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Sarah Jen

Discourses of Bisexuality among Older Women

Sarah Jen

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Reading Committee:

Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, Chair

Taryn Lindhorst

Nancy Hooyman

Susan Kemp

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Sarah Jen

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen

School of Social Work

Purpose: Older bisexual women report differences in experiences over the life course as well as significant health disparities compared to heterosexual, lesbian, and gay counterparts. In-depth qualitative analyses are needed to provide a better understanding of how older women construct their bisexual identities in later life as well as how their identity negotiation process is informed by larger social structures. This study applies a Foucauldian discursive approach to conceptual framing and analysis, supplemented by critical feminist and life course perspectives, in order to analyze how older bisexual women construct bisexual identities within their particular discursive and historical context.

Method: Study participants (N=12) were recruited to complete in-person interviews including creation of a life history timeline and reflective questions focused on their

bisexual identity. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis was applied to analyze the specific linguistic tools and broader discourses that participants drew on when constructing their bisexual identities as well as the historical influences that impact their use of language.

Findings: Two divergent groups of women, the Early Emergers and Mature Migrators, emerged based on the ways in which they constructed bisexuality and by the timing of their reported attractions to other women. The Early Emergers construct bisexuality as a stable, biological concept while the Mature Migrators challenge this narrative by emphasizing the fluidity of sexuality through discourses of migration spurred by “light bulb” moments. Although participants described feelings of ambivalence toward bisexuality as a label, they also constructed bisexuality as creating freedom and possibility in the full context of their lives.

Discussion and Implications: This study points to the unique contributions of discourse analyses in revealing patterns in constructions of bisexuality among older women as well as the need for scholars to critically and intentionally contribute to discourses of bisexuality. Practitioners who seek to better support this population should allow clients to describe their sexual identity and the meaning behind that identity within the full context of their lives in order to validate and recognize the unique life patterns among older bisexual women. Future research would benefit from more accurate and nuanced ways of operationalizing sexual identities and life patterns.

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Dedications

For all of the wonderfully, radically queer women who came before me.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) older adults have been recognized by the Institute of Medicine (2011) as an understudied and underserved population. While the acronym “LGBTQ” implies a common identity or experience, important subgroup differences are often overlooked in empirical literature (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010). In particular, empirical research rarely explores the experiences of older bisexual individuals separately from those of lesbians and gay men (Jones, 2012; Kaestle & Ivory, 2012; Scherrer, 2013), an oversight that reflects the relative invisibility of their social position both within LGBTQ communities and the broader population (Brewster & Moradi, 2010).

When separate analyses or comparisons are carried out with older bisexual research participants, important differences and disparities are revealed. Notably, bisexual older adults report a less positive or more conflicted sense of their sexual identities, which influences their access to social support (Erosheva, Kim, Emlet, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016) and health-related outcomes compared to lesbian and gay counterparts (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Shiu, Bryan, Goldsen, & Kim, 2016; Kertzner, Meyer, Frost, & Stirratt, 2009; Needham & Austin, 2010). Additionally, when gender differences are examined, older bisexual men and women report different life sequences, key life events, and health-related outcomes (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017). This literature indicates the need to examine older bisexual men and women’s lives as distinctively informed by their relative positioning within societal structures of

ageism, heterosexism, and biphobia (Scherrer, 2017); thus, this study specifically centers the experiences of older bisexual women.

Despite the need to understand and interpret these experiences in context, the historical and discursive environment surrounding older bisexual women's lives is largely unexamined in existing literature (Jones, in press). Due to the social forces that render bisexuals marginalized from heterosexuals and monosexual (attracted to a single sex or gender) minorities, bisexuals occupy a different discursive space in terms of the language and discourses they draw on in defining themselves and their experiences (Eisner, 2013; Owen, 2011; Rust, 1993). Bisexual individuals may also take up a radically different set of personal and political interests, which can in turn make their connections to the mainstream LGBTQ community tenuous and troubled (Eisner, 2013; McClean, 2008). Therefore, a better understanding of how bisexual individuals make sense of their bisexual identities is needed in order to reveal the influence of context and culture on the life experiences and health outcomes associated with that identity.

To fill this gap in existing literature, this study takes a critical and contextualized approach to the language and discursive tools available to and used by older bisexual women in making sense of their own bisexual identities. The theoretical and analytic framing draws on Foucauldian concepts of discourse, language, power, and subjectivity (Foucault, 1978; 1980; 1983), which are particularly useful for examining identity construction and negotiation (Lamers & Williams, 2015). I also draw on Foucault's later work and a critical feminist lens to speak to issues of agency and resistance, which were absent from Foucault's earlier writing. This framework is combined with the life course perspective to create a theoretical bridge between historical context and the timing and unfolding of individual lives (Elder, 1994). By applying Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

to semi-structured interviews with older bisexual women, this research explores the influence of external power structures at various levels (i.e., biphobia, internalized bias, invisibility) as well as the agency and creativity of women in *choosing* the language they use to write or speak their own stories into history (Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 1976). This study thus offers a crucial first step toward developing a better understanding of older women's bisexual identities, which will inform more nuanced interpretations of factors related to the life experiences and equitable health achievement of this population.

Motivation for the Study

At the age of 16, I started volunteering in a skilled-nursing facility (SNF) and quickly fell in love with the work, knowing that in some capacity, I would spend my life bearing witness to the lives of older people. By the time I had graduated with my Master's in Social Work, I had worked in over 20 different SNFs as a volunteer, caregiver, or social worker. A common issue emerged in all of these settings: we were failing to support residents' sexual needs and to provide culturally responsive spaces for older sexual minorities. It was this realization that motivated me to pursue a PhD in social work to produce research that would support increased competency around sexual issues of older adults, from micro interactions to policy development.

