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Coming Out to Family and Friends as Bisexually Identified Young Adult Women: A Discussion of Homophobia, Biphobia, and Heteronormativity

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Although coming out is considered a crucial part of minority sexual identity development, research concerning bisexual women's coming out experiences is limited. Nevertheless, bisexual women encounter unique stigma and challenges that warrant specific attention. Seventeen young adult women participated in individual, open-ended qualitative interviews about their bisexual identity development. Our inductive thematic analysis of participants' coming out experiences and perspectives revealed important themes related to the unique aspects of coming out as young bisexual women. Themes included 1) the presence of both homophobia and biphobia, 2) the use of alternate identity terms to combat biphobia, 3) the preference to approach coming out in a casual manner, 4) the ability to pass as heterosexual or lesbian when it fits the situation, and 5) the resolute rejection of the disclosure imperative, among others. We discuss these findings in the context of gender, homophobia, biphobia, and heteronormativity.

KEYWORDS *bisexuality, biphobia, homophobia, sexual orientation, coming out, identity development, intersectionality, gender*

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have made notable advances in understanding the development of bisexual identities (Brown, 2008; Diamond, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Fox, 2003; Klein, 1993; Morgan & Thompson, 2008; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Weinberg, Williams, &

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Pryor, 1994), however; few scholars have focused attention on the bisexual coming-out experience (e.g., the decision and act of telling others about their bisexual identity) as an important topic of inquiry in its own right (Knous, 2005; McLean, 2007). Indeed, to our knowledge, there have only been two peer-reviewed sociological journal articles about bisexual coming-out experiences in particular within the past 10 years (Knous, 2005; McLean, 2007).

Knous (2005) and McLean (2007) described how stigma can inhibit the bisexual coming-out process. Specifically, Knous (2005) found that bisexual individuals engage in stigma management (i.e., techniques that individuals use to cope with a discredited identity) from the beginning of the coming-out process. Similarly, McLean (2007) found that such bisexual stigma resulted in participants engaging in selective disclosure strategies (i.e., many of her participants only came out to others when they deemed it safe or necessary). Both researchers highlighted the impact of stigma on bisexual identity disclosure and the subsequent management processes that bisexual individuals adopt as a result; however, these conclusions were drawn from mixed-gender samples that also included participants who represented a wide age range. Unfortunately, their sampling frames make it difficult to disentangle the likely effect gender, age, and cohort has on the coming-out process for bisexual individuals. Furthermore, many bisexual identity models are based on data from older adults who provide retrospective accounts (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011), which are likely influenced by recall bias.

There has been a relatively recent trend in the literature to focus on bisexual identity formation processes as unique from lesbian and gay sexual orientation development. More research is needed, however, because bisexually-identified individuals face unique stigma associated with their specific sexual orientation (Herek, 2002; Klesse, 2011; Ochs, 2011; Yost & Thomas, 2012). For example, common stereotypes, such as those suggesting that bisexual people are promiscuous, likely to infect others with sexually transmitted infections, incapable of monogamous relationships, or that they are really lesbians or gay men who have not fully come out (McLean, 2007; Ochs, 2011; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010; Spalding & Peplau, 1997), certainly contribute to bisexual identity stigma in particular.

Bisexual stigma is in many cases gender specific. For instance, bisexual women are often considered “visitors” of a bisexual orientation (Fabello, 2013; Joel, 2012). That is to say, there is a pervasive myth that college-age bisexual women are only bisexual for the duration of college and once they graduate they return to heterosexuality. This notion, however, has not been supported by longitudinal research. Instead, researchers have found that rather than representing a transitional period, very few women who identified as bisexual changed their identity to either straight or lesbian 10 years later (Diamond, 2008). A related stereotype that has also not been substantiated empirically is the idea that college-age bisexual women are

only bisexual in behavior and for the purposes of gaining male attention or approval. Remarkably, such biphobic attitudes come from individuals identifying as lesbian or gay as well as from straight-identified populations (Mulick & Wright, 2002), leaving bisexual people to cope with an additional source of stigma that other sexual minorities do not necessarily experience.

Intersectionality theory (Choo & Ferree, 2010) offers a framework for conceptualizing how multiple social identities, such as gender and sexual orientation, interact with one another to create a unique experience of marginalization. This framework stands in contrast with additive theories of oppression, which posit that the presence of multiple stigmatized social identities contribute to additional marginalization vectors rather than viewing these identities as a “matrix of domination,” which defines the experience of oppression as the interconnection of various social classifications (Collins, 1990). Again, bisexually identified women must navigate coming out in a context in which their sexuality is exploited for the sexual pleasure of heterosexual men (Ros, et al., 2010). Therefore, in addition to evidence that bisexual identities are perceived differently depending on the gender of the individual, the intersectionality of oppressed statuses (female gender and minority sexual orientation) leads us to presume that the experiences of coming out to others as a bisexual woman are different from the experiences of bisexual men.

We contend that a fuller understanding of young adult bisexual women’s experiences of bisexual identity disclosure will allow us to better understand and attempt to redress their marginalization. Therefore, for this study, we examined the unique coming-out experiences of a sample of midwestern bisexual college-age women. We analyzed the qualitative data through the lens of intersectionality and paid close attention to the themes that are unique to the experiences of coming out as bisexual women.

