything other than heterosexual can be a scary and stressful time, but if the person is surrounded by open, accepting, and loving people who will support that person no matter what coming out can be joyous and a celebration of authenticity. Authenticity comes from being able to express agency in a structure that is biphobic. Such authenticity creates space for other people to come out as well, for every person who comes out is challenging heteronormativity whether they are aware of it or not, and they can be seen as a role model for other queer people. Coming out was at the centre of the gay rights movements in the late 1960s and I would argue is still at the forefront of challenging heteronormativity: this way queer people can see themselves represented in the world, and heterosexual people are more aware of queer sexualities. This research is critical in challenging those dominant ideologies that shape what love and relationships are "supposed to look like", providing a platform so that those voices of those who do not follow this hegemonic way of loving can be heard.

Summary

Identifying as bisexual has its own set of challenges apart from gay and lesbian experience. Although dominant ideology has been shifting toward a more egalitarian way

of love, including the legalization of same-sex marriage within Canada, there is still a lot of work to be done. This research puts a spotlight on those people who have mutually occurring attractions for people of both the same-sex and different-sexes. This is different from past research that has generally grouped the experiences of bisexual people with those of gay and lesbian people. This is important because there are substantial differences in experience amongst all three groups of people. The biggest difference being that bisexual people are inherently fluid in their attractions and have the ability to love people who are different-sex, this could make them appear heterosexual to the outside world. The ability to experience heterosexual privilege while identifying as queer is likely the biggest point of contention between gay/lesbian people and those who identify as bisexual.

In a society that has framed sex, love, and relationships in such a heteronormative way it can be difficult to explore any interests or attractions that come outside of those expectations. Inherently, women are more likely to be able to be fluid in their attractions and may face difficulty when exploring their sexual autonomy. Historically speaking, sexuality has been framed from more of a male's perspective, but the sexual liberation for women is increasing. If a woman discovers mutually occurring attractions, psychologically the best thing that she can do at that point is accept herself and her sexual identity, although this may be easier said than done in a society that values heterosexuality so strongly. Not only does she break the expectation of heterosexuality by coming out, she also causes a rupture in what was expected of her family. But once she has the ability to do so, she may begin to create a sexual identity around those attractions and disclose this identity to her loved ones so that she can live her life more authentically.

Some people may be discriminatory or challenging, and some may accept that person with open arms and it is this uncertainty that can make initial disclosure so stressful. Acceptance, a willingness to ask questions and learn, and support in whichever way the bisexual person may need it are the best things one can do when looking to support someone who is coming out. Coming out is a courageous act in a world that not only expects members to be heterosexual, but also values heterosexuality above all other orientations. Coming out challenges heteronormativity in every way, and although it is a sensitive time in an LGB's life, coming out is overall a healthy choice that promotes growth, and with the right people to love and accept someone for who they are, it can lead to a happy ending. It is about safety and security, belonging and acceptance, which is a message that everyone can understand regardless of their sexual orientation.

Considerations

This study does not aim to claim that the findings are relevant for all queer people, but was used to examine coming out bisexual in its own right. Generally speaking, research on bisexuality includes samples that are mixed with the experiences of gay men and lesbian women as well, but no two queer folk are alike, especially over the span of the entire acronym (i.e., LGBTQIAAP2S*, which stands for: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning, asexual, allies, pansexual, and two-spirited). Some of the limitations of this research stem from the small sample and that all eight participants were cisgendered women. I hoped to reach a broader audience, which included cisgendered males and transgendered people, but I was extremely fortunate to have had the experience that I did with these eight women. There could be some major differences in experience based on the gender of the bisexual person, including who is

supportive/discriminatory; expectations and mixed ideologies around sexuality and gender could also affect the experience. Recall may have been an issue for some of my participants, two of whom first came out 15 to 20 years prior to the interview. One of my younger participants also reported difficulty with recall, and may have also had difficulty expressing the reactions of the people she came out to because of a developmental health condition that hinders her ability to read body language and facial expression accurately. Also, the participants in this research were well educated, some of them having formal education in issues around gender and sexuality. This could affect the insight and self-awareness one had around their sexuality, so it may be important to talk to people who had not experienced post-secondary education to understand how they understand and experience their queer sexuality. This study does not aim to generalize all findings and experiences to all queer people, and it was the experiences of my participants and the ways in which they remembered them which was most important.