In 2014, I began working as a doctoral research assistant (RA) for *Aging with Pride: National Health, Aging, and Sexuality/Gender Study* (NHAS), a groundbreaking longitudinal study of 2,450 midlife and older (age 50+) LGBTQ-identified adults with representation in all U.S. census divisions. NHAS has had an impact at a national level, revealing that many individuals are aging in good health (Fredriksen-Goldsen, et al., 2014) while also specifying key risk and protective factors that shape

their experience of health disparities when compared to non-LGBTQ counterparts, such as life time discrimination and victimization, internalized stigma, and social support (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim et al., 2013). Unique health-related patterns also emerged in the data, particularly among transgender (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Cook-Daniels et al., 2013) and bisexual (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim et al., 2013) participants, who are often considered minorities within a minority population.

As a younger bisexual woman, the significant disparities I saw among midlife and older bisexual women in NHAS were particularly troubling for me, in part because they were so unexpected. Since coming out in my late teens, I have been told that bisexuals were privileged by the safety of passing and that, particularly those of us with other-sex partners, we had no need for or claim to queer community or our own political and social issues. However, I distinctly remember holding the 20-page survey of an older bisexual woman in my hands while entering her responses into our data management system and thinking I was seeing my future right in front of me: a male partner, a history of trauma and resulting anxiety, a distancing from organized religion, moderate levels of social support, and so on. Reading these facts and converting them into numbers gave me the overall sense that things were okay for this woman, but not great. I began to wonder, how my own aging future could look different.

From findings of NHAS, among other studies, there are clearly more areas to explore in order to improve access to equitable health for older bisexuals, as well as increasing our understanding of their lives at a more detailed level. Studies have suggested that individual factors such as internalized stigma (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2015), high rates of trauma, and negative coping mechanisms (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Matthews et al., 2014) might explain these disparities as well as

having smaller social networks with fewer sexual minority contacts (Erosheva et al., 2016). Although these quantitative studies have begun to piece together important factors through which bisexual lives begin to veer away from good health and well-being, they do not offer an in-depth understanding of how these processes unfold over the life course or how bisexual individuals make sense of their sexual identities. Personal narratives, life stories, and qualitative studies are needed to offer a better understanding of how bisexual identities are constructed and experienced.

As a critical feminist scholar, I have been drawn to life stories, holding a strong belief in the importance of felt theory (Million, 2009) and language as mechanisms of power and resistance. I began to think about how bisexual women speak about themselves, their identities, and each other in ways that reveal our biases, the damaging messages we come to believe even as we seek to push them away, the ways that we slip into maintaining and benefitting from heteronormativity (or the assumption of heterosexuality), and the ways we degrade other bisexuals for their promiscuity or the transphobia embedded in their conceptions of bisexuality, creating fractures among us. I started to wonder what we could learn by examining language in use, not only as a mechanism through which we reveal our internalized “stuff,” but also one that LGBTQ people have used to take agency in the form of reclaiming and self-definition. In the words of Hélène Cixous, who promoted the need for women to tell their own stories, “writing is precisely the very possibility of the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous et al., 1976, p. 879). She describes a radical break, a jolt of imagination that allows us to think and speak outside common ways of knowing and being. It was this inspiration that brought me to explore how older women talk about

bisexual identities and the broader societal messages they draw on in doing so, not only to understand what we can learn about our subconscious thoughts and biases, but also to inform a radical break from the discursive patterns that limit our aging futures.

Research Questions

The goal of the current study is to explore how older bisexual women discursively construct and make meaning out of their bisexual identities in their particular historical and discursive contexts. Two research questions guide the study:

1. What linguistic tools do older bisexual women use to construct their bisexual identities and what broader discourses inform their language use?
2. How does historical context influence their use of language and broader discourses of bisexuality?

These questions emphasize the importance of language use and point to discourse analysis as a potentially powerful method through which to examine the narratives of older bisexual women. This study contributes a preliminary step toward more nuanced interpretations of quantitative findings by accounting for the full context of women's lives and identity construction. A better understanding of bisexual identities can also inform how we make sense of the various individual, social, and societal factors that are associated with the health and well-being of older bisexual women over the life course.

Study Overview

In Chapter 1, I have described how my motivation for pursuing this line of research evolved as well as the research questions that guide the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of current research on bisexuality and identity, including the potential

gains to be made in this area by applying a discursive approach and accounting for the broader sociocultural context of older bisexual women's lives. In light of the importance of identity in this literature, I present historical shifts in understandings of bisexuality and the definition of bisexuality applied in this study. The conceptual framing is presented in Chapter 3, beginning with an overview of my theoretical influences. I define relevant discursive concepts, such as discourse, language, power, discursive objects, and subjectivities, particularly drawing on the later work of Foucault and critical feminist theory to connect this lens to bisexual lives and create space for resistance. I then take a discursive approach to the life course perspective to describe how a more complex understanding of language within individual lives and historical times can better contextualize constructions of bisexual identities. Chapter 4 presents the methods including methodological considerations, study procedures, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) as an analytic method, and ending with a brief summary of the findings to introduce the following two chapters. In Chapters 5, I explore the divergent ways in which two groups of women, the Early Emergers and Mature Migrators, construct their sexual identity, attractions, and behaviors and the cultural influences that inform these constructions. In Chapter 6, I illustrate that although participants had ambivalent feelings about "bisexual" as a label, they also describe bisexuality as a source of freedom, allowing them to lead non-traditional lives with a sense of openness and possibility. The study concludes with Chapter 7, describing the limitations of the study as well as discussing findings in the context of prior research and implications for research and practice.