METHOD

Participants

Seventeen women volunteered for a study about bisexual identity development. Fourteen of these women identified as bisexual whereas the other three participants identified as pansexual, queer, and un-labeled. We included the three participants who did not label themselves as bisexual in the interview though they had during the screening process because researchers have suggested that those who use un-labeled and alternate sexual identity terms to describe their sexual identity typically experience same and other-sex attractions (Diamond, 1998). Indeed, these three women discussed during their individual interviews that they have attractions to people of male or female gender, with some acknowledging their potential for attraction to those who do not fit the gender binary (i.e., transgender individuals). The

women were mostly White (White/Caucasian, $n = 13$; Black/African American, $n = 2$; Asian/Pacific Islander, $n = 1$; biracial, $n = 1$) and were part-time and full-time college students from a midwestern midsized urban university. Participants (ranging in age from 18–25, $M = 20$, $SD = 1.5$) reported first becoming aware of a bisexual (or otherwise similar) orientation between ages 5 and 19 ($M = 14.7$, $SD = 3.8$).

All of the participants had disclosed their nonheterosexual identity to at least one other person. Additionally, participants reported first disclosing a nonheterosexual identity between age 12 to 20 ($M = 16.3$, $SD = 2.5$). At the time of the interview, 67% had disclosed to their mother, 33% to their father, 64% to all siblings, 90% to a spouse or partner, and 44% to at least one extended family member. All but two of the participants have been in a relationship with a woman or have had sexual encounters with women. However, none of our participants stated that they were currently in a relationship with a woman. Ten of the women reported being in a relationship with a man, or men, in the case of one polyamorous individual, whereas the remaining seven participants reported being single at the time of the interview.

Procedure

Study procedures were approved by the authors' university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Potential participants were recruited by means of classroom recruitment, listservs, and snowball recruitment. Recruitment flyers advertising our "study about bisexual identity development" were also posted across campus. After receiving information about the study through the aforementioned recruitment methods, interested individuals were instructed to contact our research lab via email or by phone. Potential participants were then screened over the phone for inclusion in the study. To be eligible, participants needed to be cis-gender (i.e., nontransgender) women between ages 18 and 24 years (though one person reported being 25 at the time of the interview) and identify as bisexual. Individual appointments were scheduled for those who were eligible and interested in participating in the study. In all, 24 women were screened for enrollment in the study. Seven women did not show up for their scheduled appointment. Thus, 17 women completed the study. We can only speculate why seven out of 24 women did not show up for their appointment, as we do not have enough information to evaluate any possible trends in women who were screened as eligible to participate but who did not complete the study.

The second and third authors, who were the principal investigators, conducted the interviews jointly at a local university in a private research office. When participants arrived for their interview, they were greeted by the researchers and informed consent was obtained. During this process, the second author disclosed her heterosexual orientation and emphasized

the rationale for the study and her commitment to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights. The third author, who was from the same age group as the participants in the study, then disclosed her identity as a bisexual woman. After participants seemed comfortable with the interviewing context, they were asked to complete a brief (i.e., 5- to 10-minute) pencil-and-paper survey about basic demographic information and information about those to whom they have disclosed their bisexual orientation. After participants completed the survey, the second and third authors conducted individual, in-depth qualitative interviews using a semistructured interview guide that was designed to elicit reflections on the developmental trajectory of arriving at a bisexual identity (see the appendix for interview guide). All interviews were digitally recorded and lasted approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours. Immediately after each interview, the interviewers discussed the topics covered and, consistent with the principles of grounded theory, made decisions about which topics merited further inquiry in subsequent interviews. On three occasions, this discussion prompted the interviewers to invite three participants back to participate in a second individual interview. Upon completion of each interview, participants were compensated \$10 for their participation. Audio files were transcribed verbatim and managed using NVivo (version 10) qualitative software.

Analytic Methodology

This study was part of a larger project aimed at developing a grounded theory model (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of bisexual identity development which also had a sample of 17 bisexually identified women. For this study, however, we used an inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to conduct a secondary data analysis of coming-out experiences. (We use the phrase 'coming out' to mean the disclosure of one's sexual identity to others). Although we focused our interviews on the development of a public and a private bisexual (or otherwise similar) identity in the broader project, for the purposes of this study we analyzed data related to public identity development (i.e., coming out to others) only. We focused on the public identity aspect because of its links to better health and well-being (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001) and to ensure that we did not sacrifice depth for breadth.

Consistent with a qualitative inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), we read the transcripts multiple times to identify potential themes related to coming out (i.e., we only coded text in the interview transcript when the discussion was about coming out). Next, we conducted open coding until saturation of emergent themes occurred. We then developed a preliminary coding structure that combined codes into overarching themes that best depicted the data. All of the transcripts were then analyzed a second time in

accordance with this structure. The first author completed coding of all the interviews for this study; a research assistant and the study's other authors reviewed the codes for coding discrepancies (i.e., disagreement with labels and missing and/or incorrect codes). Discrepancies were discussed until an agreement was reached.

FINDINGS

Our thematic analysis resulted in the identification of several unique aspects of coming out as a young bisexual woman. These themes included the following: (1) the presence of homophobia and biphobia, (2) the use of alternate identity terms to combat biphobia, (3) the viewpoint that a female bisexual orientation in the university context is for heterosexual male entertainment, (4) the need to assess for bisexual identity acceptance among lesbian or gay- and straight-identifying individuals, (5) the preference to approach coming out in a casual manner, (6) the ability to pass as heterosexual or lesbian when it fits the situation, (7) the perspective that bisexual identity is partially or incompletely homosexual, and (8) the resolute rejection of the disclosure imperative.

The Presence of Homophobia and Biphobia

Our participants frequently mentioned instances of homophobia and biphobia in the context of discussing coming out. First, we discuss experiences that are reflective of homophobia and biphobia. Then, we discuss how some participants chose to use alternate identity terms (i.e., pansexual, queer) to try and combat the effects of biphobia.