Future Research

Future research should continue to focus on bisexual people as their own group, including anyone who has same-sex and different-sex attractions, as Diamond (2008) suggested. It could also examine bisexual erasure more closely, looking at the ways in which it occurs for different people, and which purpose it serves for each person whether they are gay/lesbian, straight, or bisexual. Sexual fluidity within bisexual samples should also be examined more in depth to understand how bisexual people explore their attractions and come to a new sexual identity. Research could also focus on samples of bisexual men, or bisexual transgendered people to see how they experience coming out and social support.

Future topics could also examine the intersectionality of different characteristics (i.e., other “isms”) that could also cause discrimination (i.e., race, gender) as well as being queer, and how that affects a bisexual person’s experience. This would include men and transgendered people, which were not a part of this particular study. This would help improve not only our understanding on bisexuality from purely a knowledge standpoint, but in a way that improves programs aimed to help queer people (i.e., The Ally Program). The mothers of my participants seemed to be the most likely to be discriminatory around their daughters’ bisexuality, because of the tangled ideology around family structure. It could be interesting to see how this changes if the person coming out bisexual was a male: would mothers be just as discriminatory, or would fathers have more of an opinion?

In terms of queer research in general, similar interviews with gay and lesbian people could be conducted to compare their experiences with those of my bisexual participants. This was the original idea for this study, which had to be altered because of time constraints, the design not fitting with the critical theory paradigm, and novice research design abilities.

I am also curious to see how the Internet has changed individuals’ abilities to come out and find social support as an LGB. Historically speaking, little people had access to the Internet prior to the 20th century, and I wonder how different people use it and in which ways when they are first coming to terms with their queer identity, and then how they use it to explore their attractions and disclose these attractions to other people.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This research has shed some light on a developing area of research on sexual orientation. Although there has been an increased focus on gay and lesbian experiences, there is a growing need to understand the experiences of those who do not fit within the sexual orientation binary (i.e., heterosexual-homosexual), with an ever growing acronym being used to represent the queer population. Eight women who shared similar sexual attractions experienced their sexuality in both very similar and different ways. It is important to note the similarities between these women (i.e., that they all had same-sex and different-sex attractions) as well as their individual experiences and ways/reasons of identifying the way they do.

Although this research focuses on bisexual individuals, I would like to note that even the bisexual label may be troublesome when researching those who have multiple sets of attractions, because of the reinforcement of the gender binary through both the person identifying as such, and the people whom they are attracted to. I find that through the use of the word queer, we can (a) lessen the reinforcement of the gender binary, (b) the ever growing acronym being used to try and catch up to all queer sexualities, and (c) still have a label that non-heterosexual people can find affinity with, without necessarily trying to impose the more strict labels for sexual identity. The queer label is a middle ground between the heterosexual-homosexual binary, and the need to include *every* sexual identity in an all-encompassing acronym.

Something that was evident with all eight women was the importance of coming out to oneself, accepting one's sexual orientation, and gaining, at the very least, the acceptance of other people in order to develop their sexual identity in a healthy and

positive way. Discovery of one's non-heterosexual orientation was done through exploration of sexual interests, and there were a number of ways in which exploration occurred, for example through the Internet, use of alcohol, or simply by meeting a particular person whom they became attracted to. All eight women had their own experiences of discrimination and support, and each are at varying levels of acceptance and identity development.

Sexual fluidity is an important theme to explore when exploring the experiences of bisexual people. It is an inherent part of their identity, and is likely one of the most prominent points of contention between homosexual/heterosexual and bisexual people. The inability to clearly define what bisexuality looks like for all bisexual people can cause distress for those who do and do not identify in this way; it does not fit neatly within the confines of a simple definition. Although sexual fluidity is an important aspect of everyone's sexuality, regardless of sexual orientation, it is more easily accepted and practiced by those people who have multiple attractions.