CHAPTER 2

BISEXUALITY – CURRENT RESEARCH AND HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Chapter 2 begins by reviewing current research on bisexuality, particularly highlighting the experiences of women and older adults and the role of identity in shaping the lived experience of bisexuality. In light of this research, I discuss the potential contributions of a discursive approach to bisexual identity construction and negotiation. Next, I review key discursive shifts that have impacted present constructions of bisexuality and how those shifts inform the definition applied in this study. This definition will be combined with the larger conceptual framing in the Conceptual Model presented in Chapter 3.

Current Research on Bisexuality and Identity

Bisexuality studies is a small but growing field of empirical research, including estimates of the size and demographic composition of the population, comparisons with other populations or among bisexual subgroups, and distinctive life experiences and health-related outcomes. Most empirical research examines the experiences of individuals who identify as bisexual, which is typically defined as experiencing attraction to people of multiple sexes or genders (Eisner, 2013). Recent estimates indicate that bisexual-identified men and women make up a larger proportion of the adult population than gay- and lesbian-identified individuals combined, constituting about 3.5% of the U.S. population age 18 and older, while up to 11% report attractions to

multiple genders without claiming a bisexual identity (Gates, 2011; Herbenick et al., 2010).

Women are more likely to identify as bisexual (Chandra, Mosher, & Copen, 2011; Gates, 2011; Hill, Sanders, & Reinisch, 2016) or to express bisexual attractions compared to men (Hoburg, Konik, Williams, & Crawford, 2004). Bisexual women also report life events and health-related outcomes that are distinct from those of bisexual men (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Clark, & Jen, in progress) or from lesbians and gay men (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017). These distinctions are informed by their social positioning (e.g., race, gender, class, etc.) within the interconnected structures of sexism, heterosexism, and biphobia, among others (Eisner, 2013; Fahs, 2009; Klesse, 2011). This intersectional perspective, inspired by bisexual activist and writer Shiri Eisner (2013), informs the choice to focus this study on bisexual women.

The added focus on *older* bisexual women introduces their particular historical context and social positioning in later life as relevant aspects of their experience, placing this research not only within LGBTQ literature, but also within the field of social gerontology. Although bisexuality has become increasingly common and accepted in many Western countries, researchers note the continued invisibility of the history, lives, and experiences of older bisexual people (Jones, 2011; Westwood & Lowe, 2017). To fill this gap in research and cultural understandings, this study focuses specifically on women age 60 and older, a population on and for which there is particularly little sexuality-based research (DeLamater, 2012).

While bisexual adults in general report a greater prevalence of depression, anxiety, and poorer social well-being compared to lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adults (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christensen, 2002; Kertzner et al., 2009), recent

research has also illustrated health disparities specific to bisexual women, including consistent reports of poorer mental health and quality-of-life when compared to lesbians (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Balsam, K. F., & Mincer, 2010; Kertzner et al., 2009; Needham & Austin, 2010). Higher levels of anxiety among bisexual women are also associated with negative health behaviors, predicting a higher likelihood of being a current smoker and use of illicit substances compared to lesbians (Matthews et al., 2014; Wilsnack et al., 2008). Although research on older bisexual individuals is more limited, recent analyses have found that older bisexual men and women also report worse mental and physical health than lesbians and gay men (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2016). They also experience different patterns of life events, such as coming out later in life and having more varied past romantic partners (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017).

Intersectional identities of race and class also contribute to negative health outcomes among bisexual older adults (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2016). African American and Hispanic older LGBTQ people of color have reported higher levels of discrimination due to their sexual orientation and less identity affirmation compared to non-Hispanic Whites (Kim, Jen, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017). These issues may be complicated by a lack of resources as well, since LGBTQ older adults of color are more likely to live in poverty and report lower educational attainment than non-Hispanic Whites (Kim & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Kim, Jen, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017).

Identity as a Key Experience and Explanatory Factor

There are several possible explanations for these differences and disparities, many of which are related to how bisexual identities are experienced and socially

perceived. Although being bisexual has some limited benefits in terms of passing and accessing heterosexual privilege, that privilege often comes at the cost of invisibility. Bisexual women commonly report the challenge of maintaining a bisexual identity in the context of relationships with men, describing how assumed heterosexuality erases or invalidates their past relationships with women (Hartman-Linck, 2014). This invisibility is also reinforced as the stability or reality of bisexual identities are often questioned or challenged because they threaten to disrupt normalized and dualistic understandings of sexuality (Eisner, 2013; Klesse, 2011).

When bisexual individuals are visible, they face anti-polysexual sentiment, termed “biphobia” (Jones, 2010) or “binegativity” (Eliason, 2001; Klesse, 2011), which result in discrimination, negative stereotypes, and conflicted social interactions both inside and outside of LGBTQ communities (Carr, 2011; McLean, 2008). A small number of qualitative studies with bisexual participants illustrate commonly experienced stereotypes such as expectations of promiscuity and assumptions that bisexuals are untrustworthy as sexual partners or political allies (McLean, 2008). These dynamics contribute to identity confusion or ambivalence, lack of identity cohesion or valence, and higher rates of internalized stigma among bisexual men and women (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Battle, Harris, Donaldson, & Mushtaq, 2015; Hoang, Holloway, & Mendoza, 2011; Kertzner et al., 2009). Bisexuals are also less likely to state that their sexual identity is important to them or to view their bisexuality as a positive aspect of their lives compared to other sexual minorities (Pew Research Center, 2003). More specifically, bisexual women report more sexual identity confusion (Rust, 1993) and a less positive sense of their sexuality compared to lesbians (Israel & Mohr, 2004; Paul, 1984).