Instances of homophobia. Instances of homophobia tended to emerge when the women were discussing the same-sex attraction part of their bisexual identity. One woman felt that this is why a lesbian and a bisexual orientation were “equally wrong in (her) mind”: “I’m not supposed to be attracted to girls, basically.” Other women discussed potential rejections from their families if they were to participate in same-sex relationships:

I was kind of thinking, “You know, what if I don’t want to date guys, what if I just want to be with a girl?” And that was really hard for me—I think that’s why I was like, “I’m just not gonna date at all.” You know, because, if you’re actually, if you’re actually gonna like have a life with somebody, live with somebody, you know, you know, build and grow things together, you can’t really, I mean, keep that a secret. That’s, that’s, an open kinda thing and I, I can’t do that. You know? My family’s really important to me.

“Well, I thought I was turning lesbian and stuff and I’m like, ‘Oh no! My family’s gonna reject me ‘cause they expect me to . . . like a guy, get married, and have kids and stuff.’”

Another woman discussed rejection from her friends because of her same-sex relationship:

I had a girlfriend and my friends knew about it. And, you know, it wasn’t really supposed to be a big deal ‘til all of my people that I thought were my friends started, like, making fun of me and talking about me behind my back, spread rumors about me through the whole school. I got slammed into lockers, like literally, like I’d go home with bruises. Like, you know, and, it just got to the point that I didn’t even, you know, want to be in school anymore.

Perhaps the most common instance of homophobia, however, was that our participants were often concerned that they would be viewed by heterosexual women as sexual predators:

I think for a lot of straight people if you come off as okay, I’m identifying as something other than straight, it’s scary. because then they think, “Ohh, you’re going to hit on me, or your [sic] interested in me sexually that’s why you’re telling me.” And I think that freaks them out.

Instances of biphobia. In addition to discussing instances of homophobia, our participants frequently discussed biphobia, especially as it influenced their sense of self, expectations for how others would respond to their sexual identity, and how they understood others’ negative reactions to their bisexual identity disclosure. One woman discussed her difficulty with identifying as bisexual, especially when her peers joked about the term:

I also felt like I had to be one or the other, and I was kind of like, “well I’m in the middle, what does that mean?” and then bisexual was kind of a term that we made fun of—straight girls like getting drunk and making out with girls in front of their boyfriends for their own personal gratifi—like for the boy’s gratification. So it was kind of like “yeah okay you’re bi whatever.” So that was kind of what that meant.

Our participants were very aware of the existence of biphobia and often expressed this awareness when discussing how they presume others will respond to their bisexual identity:

I expect people to just say, “Oh it’s a phase.” You know, or “You just want to experiment, or you just want to do this, or you’re just attracted to girls when you’re drunk.” You know, I’ve heard people say that all the time.

I think my dad would just be, “Oh, you just haven’t decided yet, you know, you’re still young.” . . . I think he might have a harder time accepting that it could be either or.

One woman decided not to come out to her boyfriend because she did not believe he would understand her bisexual orientation, “I was afraid that . . . that he [her boyfriend] just wouldn’t understand it. So I haven’t told him.”

Other women experienced negative reactions to their bisexual identity disclosure that reflected stereotypes of bisexual people, “but the first two that I had, like, didn’t understand bisexuality, and like didn’t believe in it, and they’re like ‘wait, so you like girls and boys? Are you sure?’” and “When I came out as bisexual people just thought I was just experimenting, that I didn’t know, and like that’s just the reaction I got from most people.”

Use of Alternate Identity Terms to Combat the Effects of Biphobia

In response to instances of biphobia, a few women decided to use alternate identity terms that reflect their nonheterosexual identity. One woman discussed her decision to call herself ‘pansexual’ to avoid the effects of the negative connotations associated with the word ‘bisexual’:

Like, I used to identify—or I used to say I was bisexual, but my thing is, I don’t like to say I’m bisexual. Because I just realized that people had these horrid connotations with the word ‘bisexual.’ Once you say you’re bisexual, suddenly you become the slutty girl who makes out with everyone at the bar. Suddenly you become the barsexual, suddenly you become, you know, this person who just needs good dick or whatever. Suddenly you’re dirty to women that you like. That’s why I say pansexual.

Yet another woman discussed how she once identified as bisexual but because of the negative stereotypes she encountered, she chose to tell other people that sexual orientation should not matter:

So [after she came out] they thought that I was just experimenting or—whatever, and then, like I don’t know, I just thought about it more and then, I don’t know, I talked to other people like some of my friends who are gay and they—I kind of just realized that I don’t think it should matter so I kind of changed my view a little. . . . So then I started saying that it just—it shouldn’t matter or anything and then people accepted that rather than bisexual. They just think that—most people just thought I was just confused, which that’s just ridiculous.

A Female Bisexual Orientation in the University Context is for Heterosexual Male Entertainment

Our participants discussed how a female bisexual orientation is often understood by others as specific to the college experience (i.e., vs. viewing a bisexual orientation as an enduring pattern of attraction) and for the temporary satisfaction of heterosexual men only. One woman described the stereotype that bisexual women are only bisexual for the duration of college: “I think there’s kind of a stereotype out there that once you get into college you’re bisexual, and then once you graduate, you’re not.”

Likewise, another woman found that her family’s reaction to her bisexual identity disclosure was based on this stereotype: “They [the participant’s family] thought that because I’m in college I’m experimenting and that’s who I’ll be for the next year maybe.”