Coming out had some similar characteristics among all eight women, but it presented itself uniquely based on their needs and life situations. It was evident that coming out is a continual and selective process that is not limited to the initial disclosure, but that will likely occur for as long as the person identifies as queer. Selectivity of coming out was based on a number of factors, including who they were coming out to, the gender of their current partner, if that partner was present in public space with the bisexual woman, and how relevant their sexuality was to the context/conversation. This is likely different from gay men's and lesbians' experiences, who also may be selective about who and where they do or do not come out, but because bisexual people may be in

relationships with people of the opposite-sex, there is a unique layer of invisibility that may allow them to be even more selective. This layer has been deemed a “heterosexual privilege” and it could potentially be one of the biggest points of contention between gay/lesbian and bisexual people. Gay and lesbian people were more likely to be discriminatory than the heterosexual people in these women’s lives, and much of it was centered around this heterosexual privilege or the fact that they believed the bisexual person was being greedy, indecisive, or too afraid to fully come out. Therefore coming out can be a scary time depending on how others react.

Coming out has been viewed as a period of both growth and stress for LGB individuals, and within the sample of eight women I was able to talk to, for the most part both of these were the case. Some of these women faced more discrimination than the others, but when they were discriminated against they showed great resilience, and were able to discuss these difficult experiences with me. Having people and supportive and accepting spaces, even prior to disclosure of a bisexual orientation, were seen as the most protective during times of potential discrimination. For four of these women, these included whole groups and communities of other queer people, participating in events and activism. Queer groups and spaces provided a sense of affinity and belonging, validating that these women were not alone in the world. The other four women found support elsewhere, either with their family, heterosexual friends, or the individual queer people in their lives. It does not really matter where the support comes from, as long as it is accepting and allows the bisexual person to live authentically.

The praxis aspect of this research included separating bisexual from gay and lesbian individuals to allow their experiences to be shared separately, in order to give

bisexual individuals their own voice to tell their collective story. I aim to collaborate with the Youth Project to present my research findings. The Youth Project is a non-profit organization that “provides support and services to youth, 25 and under, around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity” (Youth Project, 2012, para. 1). From there I may be able to present to other organizations who work with LGB individuals, to help enlighten their staff on the unique issues bisexual individuals face. Community education helps people to create a new world view, where education helps individual and societal transformation take place to shape a different way of understanding the LGB people and groups (McKay, 2010).

This type of research is extremely important, because more people are able to explore their sexual interests than ever before. With the ever growing acronym used to represent the queer community (i.e., LGBTQQIAAP2S*), more people are coming to terms that their attractions are more “person-specific” than gender specific, and in a world that wants to have clear definitions and labels for everything and everyone, this can be problematic. But there is clearly a need for more understanding and knowledge around fluidity of attractions and the freedom to love someone regardless of gender, because more people are beginning to realize that love is love, no matter what.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form Same Difference? Bisexual Individuals' Coming Out Experiences

You are invited to participate in a research study based out of Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). The purpose of this study is to explore the coming out experiences of bisexual* individuals in order to understand the unique experiences of coming out with both same-sex and opposite-sex romantic attractions. This research is being carried out by Teaghan Larkin, a master's student in the Family Studies and Gerontology program at MSVU, and this thesis is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Who is eligible to participate in this study?

You are invited to participate in this research if:

- a) you are attracted to both same-sex and different-sex romantic partners*, and
- b) you are "out" to at least one other person.

This research is inclusive of anyone who claims to have these attractions (whether or not you have had the sexual/romantic experiences with both sexes).

**Bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, queer, non-heterosexual, hetero-flexible, unlabeled individuals and anyone else who possess both same-sex and different-sex attractions are invited to participate in this research study: you do NOT have to identify as bisexual.*

What will be expected of me as a participant in this study?

You will be asked to correspond with the researcher (Teaghan) via e-mail or telephone to discuss the study and, if you agree to participate, decide on a time and place to meet for an audio recorded interview (a private location will be offered).

You and the researcher will meet at the agreed upon location, and you will be given the opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the study. You will be asked to sign this informed consent form to show that you understand the study, the expectations of both yourself and the researcher, and your rights as a participant.

You will be asked questions about your experiences as a bisexual individual. The interview may take anywhere from 60 - 90 minutes. Topics will include (but are not limited to): coming out, social support, and community involvement. The interview

WILL BE AUDIO RECORDED

At the end of the interview, you will be asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire (5 minutes).