Beyond psychological impacts, binegativity also contributes to bisexuals feeling that they hold a less valued or more tenuous place in LGBTQ communities compared to lesbians and gay men (Jones, 2012; McLean, 2008). Because of these negative experiences, many bisexuals choose to conceal their identity and may not engage in LGBTQ environments, resulting in continued invisibility and a lack of connection with other LGBTQ individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; McLean, 2008). The challenge of finding a sense of belonging can be even more complex for non-Hispanic White individuals who report tension between communities of color and LGBTQ communities (Battle et al., 2015).

Although most existing research on bisexuality is limited to adult samples, older adults report similar negative experiences associated with bisexual identities. Older bisexual women report higher levels of internalized stigma, more concealment of their sexual identity and smaller and less diverse social networks compared to older lesbians (Erosheva et al., 2015; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim et al., 2013). These factors contribute directly and indirectly to poorer mental and physical health (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2016). It is also worth noting that the limited data available regarding the experiences of bisexual identities is drawn from samples that are largely non-Hispanic White, U.S.-born, and of middle class status or higher, necessitating a more intentional intersectional approach to research with this population (Eisner, 2013).

Potential Contributions of Discourse Analysis

Quantitative studies have contributed preliminary findings regarding older bisexual women's differences in life patterns and health disparities compared to other populations. However, additional qualitative research is needed to better understand

how the key factors of identity and social positioning contribute to these findings. A preliminary step requires that we examine the ways in which bisexual identities are constructed and understood in order to make sense of their impact on their lives. Additionally, structural and historical factors have received very little attention, meaning that our current understanding of bisexual identities is often divorced from the larger context around bisexual lives (Jones, in press). As Marmor (1980) has argued, reported health disparities are not the result of sexual identities in isolation, but rather due to the socialization process around sexuality to which individuals are exposed and the material impact of those processes. Thus, this gap in the literature poses a necessary area for further development.

As a preliminary step toward addressing these gaps, this study takes a discursive approach to conceptual framing and analysis of semi-structured in-person interviews with older bisexual women. Discourse analysis has not been applied to interviews with a bisexual population to date to the best of my knowledge. However, this analytic method has the potential to reveal conscious and unconscious internalized processes through which societal messages influence individual constructions of identity as evidenced by everyday uses of language (Goergaca & Avdi, 2012). As Chapters 3 and 4 will further discuss, this study specifically applies a Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse and analytic method, which offer useful concepts and analytic tools for examining socially constructed identities (Hakeem, 2010; Wallis & Singh, 2014) and social positioning (Hanna, 2014; Lamers & Williams, 2015; Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015) within the broader context of power dynamics in society.

Although discourse analysis has not been applied to interviews with bisexual individuals, some qualitative studies and reviews of literature have revealed the

potential for discursive interpretation in their findings. In interviews with young adults of a variety of sexual identities, participants maintained the invisibility of bisexuality “by expecting bisexuals to meet a list of difficult criteria” (e.g., equal attraction to or having had relationships with men and women), thereby raising the “bar so high that it became almost impossible for anyone to be a ‘real’ bisexual” (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013, p. 204). A literature review of medical research with bisexual participants also revealed that one-fifth of included articles depicted bisexuals as an “infection bridge” with the potential to carry sexually transmitted diseases between heterosexual and homosexual circles of contact, illustrating a medical discourse of bisexuality (Kaestle & Ivory, 2012). To name a resistive discourse, bisexual participants in a recent study in the UK described their imagined aging futures, providing optimistic counter-narratives to heterosexual life sequences with the potential to disrupt traditional views of what it means to age well (Jones, 2011).

While these studies did not center discourse in their conceptual framing nor did they apply a discourse analytic method, there is clear potential for discursive interpretation of their findings. Building on this potential, the current study offers an intentional discursive analysis of older bisexual women’s everyday language use in order to explicate the historical context and dynamics of power that might influence their identity construction and negotiation.

Discursive Shifts in Constructions of Bisexuality

As bisexual identities and the social perception of these identities are key sources of psychological and interpersonal conflict for bisexual individuals, it is crucial that this study examines the historical and discursive contexts around understandings of

bisexuality in more detail. Inspired by a Foucauldian approach to history, I identify key historical shifts in societal constructions of bisexuality that might influence the lived experience of bisexual identities as well as explaining how those shifts inform the definition of bisexuality in this study. While Foucault did not provide a method for analyzing qualitative interview data, he did illustrate what a historical analysis might look like. In the *History of Sexuality* volumes I-III (1978, 1980, 1983), Foucault uncovered historical foundations of contemporary understandings of sexuality, producing a “history of the present” (1978). This method begins from the present discourse surrounding a particular topic and then reviews chronological historical shifts, revealing layers of history that provide a foundation for understanding the present.

The Present

There is a tension in the current literature between two negative experiences of bisexual identities. One source of stress and social marginalization stems from the invisibility of bisexuality (Hartman, 2006; Klesse, 2011; McLean, 2008), and a second from the hypervisibility of bisexual individuals as unwelcome and untrustworthy romantic partners and political allies (Carr, 2011; Eliason, 2001). However, these empirical findings do not offer a detailed understanding of how bisexuality is defined or how bisexual identities have come to be associated with these two divergent experiences. Thus, the empirical literature on bisexual lives and identities is disconnected from the literature that seeks to make meaning out of bisexuality as a construct, thereby limiting our ability to address the complexity of bisexual identities in empirical research.