In addition to the notion that women are bisexual only during college, participants also discussed how their female bisexual sexual orientation was understood in the context of the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975). That is to say, many women recognized the existence of the heterosexual male fantasy of two women being intimate only for the purposes of heterosexual male pleasure. In addition to her sisters’ thinking that her bisexual sexual orientation was a phase, one polyamorous participant’s sister rationalized that the participant may “just [be] doing it [seeing other women] for her boyfriend.” Similarly, one woman reported that her female bisexual friend explained to the participant that, “Oh, my [the participant’s friend’s] boyfriend is okay with it as long as he has to be watching or you have a threesome.” A different participant discussed how the stereotype that all bisexual women are claiming a bisexual identity for the purposes of gaining attention from men changes the way she talks about her sexual identity:

Instead of saying like “Oh I got really drunk and kissed this girl who is really cute!” Like you’d say like “Oh I met a girl who is really cool and I could see myself with her.” Or something like that. You know it’s just—um . . . talk in a way that they will respect it as something real.

This participant seemed to be aware of the stereotype that bisexual women exist for men’s pleasure and that it discredits the existence of “real” female bisexual orientation. Indeed, one of our participants admitted that she used to ridicule straight women who were intoxicated and kissed girls in front of their boyfriends for their boyfriend’s personal gratification. Another participant offered the term ‘barsexuals’ to describe those women who go to bars and make out with other women to garner the attention of heterosexual men. This same participant explained how the behavior of these “barsexuals” influences the legitimacy of their bisexual identity: “Once you say you’re

bisexual, suddenly you become the slutty girl who makes out with everyone at the bar. Suddenly you become the barsexual.”

Another participant echoes a similar opinion that “barsexuals” work to invalidate a female bisexual orientation:

“You’re just attracted to girls when you’re drunk.” You know, I’ve heard people say that all the time. Not to me, but to other people. I know a lot of girls do do that, just kiss [girls] when they’re drunk. But I mean, I haven’t just done it [kiss girls] when I was drunk.

Assessing Acceptance of a Bisexual Orientation among Straight- and Gay- and Lesbian-Identifying Individuals

When discussing their coming-out experiences or their reasons for choosing not to come out, our participants expressed concern about being misunderstood and not accepted by heterosexual and lesbian or gay individuals. Many of the women described how other members of the LGBT community were among the first people with whom they shared their bisexual identity. One woman described how she would seek support from other bisexual people upon her identity disclosure, but indicated that she would not feel comfortable talking about her identity with heterosexually identified individuals:

Now, if they’re bisexual too [referring to the theoretical individual the participant is talking to], then I would start questioning them like, “What do you do? Do you have a boyfriend? How’s your boyfriend towards your life?” Like, “How do you deal with it?” That kind of whole thing, but if they’re straight, I’m just like, (whispers) “Okay, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Indeed, some of our participants discussed how they were only comfortable sharing their identity with other bisexual people, “I had told a few of my friends, but the only people I was comfortable telling were people who had already identified as bisexual.”

Although LGBT people were among the first with whom our women disclosed their bisexual identity to, many of our participants indicated their concern that gay and lesbian individuals do or would not fully understand and/or accept a bisexual orientation:

A lot of times, like, fully homosexual people, like gay and lesbian people don’t really understand how a person could be bi and not just straight, and people who are straight don’t understand how someone can be bi and either not just gay or not just straight.

I don't know, I guess I feel like on one hand, it's hard for me to come out. Oh I'm bisexual, but I have a relationship and it's with a guy. So I feel like a lot of people, especially maybe someone who is gay, would be like, "Come on, you have to choose sides here," or maybe not be as accepting because of that.

Some women recounted conversations with gay and lesbian friends that rendered a bisexual orientation invisible:

I go up to him [her gay male friend] and say, "What do you think of bisexuals?" And he's like, "They don't exist." And he's like, "Why, because your bisexual?" And I'm like, (in a quiet voice) "Yeah."

Like, she [her friend] is hardcore lesbian—you're either a lesbian, or you're straight, there is no in-between. And so she's just like, you know, she makes jokes about me and everything, but . . . she's like, "I don't get it [her bisexual orientation]." She can't get it.

In addition to our participants' discussions of perceived and actual rejections of their bisexual identity by gays and lesbians, many described how these experiences resulted in their feeling shunned and discredited by straight and gay people:

I think that a lot of people consider it a phase or it's people that just haven't made up their minds. And I think that I've gotten that from, maybe not equally, but from the gay community and the straight community. And . . . well that's . . . you're just confused, or "just pick a side already" sort of thing.

Casual Coming Out

Many of our participants chose to disclose their bisexual identity to others in rather casual ways. Casually coming out often meant disclosing their sexual orientation "naturally" through everyday conversation and with other people whom they perceived as comfortable and accepting. To approach coming out more casually also meant waiting for it to come up in an effort to not make it a big deal, "Coming out to people that I'm comfortable with isn't that big of a deal. It's not a big pronounced like, 'I'm coming out to you right now.'" Some women simply corrected others when they were incorrectly assumed to be heterosexual: "I got set up with a friend, and I was like, 'Mom, I just need twenty bucks, I'm going on a date.' And she was like, 'Oh, what's his name?' and I was like, 'Megan.'" Other women would casually come out by telling friends about their queer-related jobs, such as being a student worker at the LGBT resource center, or by talking about their gay

friends. Sometimes this style of coming out led others to perceive the women as gay instead of bisexual:

I was at a magazine store, like a Walgreen's or something, looking through the magazines and I didn't know who she was there was this picture of a gorgeous women in there and I was staring at her. I was just like, "Oh my god, she is beautiful." And [name of participant's female friend] was like, "What, are you a lesbian or something?" and I was like, "Well, kind of, if you want to look at it that way."

Choosing to come out casually seemed to take the pressure off women to make it a "big deal" and also allowed the disclosure to seem less "forced." Indeed, one woman felt that "some people would probably be a little less accepting if [she] just sat them down and told them everything" because [formal coming out] creates a "burden." Others indicated that a casual approach was more "comfortable" and enabled them to be "nonchalant" about it.