After the interview process, Teaghan may wish to contact you for follow up discussion or questions, via method of preferred communication (i.e., e-mail or telephone).

What are the risks/benefits associated with this study?

Risks: Some questions or topics may make you uncomfortable (i.e., remembering a sad memory). You do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Benefits: You will help contribute to an understanding of the unique experiences bisexual individuals face when coming out. You will also be given a \$10 gift card to Tim Hortons or The Halifax Shopping Centre (your choice) for your time.

What will happen with my information?

Your name and all of your personal information will be kept anonymous to everyone but the researcher and her thesis advisor. This form and your demographic information will be stored in separate locked cabinets, in which only the researcher and thesis advisor can access.

The audio recording of the interview will also be kept private (i.e., in a locked briefcase during transportation, and a locked cabinet upon arrival to Mount Saint Vincent) to everyone but the researcher and thesis advisor.

The recorded interviews will be transcribed (i.e., typed word for word) by the researcher herself, and these interviews and your demographic information will be stored on a password protected private computer. Backup storage will be placed on a password protected external hard drive, and two personal USB drives. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the audio recording will be locked away in cabinet with only researcher and thesis advisor access.

Audio files will be destroyed upon thesis completion. Transcripts will be destroyed approximately 5 years post thesis defence, for potential publication purposes.

All of the information you provide in the interview will be kept confidential. If quotes from your interview are used in any presentations or papers about the research, pseudonyms (i.e., fake name) will be used.

LIMITS TO CONFIDENTIALITY: If a participant discloses that they have an intention to harm themselves, harm to another person, the researcher has an obligation to report this to the proper authorities.

If you would like to receive a copy of your transcript once completed, and/or a summary of the results, the researcher will gladly provide you with them. Please fill out the section below your signature if you are interested.

Who can I contact if I have any questions or concerns about the study?

Researcher: Teaghan Larkin teaghan.larkin@msvu.ca

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Áine Humble aine.humble@msvu.ca

If you have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at research@msvu.ca

Contact Information (for follow up):
Method of Contact

Preferred

Phone number: _____

E-mail address: _____

Consent

The ethical components of this research have been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Board and found to be in compliance with Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Policy.

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understand the information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost *INCENTIVE*. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study

Name (please print) _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Transcript/Result Summary Request

I would like to receive a copy of my transcript once complete:

Yes ____ No ____

I would like to receive a summary of the results after the analysis has been completed:

Yes ____ No ____

E-mail address: _____

Sex Positive Resources in Halifax**Dalhousie University / NSCAD Counselling Services**

Website: http://www.dal.ca/campus_life/student_services/health-and-wellness/counselling/contact-us.html

Telephone: 902-494-2081

Halifax Sexual Health Center

Website: www.halifaxsexualhealth.ca

Telephone: 902-455-9656

Mount Saint Vincent University Counselling Services

Website:

www.msvu.ca/en/home/studentservices/healthwellness/counsellingservices/contactus.aspx

Telephone: 902-457-6567

Saint Mary's University Counselling Services

Website: <http://www.smu.ca/administration/counselling/>

Telephone: 902-491-6248

The Youth Project (25 years of age or younger)

Website: www.youthproject.ns.ca

Telephone: 902-429-5429

Avalon Sexual Assault Center

Website: www.avaloncentre.ca

Telephone: 902-422-4240

Venus Envy (*Sex-Positive Bookstore and Shop*)

Website: www.venusenvy.ca

Telephone: 902-422-0004

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Coming Out

1. How did you first come to realize and understand and your same-sex attractions in conjunction with your opposite-sex attractions? What were your initial thoughts and feelings around these attractions? Did they change? How and why did they change?
2. Who did you first come out to? Can you tell me about that experience?
 - *Probes: Why did you choose that particular person? How did you come out to them (e.g., in person, e-mail, phone call)?*
 - *Who else have you come out to?*
3. How did people react when you came out to them? What reaction/who resonated with you the most?
 - *Probes: Negative, positive, confused, “knew all along”?*
 - *Why do you think they responded this way?*
 - *Who were you most worried about coming out to? Why?*
4. Bisexual people come out over and over again with each person they meet. Are there certain situations in which you have felt more comfortable coming out? Why? Less comfortable? Why?
 - *Probes: Are you currently out to family members? Friends? Co-workers? Teachers/professors? Fellow students?*
5. Has your view of yourself changed since coming out? If so, how?
 - Why has it changed?
6. Did you have any expectations around what life would be like after you came out? Did these expectations actually come true? Were you surprised by anything after coming out?