To draw on the latter body of literature, scholars writing in sexuality studies currently use the term “bisexual” to describe individuals, who are distinguished in terms

of their attractions to people of multiple sexes or genders (polysexual), as opposed to a single sex or gender (monosexual), sometimes considered to fall under a bisexual umbrella including other identities such as pansexual, polysexual, omnisexual, or queer (Eisner, 2013). In this study, I define bisexuality as the *potential to be attracted to or form relationships with people of multiple sexes or genders, which can include romantic or sexual attractions and relationships that have the potential to vary in degree, type, and quality as well as over the course of one's life*. While this definition draws on years of prior theorizing of sexuality and bisexuality, several key discursive shifts inform this broadly inclusive, multi-dimensional, and dynamic construction.

Historical and Discursive Shifts

In Western history, before bisexuality was conceptualized as an identity, it was understood solely as a practice or behavior, as sexual relationships among men (who would eventually marry women) were common and revered in ancient Greek and Roman cultures (Foucault, 1980; 1983; Klein, 1993). While the term bisexual is applied to these behaviors in retrospect, bisexuality as a concept emerged much later, first coined by Charles Chaddock in his 1892 translation of Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Thorpe, 2014). At the time, the term "bisexual" was rarely used openly due to the threat of criminal charges for sodomy (Klein, 1993) and it was also understood quite differently since hermaphroditism and bisexual attraction were closely intertwined (Eisner, 2013). This merging of concepts is still evident in some dictionary definitions that describe bisexuality as "possessing characters of both sexes and especially both male and female reproductive structures" in addition to having attractions to men and women (Merriam-Webster.com). However, scholars now distinguish between biological

sex and sexuality more clearly and continue to argue for increased theoretical clarity in their operationalization. These contrasting historical moments illustrate the relatively modern emergence of bisexuality as an identity, as well as conflicted societal perceptions of bisexuality, ranging from honor and reverence to pathology and criminality.

Early 20th-century descriptions of bisexuality were deeply influenced by Freudian theory, which constructed bisexuality as an unfinished phase or process, giving rise to stereotypes of bisexual individuals as immature or indecisive in their sexual attraction and identity formation (Eisner, 2013). Half a century later, Alfred Kinsey (1948; 1953) would attempt to lessen this pathologizing influence, claiming that the majority of the population experiences bisexual attractions. To support this claim, he developed the widely known and influential Kinsey scale, a 7-point scale ranging from “exclusively heterosexual” (0) to “exclusively homosexual” (6) with a gradation of bisexual attractions in between, presenting sexuality as a continuum for the first time. Forty years later, Alfred Klein (1993) presented case studies of healthy, emotionally stable bisexuals and created the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) in which sexual identity is rated on multiple dimensions (e.g., attraction, behavior, fantasy, etc.) as well as over time (past, present, and ideal future). Although the grid offered an imperfect approach to fluidity over time, it also illustrates potential for change in multiple sexual dimensions, thereby attempting to destigmatize the experience of sexual phases or transitions in bisexual lives. Despite the impact of pathological discourses, Kinsey and Klein contributed counter-narratives of bisexuality that have lasting influence today.

More recent discursive shifts include refinement of sexual dimensions and greater attention to identity as a key dimension of interest. Paula Rodriguez-Rust

(2000) developed a Model of Bisexuality (see Figure 1) in which individuals are located in topographical terms to distinguish their discursive positioning relative to bisexual (or bi) feelings (or attractions), behaviors (including relationships), and identity, providing a useful way for researchers to determine the boundaries around bisexual populations.

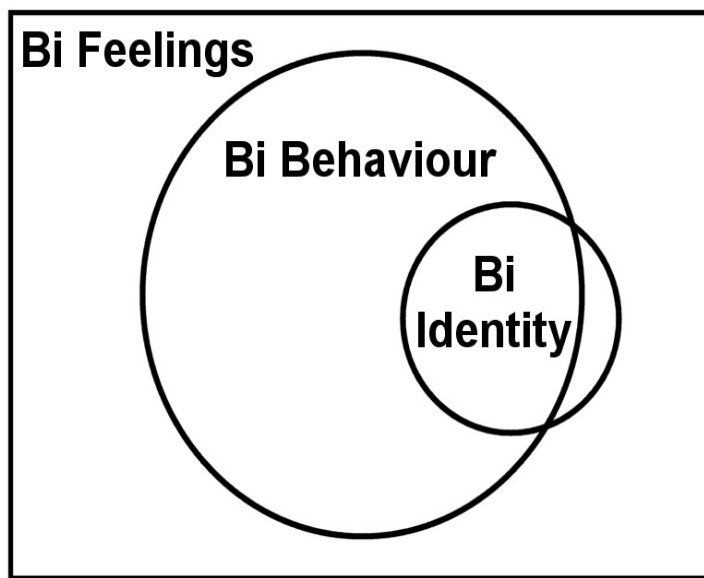


Figure 1: Model of Bisexuality
Rodriguez-Rust, P. (Ed.) (2000). *Bisexuality in the United States: A social science reader*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

To address variation across bisexual individuals, bisexual writer and activist Robyn Ochs, coined one of the most commonly applied definitions of bisexuality in current literature in 2009 (*Getting Bi*, Ochs & Rowley, 2009). She defined bisexuality as “the potential to be attracted- romantically and/or sexually- to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree (p. 9). This definition accounts for the widely varying experiences that bisexual people report, encompassing a broad and diverse bisexual population and emphasizing potential, rather than mandated, experiences. However, Och’s definition lacks a thorough conceptualization of change over time.