Despite the high number of women in our sample who chose to engage in casual coming out, some did choose to come out in a more formal manner. Formal coming out was much more direct (i.e., sitting someone down and telling them about their bisexual identity), involved planning, and was seen as "scary" by our participants. However, some participants bristled at the notion that formally coming out was necessary for people who are bisexual in contrast to people who identify as gay or lesbian:

I mean I've watched like *True Life: I'm Gay* (a reality show on MTV), or stuff like that, you know. And I see like the big, you know, (in a mocking tone) "When I get home or whatever, I just wanna like tell the parents, oh I got to talk to you" and then you sit down and you have this thing, oh my god, like they're about to cry and have this conversation. And I just feel like it's not like that. At all. When you're bi.

Later, this same participant elucidated her point by sharing that coming out bisexual is "not that big of a deal" in comparison to coming out gay or lesbian because other-sex attraction is still a part of her sexual identity:

Like being bi is just kind of different than being the full blown. Ya know? If you're like . . . and people don't take, like people kinda don't really—people think it's a phase. And people think you're going to grow out of it. And people think this or that. And so like, I just feel like . . . like it's just very different coming out. Because you still like guys, so it's not like you're completely different. But you like girls now too, so it's a little different.

She further elaborated this point by explaining that coming out is different when you are bi "because you still like guys, so you're still somewhat

normal in the other person's head" and that this "makes the whole [coming out] experience different because you feel like you shouldn't make a big deal about [a bisexual orientation]."

"Passing" as Straight or Lesbian

Another unique experience described by our young adult bisexual women was the ability "pass" (i.e., be perceived) as straight *or* lesbian. Many women discussed how they choose to pass as straight until in a serious relationship with a woman. One woman did not see the point of coming out unless this was the case, "If I met somebody of my same sex who I want to spend my life with, that's when I would come out. Other than that, I have no—I just don't see the point. I don't see why I need to." Others described how disclosure becomes relevant only in the context of being involved in non-heteronormative relationships more generally (e.g., disclosure is important in any same-sex relationship, despite level seriousness):

I just don't see it as something that's necessary for [other people] to know. If I decided to have a relationship with a girl, then I would come out, because it was way too hard trying to have a relationship with my ex-girlfriend when I wanted to keep everything a secret and she wanted everything to be public.

These women talked about being in a relationship with a woman as a right time to come out to others because they saw high cost and little benefit to coming out otherwise. Some seemed to be following this rule as a protective strategy. Specifically, some women chose not to come out to family and/or friends because they did not want to compromise these relationships:

I'm not comfortable with my whole family disowning me, so [my bisexual identity] is not something that I want public, you know and you know the way it is; you tell one person, and then the whole world knows, and I . . . you know, family is so important to me—I'm not one of these people that grew up with a huge family and has so many people there; I have my mom; I have my sister. You know . . . and I mean a few other select scattered relatives that I would actually call family. And I don't want to lose what little family I have over something that—to me—isn't even that important for them to know.

One woman felt as though she had to make a choice between concealing her bisexual identity or revealing it and losing contact with her family: "I only have two options here. You know, for them [her family] to not know

the whole me, or for them [her family] to know the whole me and never speak to me again.”

Although some women told others about their bisexual only after having established a relationship with a woman as a protective strategy, others decided to wait to come out until they were in a relationship with a woman because they thought others might be less likely to believe that they really were bisexual unless they are dating a woman. One woman described how living with a woman would be “more of a statement than [my] saying anything [about my bisexual orientation].” Further, she said, “That’s more of, ‘Look, this is for real,’ than just saying, ‘Oh, I’m bisexual whatever.’ You know, it’s more believable, it’s more, ‘Okay I can see it and I can understand it.”” Still others recognized that the “charade” of heterosexuality was most difficult to maintain when in a relationship with a woman for both practical (i.e., knowing others will eventually catch on) and psychological reasons (feeling bad for hiding or lying about their bisexual orientation, feeling that nondisclosure hinders relationship development).

Viewing a Bisexual Identity as Being Partially or Incompletely Homosexual

Some participants conceptualized their bisexual sexuality as being a mixture of homosexual and heterosexual parts and did not view their bisexual orientation outside this binary. For instance, in an earlier quote one participant referred to “fully homosexual people.” This language suggests that the participant understands her bisexual orientation is partially homosexual. A second participant used similar language when describing what it is like to be bisexual. Also in an earlier quote, a second participant used the phrase ‘full blown’ to describe homosexuality. Similar to the phrase “fully homosexual people,” it follows that this participant also conceptualizes her bisexual identity in relation to individuals who identify as lesbian or gay.

Rejection of the Disclosure Imperative

Clearly, women voiced concerns about being rejected upon a bisexual identity disclosure. Others were resolute about rejecting the disclosure imperative itself (see McLean, 2007). Some argued that they should not have to come out because heterosexual people do not have to come out, “How come it’s expected of me to disclose [a bisexual identity] when nobody else has to walk up and say, ‘Hi, I’m Sue, I’m straight.’ You know what I mean? Like why do I have to do that? Nobody else does.” Reticence toward coming out because of a belief that one should not have to come out because straight people do not have to come out was a fairly common stance among those who were less out about their sexual identity.

One participant explained that she chose to identify herself as “queer” in hopes that others would ask her about her identity:

It [bisexual] just was kind of a word that bugged me, so I went to queer because it was recognized as an umbrella term—like straight people could be queer you know? Anyone could be queer. And it forced people who were really interested to ask more questions to kind of figure things out.