Social Support

7. Who was supportive during your initial time of coming out? Who was not supportive? Who was supportive when you subsequently came out later?
8. How did those who were supportive, show their support? What was most helpful? What would have been helpful? What was not helpful?

9. What kind of social support have you received from other bisexual individuals?
10. What kind of support have you received from gay men and lesbians? What kind of support have you received from heterosexual individuals?

Community Involvement

11. What do you think about the term “LGBT community?” Have you experienced a sense of community?
Probes: Are you involved in this “community” (e.g., “Pride Events”)? If so, in what way?
12. If you haven’t been out to pride events, have you been involved in LGBT organizations? Websites? Online forums?
13. If you aren’t involved, have you tried to be a part of rainbow events? If so, what was that experience like?
 - *If no involvement to date: Would you like to be involved with the LGBT events? What sorts of things have stopped you from becoming involved?*
14. Is there anything else that we haven’t talked about that you think would be helpful for me to know about?

Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

(If answering “Other”, please specify in the space provided)

Sex:

Male ___ Female ___ Other _____

Educational Level:

Less than High School ___ Some High School ___ High School diploma ___

Some University/College ___ College diploma ___ Bachelor’s Degree ___

Some Graduate School ___ Master’s/PhD Degree ___ Other

Marital Status:

Single ___ Long Term Relationship ___ Cohabiting ___

Domestic Partnership ___ Married ___ Separated/Divorced ___ Widowed ___

Other _____

Sexual Identity:

Gay ___ Lesbian ___ Bisexual ___ Pan/Omnisexual ___ Queer ___

Other _____

Age at which you first realized same-sex attractions:

Current Age:

Religious Affiliation:

Which of the follow best describes your racial/ethnic identity? (check all that apply)

- White, European Canadian
- Asian or Asian Canadian
- Black, African, Non-Hispanic
- Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern Canadian
- North African or North African Canadian
- Hispanic or Latino Canadian
- American Canadian or Alaskan Native
- Other (please specify) _____

What is your employment status? (check all that apply)

Full-time employment Part-time employment Student

Other (please specify) _____

What range most closely represents your personal annual income?

- Less than \$20, 000
- \$20,000 to \$29, 999
- \$30,000 to \$39,999
- \$40,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$59.999
- \$60,000 to \$79,999
- \$80,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more

Appendix D: Certificate of Research Ethics Clearance



University Research Ethics Board

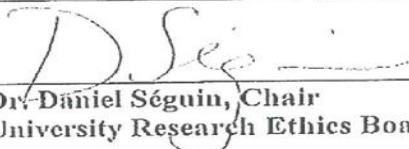
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

Certificate of Research Ethics Clearance

File #: 2012-098
 Title of project: *Same Difference? Bisexual Coming Out Experiences*
 Researcher(s): Teaghan Larkin
 Supervisor (if applicable): Aine Humble
 Co-Investigators: n/a
 Version : 1

The University Research Ethics Board (UREB) has reviewed the above named proposal and confirms that it respects the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* as outlined in the *MSVU Policies and Procedures: Ethics Review of Research Involving Humans* regarding the ethics of research involving human participants.

This certificate of approval is valid one year from the date of issue. Renewals are available for up to four years in addition to the initial year and are contingent upon an annual submission to the UREB of a written request for renewal accompanied by a satisfactory annual ethics report thirty days prior to the expiry date as listed below. A final report is due on or before the expiry date. Researchers are reminded that any changes to approved protocol must be reviewed and approved by the UREB prior to their implementation.

 Dr. Daniel Séguin, Chair University Research Ethics Board (UREB)	<p>April 10, 2013 Effective Date</p> <p><i>[Expires: April 9, 2014]</i></p>
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