Rather this particular shift in sexuality studies was offered through contemporaneous theorizing specific to women's sexuality, which has been described as more dynamic and context dependent than the sexuality of men (Carpenter, 2010; Diamond, 2008).

One benefit of Ochs's definition is the deconstruction of binary categories of gender or sex in answer to the claim that the very term *bi*-sexual inherently reinforces oversimplified binary approaches (Ochs, 2007). While non-binary constructions have received increased attention, some scholars argue that more radical (de)constructions of sexuality veer dangerously close to denying the ontological reality of sexual identities altogether and therefore lose sight of the potential contributions of identities as sources of political power (Angelides, 2001; Bulter, 1997). Thus, bisexuality as an identity and category of analysis remains questioned in terms of its reality, definition, contributions, and meaning to this day, even in the conversation of scholars who write bisexuality into theory and discourse (Eisner, 2013; Garber, 1995).

In light of this history, it is not surprising that bisexual identities are experienced and influence lives in divergent ways, contributing both the invisibility of an invalidated sexual identity as well as the hypervisibility of negative stereotypes. Although scholars have described bisexuality as a "complicated or troublesome" category of analysis (Jones, 2010, p. 4), the complexity and nuance of these historical shifts is also a strength resulting from years of theoretical refinement that inform my definition of bisexuality. This definition reflects conceptual gains in understandings of bisexuality as a social construct that has evolved from an unnamed, but common behavior (Foucault, 1980-1983) to an identity that encompasses multiple dimensions of sexuality (Rodriguez-Rust, 2000), allows for variation across individuals (Kinsey, 1948; 1953; Ochs, 2009),

challenges binary constructions of gender and sex (Ochs, 2007), and accounts for fluidity of sexual experience over time (Diamond, 2008).

In light of this discussion and definition, I also clarify the population of interest for this research. As argued by Rodriguez-Rust (2000), individuals often engage in bisexual behaviors or experience bisexual attractions without choosing to identify as bisexual, leading to confusion about how to best recruit bisexual individuals in research (Jones, 2010). While identity is not the only possible way to define bisexual populations in research, study samples that are recruited based on identity, behavior, or attraction will serve different research goals. This study focuses on individuals who choose bisexuality as an identity in order to understand how that identity is constructed and understood by those who claim it as their own, allowing for a better understanding of how individuals use language to apply the identity to their own lives. I also limit this analysis to individuals who currently choose this identity to acknowledge that individuals who experience bisexual attractions or behaviors but use other identities such as “queer” or “pansexual” have their own experiences of sexual identity that are distinctive from bisexuality (Mitchell, Davis, & Galupo, 2014).

CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

This study applies a discursive approach using the later work of Foucault as a primary theoretical influence. A Foucauldian understanding of discourse is historically situated and accounts for dynamics of both domination and resistance evident in everyday language use (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012; Willig, 2001). Foucault also offers theoretical concepts that are particularly useful for understanding the experience of identities by examining how they might enable or limit certain actions or feelings. Identities are shifting and fluid constructs, negotiated, communicated, and understood through the use of discourse; thus, they have important implications for one's location relative to power (Butler, 1990). In order to enable an analysis of domination, resistance, and agency in the lives of participants, I also draw on a critical feminist lens that accounts for the political importance of identity and bisexuality in older women's lives. Finally, to connect the cultural and historical contexts of power to their implications for individuals, the conceptual framing and analysis are also informed by the life course perspective, which theorizes the timing of and agency within individual lives (Elder, 1994).

I begin the conceptual framing by defining the concepts of discourse, language, power, discursive objects, subject positions, and subjectivity. I then apply these terms to the context of bisexual lives, demonstrating the relevance of language in the analysis of bisexual identities. Critiques of conceptualizations of discourse and discursive subjects are addressed through a selective application of Foucault's later work and a critical feminist approach, creating potential for agency and resistance. I then provide a more

thorough conceptualization of the intersections of discourse in individual lives and historical times, as informed by the life course perspective (Elder, 1994). In particular, I describe how historical context and timing of lives might open or limit discursive possibilities in older women's constructions of bisexuality. This chapter concludes with a visual representation of the study's conceptual approach that combines the definition of bisexuality presented in Chapter 2 with the conceptual framing of Chapter 3.

Discourse and Bisexuality

Foucault described discourse as ways of constituting knowledge, including sets of statements and practices that construct the world, objects, and subjects in particular ways (Parker, 1992), making available certain ways of seeing and being in the world that “are strongly implicated in the exercise of power” (Willig, 2001, p. 107). Beyond the individual, discourses influence societies, operating as shared systems of meaning within a particular cultural and historical context (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012). At a societal level, discourses operate through social and institutional practices as a mechanism used to organize or regulate social life (Foucault, 1978; Weedon, 1987). As an example from Foucault's own work, religious institutions maintain discourses concerning what forms of sexuality are deemed moral or ethical as well as reinforcing those discourses by creating pressure to act within the bounds of moral sexual conduct (Foucault, 1978).