Another participant pointed out the negative history associated with the term ‘queer’ but echoed a similar sentiment about placing the burden of gaining an understanding of one’s sexuality on the recipient of the disclosure:

Older generations [have] a big problem with the word itself and you know “people called me that when I was a kid—I got beat up, called a queer blah blah blah.” [In my opinion], people just have to ask more questions to determine what [queer] means.

This strategy of forcing others to ask questions about their sexuality to fully understand it might be considered subversive because it places the responsibility sexual identity disclosure on the other person. Certainly, coming out “queer” does not necessarily lead to an accurate understanding of the sexual identity of the queer person. In contrast, if she were to tell her family and friends that she is “bisexual” they will likely have a clearer understanding of what that means. In some manner, this tactic (of identifying as queer) allows the bisexual women to gain a sense of control over her sexual identity disclosure.

Despite reported benefits of coming out (i.e., not having to “keep up [a] charade”; remaining honest), many of the participants argued that sexual orientation does not or should not matter in terms of who a person is. Those believing that it is not important in that sense, then, discussed that there was, therefore, no reason to actively disclose their bisexual orientation to others. In response to the interviewer questioning whether the participant had disclosed her bisexual orientation to her sister, one participant shared, “I just, I don’t want to. I don’t even want to go there. I don’t—I don’t see why anybody needs to know about it.”

Participants’ assessments of the relative importance of sexual orientation and sexual orientation disclosure were also in large part a consideration of the potential cost of disclosure. Cost and reasons for nondisclosure that were mentioned included feeling like others will not be able to relate, not wanting to deal with awkward situations or negative reactions, not wanting to lose friends or family, and not wanting to become a burden to others or cause problems. Unfortunately, for many women the potential cost of coming out heavily outweighed the benefits.

DISCUSSION

This study is the first qualitative study to examine coming out among young adult bisexual women through the lens of intersectionality (Choo & Ferree, 2010). We identified eight themes that appear to be unique to the coming-out experiences of bisexual women: (1) the presence of homophobia and biphobia, (2) the use of alternate identity terms to combat biphobia, (3) the viewpoint that a female bisexual orientation in the university context is for heterosexual male entertainment, (4) the need to assess for bisexual identity acceptance among gay- and straight-identifying individuals, (5) the preference to approach coming out in a casual manner, (6) the ability to pass as heterosexual *or* lesbian when it fits the situation, (7) the perspective that bisexual identity is partially or incompletely homosexual, and (8) the resolute rejection of the disclosure imperative. We discuss these findings in the context of gender, biphobia, homophobia, and heteronormativity. First, we discuss the sexualization of women in relation to our finding that the participants understood others' perceptions of a bisexual orientation as specific to the university context and for heterosexual male entertainment only. Next, we examine the possibility that participants' rejection of the disclosure imperative may represent a subversive response to society at large. Following this discussion, we highlight the presence of biphobia and homophobia and how several of our findings appear to be in response to one prejudice or the other (i.e., in response to biphobia in particular or homophobia in particular). Finally, we conclude by contextualizing the findings with respect to our behaviorally heteronormative sample (i.e., most participants were dating men at the time of the interview).

Existing in the Social World as Bisexual Women

The findings from this study suggest that there are likely notable differences in coming out as a sexual minority that are dependent upon the individual's gender and sexual orientation. First, we discuss the sexualization of women and how this social context may influence the coming-out experiences of bisexual women. Second, we consider how this environment likely manifests itself differently in the coming-out processes of bisexual versus lesbian women.

The sexualization (i.e., viewing women as sexual objects to be evaluated in terms of their physical attractiveness; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) of women is demonstrated most prominently with the finding that a female bisexual orientation in the university context is for the purview of heterosexual men specifically for their entertainment. The notion that a female bisexual orientation exists for the temporary satisfaction of heterosexual men is likely the result of existing in the social world as a woman and bisexual. For instance, there are important differences in how heterosexually

identified men and women engage in and interpret their experiences with same-sex sexual performativity. Women reported being asked to participate in same-sex sexual behavior more often than men, and men were more likely than women to report having asked others to participate in such behavior (Esterline & Galupo, 2013). These findings further support the notion that same-sex sexual behavior is a significant target of male objectification. It has also been suggested that same-sex sexual behavior performed by heterosexually identified women may reflect a shift in culture towards the possibility of a compulsory bisexual orientation (i.e., a requirement that women identify as bisexual to fit within social norms; Fahs, 2009). Bisexually identified men indubitably do not experience this degree of sexualization; and therefore, sexual objectification appears to be a unique factor that likely influences bisexual women's approaches to and experiences of bisexual identity disclosure.

In addition, there are important differences in how heterosexually identified men and women engage in and interpret their experiences with same-sex sexual performativity. Women reported being asked to participate in same-sex sexual behavior more often than men, and men were more likely than women to report having asked others to participate in such behavior (Esterline & Galupo, 2013). These findings further support the notion that same-sex sexual behavior is a significant target of male objectification. It has also been suggested that same-sex sexual behavior performed by heterosexually identified women may reflect a shift in culture towards the possibility of a compulsory bisexual orientation (i.e., a requirement that women identify as bisexual to fit within social norms) (Fahs, 2009). Bisexually identified men indubitably do not experience this degree of sexualization; and therefore, sexual objectification appears to be a unique factor that likely influences bisexual women's approaches to and experiences of bisexual identity disclosure.

The social context of the sexualization of women likely influences the coming-out experiences of bisexual women; however, we also argue that this sexualization may be experienced differently by bisexual women in comparison to lesbian women. Specifically, the finding that others often understood their bisexual orientation as specific to the university context (i.e., instead of an enduring pattern of attraction) and for male satisfaction and attention only, differentiates the experiences of bisexually identified women from the accounts of lesbian-identified women because bisexual women are presumably open to sexual relationships with men. That is, lesbian and bisexual women are subjected to male objectification, particularly with respect to same-sex sexual acts; however, a critical difference for bisexual women is that the heterosexual male observers realistically have the possibility of engaging sexually with bisexual women whereas this is not likely the case for lesbian women.

Rejection of the Disclosure Imperative as a Subversive Act

Many of the participants in this study described what amounts to rejecting the disclosure imperative (McLean, 2007). That is to say, they maintain that they should not have to come out bisexual and that sexual orientation should not matter in terms of a person's essential identity. In our mind, this imperative is a function of living within a society in which a sexual minority orientation must be justified and explained or performed according to a set of monosexual expectations. That is to say, this pressure to declare oneself either heterosexual or lesbian or gay comes from both monosexual populations and is enacted in ways that reflect homophobic and biphobic orientations.

This finding may reflect a cohort effect or may even be an artifact of our interviewing younger adults who are in the midst of this process rather than older ones who are reflecting upon it retrospectively. We argue that a rejection of the disclosure imperative in the case of our young adult sample might also represent a subversive response to society at large. Specifically, the women may be rejecting society's expectation that they need to reveal their bisexual identities as a way to retaliate against a society that oppresses them. We do not mean to say that rejecting the disclosure imperative subverts sexual prejudice necessarily, but that they may be repudiating this imperative as a way to express their disapproval of U.S. culture; and therefore this act may be interpreted as an attempt to subvert cultural expectations.

Another perspective is that the women may have rejected the disclosure imperative because they have adopted queer theory's assumptions that sexual identity is a social construct and that the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual attraction is not stable (Fricke, 2010). A critical interpretation is that their resolute rejection of the disclosure imperative might be an attempt to dismantle the identity model altogether in accordance with queer theory's perspective on sexual identity. Indeed, our data only allow us to speculate.

The Presence of Biphobia and Homophobia

Consistent with previous research (Herek, 2002; Klesse, 2011; Ochs, 2011; Yost & Thomas, 2012), we found that biphobia is pervasive, including in conversations about coming out to family and friends as a bisexually identified young adult woman. In addition, our findings revealed that homophobia is also prominent in these discussions. First, we argue that several of our themes are likely reactions to biphobia in particular, including the need to evaluate acceptance of a bisexual orientation among straight and gay and lesbian identifying individuals, casual coming out, and the use of alternative identity labels. In addition, we contend that one theme in particular appears to be a reaction to homophobia (i.e., the decision to come out as bisexual only after having established a relationship with a male).

In contrast, we interpret another theme to be representative of internalized homophobia (i.e., the view that a bisexual orientation is incompletely or partially homosexual), instead of being a reaction to it.

Bisexual identity stigma compelled women to critically evaluate whether potential disclosure targets who identify as either heterosexual or gay or lesbian would be understanding and accepting of a bisexual orientation in particular. For example, viewed from the lens of bisexual identity stigma, casual coming out might represent a way for women to give others some indication of their nonheterosexual identity without having to completely commit to coming out because the act of coming out casually typically did not include direct communication about the woman's sexual orientation and, therefore, required some inference on behalf of the receiver. We might then interpret the decision of these women to engage in casual coming out as a way to protect themselves from the consequences of stigma (e.g., specifically, bisexual identity rejection).

Yet another adaptive strategy reported by the participants in this study was the use of alternative identity labels (e.g., pansexual, queer as opposed to bisexual) to combat biphobia. Indeed, bisexual individuals have reported experiencing more sexual prejudice from lesbian and gay individuals than those who identified as pansexual, queer, and sexually fluid (Mitchell, Davis, & Galupo, 2014). It may be that choosing an alternative identity term is a way to combat stigma from monosexual others as well as to dampen the internalization of negative stereotypes the label, bisexual, elicits. Of course, prejudices based on labels are problematic even as we acknowledge that the use of other plurisexual labels outside of the bisexual moniker provides women with the opportunity to express their sexuality in a more nuanced way.

In addition to the use of alternative identity labels to combat biphobia, researchers have indicated that nonexplicit bisexual identity disclosure plays a role in maintaining a sense of perceived similarities (i.e., a shared attraction to men) within bisexual–heterosexual friendships (Galupo, 2007). Only when the bisexual friend was partnered with another woman did their bisexual identity become explicitly acknowledged. This pattern of allowing behavior (e.g., dating a woman) to dictate whether the bisexual friend's bisexual identity is directly recognized has important implications for the validation of bisexual sexual orientation (Galupo, Sailer, & St. John, 2004) and arguably, perceived social support. It would seem, then, that heterosexism (manifested by minimization of the bisexual friend's same-sex attractions), in addition to biphobia, influences the disclosure of a bisexual identity, at least in the context of bisexual–heterosexual friendships (Galupo, 2008).

Although the impact of biphobia has already been discussed in the context of bisexual coming out (Knous, 2005; McLean, 2007), we argue that homophobia also needs to be considered in this context, especially given its prominence in the participants' discussions concerning coming out to family

and friends as bisexual. Many of the women were dating men at the time of the interviews and thus enjoyed the privilege of being able to conceal their identities. Waiting to come out only after having established a relationship with a woman seems to represent in part, a reaction to homophobia in particular because these women benefit from heterosexual privilege to shield themselves from discrimination. This particular circumstance underscores the need to better understand the coming out process among bisexual individuals and how it likely differs from gay men and lesbians' experiences in a cultural context that privileges heterosexuality. Choosing to pass as straight when dating men in conjunction with our finding that the participants view a bisexual orientation as partially or incompletely homosexual suggests the internalization of homophobia. That is, the participants viewed homosexuality as the benchmark by which they evaluate the validity of their sexuality instead of choosing to view a bisexual orientation as valid in its own right.