Language is one social practice or action, a tool that can be used creatively to stretch discursive possibilities as well as to achieve interpersonal goals of organization and regulation (Cixous et al., 1976; Crapanzano, 1996). Therefore, while people shape language as a practice of power and agency, language also shapes people by providing possible subject positions we might take up, orient to, or distance ourselves from. While

Foucault's discussion of discursive objects might apply to any object that is constructed in speech or text, subject positions are more specific in definition (Willig, 2001). As opposed to social roles, defined by one's location relative to other people (e.g., mother, friend, boss), subject positions have implications for "the sense of self and experiences of the speakers, and for the actions they are entitled and expected to perform" (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012, p. 148). In other words, subject positions place contextually specific expectations around one's subjectivity or what one can do, say, feel, or think. Thus, these are not only social positions relative to other individuals, but also positions that are located relative to power (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Willig, 2001).

According to Foucault (1978), "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (p. 101). He described power as an omnipresence that is unstable as it is constantly moving and being reproduced. It is not an object that can be acquired or held, but a network that operates between institutions and people to enact dominance through legitimizing the perspective, knowledge, and reality of privileged individuals while silencing others or rendering them illegible as valid subjects (Butler, 2000; Foucault, 1978). Legibility refers to one's ability to be understood, recognized, and categorized within a societal context and therefore has implications for how identities are positioned relative to power (Butler, 2000). Legibility can be explored by asking who counts as a valued person, citizen, or subject and whose view of reality is legitimated by dominating discourses in a particular society. As one instance of negotiating possible subject positions and subjectivity through language, while individuals come to understand, construct, and make meaning out of their racial, sexual, or gendered identities, they do so with the language to which they have been exposed and have access, thereby providing certain discursive possibilities while

eliminating others. However, when the subject must make choices to alter their behavior in order to feel and live in certain ways in order to remain legible, there is also the possibility of choosing illegible positions, thereby radically disrupting existing dynamics of power; in the words of Foucault (1978), “where there is power, there is resistance” (p. 95).

Discourse in Bisexual Lives

In relation to the lives of bisexual individuals and considering the rapidly changing terminology around sexual identities, the current state of discourse determines what identities are available to individuals at a given moment (Crapanzano, 1996). In the anthology, *Getting Bi* (Ochs & Rowley, 2009), an American woman named Julie describes her first introduction to the term “bisexual”: “People underestimate the power of language. Language gave me the avenue to *be* bisexual. Until that moment I was just a straight girl who never felt totally straight” (p. 41). Her reflection demonstrates the importance of having access to terms or labels that resonate with one’s experienced attractions and sense of self, offering validation, belonging, and access to bisexual subject positions. In other words, having access to discourses of bisexuality allowed Julie to know that she *could* be a bisexual person and what *kind* of bisexual person she could be.

As bisexual identities have become more common, they are also imbued with certain cultural meanings and more specific possible subject positions. One subject position commonly depicted in literature and film is that of the bisexual predator who takes on a near sociopathic role, seducing and disrupting the lives of people of various genders and leaving a trail of jealousy and heartbreak behind them (Ochs & Rowley,

2009; Stobie, 2007). Derogatory terms also reveal negative tropes or stereotypes of bisexuality. Bisexuals have, over time, been termed curious, confused, hypersexual, and pathological fence-sitters, switch-hitters, AC/DCs, double agents, closet cases, chameleons, imposters, traitors, sluts, sexual tourists, Katy Perrys, and LUGs (lesbian-until-graduation), liable to be sexually tempted, swing both ways, play for both teams, or want their cake and eat it too (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Klesse, 2011; SFHRC, 2012). These terms reveal not only the deep influence of dualistic approaches to sexuality (e.g., having to choose a “side”), but also the biases aimed toward those who take up bisexual subject positions, including being untrustworthy, uncommitted, pathological, transitional, or promiscuous. This understanding of language also indicates possible reasons that social perceptions of bisexual identities might result in fewer connections to LGBTQ communities and a less positive sense of one’s identity.

These terms also illustrate particular narratives or scripts that are available to the legible bisexual subject. One possible script, depicted by the term “LUG,” is that of the young woman experimenting with sexual behaviors with women for a transitional period of time, after which she will return to dating men exclusively and go on to live a heteronormative, and therefore privileged, lifestyle (Diamond, 2005; Eisner, 2013). Language use is therefore an important social process that informs what discursive possibilities and subjectivities are available, which allow us to make sense of and are projected onto bisexual identities. It is also worth noting that many of these narratives are associated with bisexual women, making bisexuality hypervisible among women and nearly invisible among men. Narratives also tend to be limited to younger bisexual people, thereby rendering the older bisexual subject invisible or illegible (Jen, in press). Therefore, while we may have a better means of interpreting the influence of identity-

related challenges among younger bisexual women, there remain limited discursive narratives to help us make sense of older bisexual women's experiences.

Critiques of Discourse and Power

Conceptualizations of discursive processes provide a useful framework for understanding older bisexual women's identities in context. However, there are some common and notable critiques of Foucauldian theorizing that require additional discussion. Scholars often position Foucault's theoretical work within poststructural or postmodern epistemological paradigms, although he rejected these labels himself (McLaren, 2002; McNay, 1992). A poststructural perspective would suggest that meaning is imposed by societal discourses, such that this discursive context is inescapable and structurally determined (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). Critics claim that poststructuralism views the subject as completely determined and with no potential for agency or action. On the other hand, a postmodern approach would question an objective reality, creating a sense of relativism depending on one's perspective and positioning (McLaren, 2002). Considering this approach, critics claim that postmodern thought minimizes the impact of material structures, since if a subject's reality is based in their own perspective, they can create new structures simply by thinking and writing them. These critiques question epistemological positions of structural determinism, which would question bisexual women's ability to enact agency through self-definition. They also question relativism, which would imply that their identity formation and negotiation has little material impact on their lives (Crapanzano, 1996).