Contextualizing a Heteronormative Sample

Compared to others' studies of bisexual identity experiences, this study is unique because many of the women who volunteered to participate in this study of bisexual identity were not currently in relationships with women at the time of the interviews even though the majority (e.g., 15 out of 17) had had same-sex sexual encounters or had previously been involved same-sex relationships. This context is important to consider in the interpretation of our findings. Typically, sexual and gender minorities experience the strongest effects of stigma when they are actively "out." For example, lesbian and bisexual female youth age 14 to 21 who had self-identified as lesbian or bisexual or who had disclosed their sexual orientation to others reported more lifetime sexual orientation victimization than those who did not (D'Augelli, 2003). In line with this, our data suggest that one does not need to act on same-sex sexual desires (e.g., by dating women) nor actively disclose one's bisexual orientation to experience the consequences (e.g., felt homophobia and biphobia) of having same- and other-sex attractions. The implication of having both types of attractions is that bisexually identified women still need to manage biphobia and homophobia regardless of their level of "outness" and relationship status (e.g., same-sex or other-sex). Despite the fact that many chose to maintain a heteronormative presentation by choosing not to come out to family members, and so on unless they were in a committed relationship with a woman, all of our participants still chose to disclose their nonheterosexual identity to at least one other individual (although many did not disclose to many more people). Therefore, we might conclude that our participants viewed their sexual identity as an important component of their lives; yet, to effectively cope with a stigmatizing social environment they chose to only disclose to those whom they perceive as accepting in addition to electing to date men over women.

Study Limitations

To our knowledge, this study is the first qualitative, inductive thematic analysis of bisexual coming-out experiences to focus only on young adult women and to consider bi- and homophobia in the interpretation of findings. Although this study has yielded important information about the unique experiences of young midwestern bisexual women's public coming-out process, like all studies, it is not without limitations. Indeed, we do not intend for our findings to be representative of the broader population of women who identify as bisexual because our sample was limited to one particular geographic context within the Midwest. However, we contend that our findings may be transferable to other bisexual women in contexts in which there is little political will, collectively, to redress deficiencies in LGBT rights. It is entirely possible that our findings are less transferable to locations that are known to have a supportive atmosphere for sexual minorities (e.g., San Francisco, California and New York City).

The recruitment and enrollment context is important to consider. On the one hand, the university from which we recruited has been ranked in the top 50 of LGBT-friendly colleges and universities nationwide (Campus Pride, 2014). On the other, recruitment was hampered by the frequent removal of recruitment flyers from campus bulletin boards. We do not know whether our flyers were systematically targeted, but there is a real possibility that they were removed with the intention of suppressing our work. Additionally, we had a relatively high no-show rate (e.g., seven out of 24 women) and those who did participate were relatively homogenous in terms of ethnic background.

Future Research Directions

Our analysis allowed for the emergence of important themes related to the bisexual women's coming-out experiences. Additionally, the impact of bi- and homophobia on the coming-out process may serve as a reminder that these prejudices are prominent and need to be taken into consideration by all researchers and practitioners who work with bisexual populations, including with those bisexual women who are currently in a relationship with a man. Extant bisexual identity models do not account for differences in coming-out experiences that may arise as a result of being in a relationship or a specific relationship type (i.e., same-sex or other-sex, nonmonogamous, etc.) or be dependent upon the context into which one is coming out (e.g., if one is presumed to be heterosexual vs. if one is presumed to be lesbian). Other researchers should attempt to fill in this gap.

Additionally, subsequent studies should be conducted related to the intersection of gender and a bisexual orientation and how these identities influence the identity development process more broadly. This study represents

one of the first attempts to disentangle the likely effects of gender on the bisexual coming-out process. Other researchers should consider conducting a study that specifically asks bisexual women to reflect on the role that gender plays in their experiences. Furthermore, it may be fruitful for researchers to compare the experiences of bisexual women and men to further explicate the differences in their experiences related to the bisexual coming-out process.

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APPENDIX: SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Meaning of Bisexuality

- Some people identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, and other names. Could you talk to me about how you identify and what that means to you?

- Regardless of whether they know your sexual orientation, what do you think being bisexual means to your family? To your friends or co-workers? To fellow students?

Bisexual Identity Development

Most people are raised to be heterosexual or to become attracted to members of the opposite sex. What are your memories about the time when you first became aware of being attracted to girls or women? How old were you? (Coming-out story)

- How did you feel?
- What did you do about it?

Since the time(s) when you recognized that you had an attraction to women, when did you begin to realize that you were not heterosexual?

Describe the process you went through before finally telling yourself you were bisexual? What did identifying as bisexual mean to you then? What does it mean to you now? What changed after you identified as bisexual?

Disclosure of Sexual Orientation

Now, I want to discuss your experiences telling other people about your sexual identity. Sometimes, coming out can be a process in which a person gives some indication that they are not heterosexual first before they declare being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Who have you told of your non-heterosexual orientation?

For those who have told at least one individual:

When/Why did you decide to come out?

Who did you tell first? What happened? How did you identify (e.g., bi-curious, unsure, bisexual, lesbian, etc.)?

Who do you think it was important to tell? Why?

Who have you regretted telling? Why?

How have your relationships changed with those you have told?

For those who have not told anyone:

Why have you not come out to anyone?

Who would you first like to tell? Why?

Who do you hope to avoid telling? Why?

What do you expect to happen if important others find out?

Have you ever lied to an important person about your sexual orientation?

What happened?

For those who report being “out” to nearly everyone:

How does it happen that people know you are bisexual?

What reactions do you get when people know your sexual orientation? Do you talk to people about it?

Is there anything you would like to add that we did not get to?

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