More specifically, feminist scholars have claimed that the postmodern deconstruction of categories of analysis as a material reality is at odds with the goals of

radical feminism; this is because feminist politics rely on these categories in order to critique the power dynamics of patriarchal societies and to reclaim womanhood or sexual identities as a means of resistance (McLaren, 2002). Feminist writers have also critiqued Foucault for producing radical theory with little practical application, leaving no room for agency in constructing one's own reality (Epstein, 1995; Hartsock, 1990; Moussa & Scapp, 1996). Rightfully, one may wonder: if we are constantly limited by our linguistic traditions and systems of language, how might individuals take up agency or creativity in their everyday use of language? As an extension, a lack of individual agency also limits potential for a generative, productive politics for marginalized groups (Moussa & Scapp, 1996; Taylor, 2014).

Combining a Selective Read of Foucault with Critical Feminist Goals

In reference to waving the Foucauldian banner, I position myself as what McLaren (2002) would call an “extender”: a scholar who uses Foucault's concepts to serve their research goals when applicable, but often limits his theoretical influence to certain of his written works. In this study, issues of agency and resistance are addressed by specifically and intentionally drawing on the later works of Foucault, namely *The History of Sexuality Volumes I-III* that describe a different kind of subjectivity. As critics of Foucault ask what individuals can and cannot do within the bounds of their reality, their arguments concern how humans become subjects of history, language, practices, and power, which Foucault described as the primary theme of his writing (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999). He described his work as studying “the objectivizing of the subject” as mad, sick, or criminal among other things, while his later

focus on sexuality addressed “the way a human being turns himself into a subject” (1982, p. 778).

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes more space for resistive power than in his earlier work:

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (1978, p. 101).

Foucault’s analysis of the ethical sexual subject creates space for discourses around sexuality to be a tool of both domination and resistance in dynamics of power. In *The Subject and Power* (1982), Foucault later stated, “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are ‘free’” (p. 780), indicating that in order for discursive power to influence an individual, they must first have choices available to them, such that the impact of power influences, but does not entirely limit, the choices they make. These later works portray a subject who is not overly determined by societal or discursive structures and who has the potential to influence those structures, a perspective that is necessary for any feminist discourse analyst who is open to the emergence of resistance in participants’ narratives.

Other qualitative researchers have also recognized the potential effect of limiting agency in participant narratives within Foucauldian theorizing (Hanna, 2014; Lamers & Williams, 2015). My own approach to this issue is similar to that of Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni (2015) who combine Foucault’s later theoretical writing with a feminist perspective on subjectivity and identity. A critical feminist perspective calls for a political commitment to recognizing the personal as political (Ray, 2006). While

sexuality and sexual identities are highly personal aspects of older women's lives, they are also the context of political meaning making and struggles of power between those who are normalized and legible and those who are marginalized and illegible in society. As an influential scholar in feminist thinking, Butler (2000) reaffirms the claim that the seeds of resistance lie within a critique of current ways of knowing; this means that if older bisexual women are dominated by the combined forces of ageism, heterosexism, and sexism, their freedom depends on an analysis that can undermine and dismantle these structures. More specifically, an examination of older bisexual women's identity negotiation has the potential to reveal the discourses that have been imposed on them, thereby infiltrating and negatively influencing their personal meaning making process. However, by revealing these dynamics of domination, we might also expose creative and resistive counter-discourses that bisexual individuals draw on, as evidenced by Jones's (2011) participants who actively resisted heteronormative life sequences in their imagined futures.

In contrast to scholars who see radical feminism as being irrefutably in conflict with a postmodern deconstruction of identities, I believe that feminists can reclaim womanhood by challenging the influence of patriarchal power structures, while also continually committing to examining the usefulness of gender, sex, and sexual identity as constructs and categories of analysis. From this perspective, bisexual identities are understood as socially constructed, fluid, and dynamic while also acknowledging that they impact lives in material ways. In contrast to structural determinism or relativism, this framing allows the current study to ask how older women might be both subjected *and* resistive to discursive influences that have material consequences for their lives, as indicated through their use of language.

The Life Course Perspective: Individual Lives in Context

In the conceptual framing of this study, Foucauldian discursive concepts and a critical feminist lens provide an epistemological lens from which to examine constructions of bisexual identities. However, a critical analysis focused on the narrative constructions of older bisexual women also requires that this context be connected to individual lives. This is particularly relevant in making space for an individual's agency to shape their own life and make creative choices in their use of language. Otherwise, if the context of individual lives is absent, we could only interpret a participant's linguistic choices according to broader historical and discursive influences, falling prey to a structurally determined lens. In answer to this issue, I combine this critical, Foucauldian approach to discourse with Elder's (1994) life course perspective, which includes four dimensions: 1) the interplay between individual lives and historical times and 2) linked lives, 3) the timing of lives, and 4) human agency. In addition to contributing a sense of individual context, Elder's perspective has been widely used in social gerontology (Bengtson, Burgess, & Parrott, 1997), thereby providing a useful theoretical bridge between a discursive analysis and research on aging (Jen, 2017b). In the current study, the main contributions of the life course perspective come from the first and third dimensions, which speak to individual lives in historical context and across time.

Timing of Individual Lives and Historical Times

Many gerontological studies have revealed evidence of distinctive cohort- or generation-based influences (Bengtson & Setterson, 2016), defined as patterned variations in the characteristics of individuals who share temporal experiences, such as generations who experienced similar historical events at a similar time in life (Spini,

Jopp, Pin, & Stringhini, 2016). For instance, Loe (2004) described how current cohorts of older women saw their daughters come of age in a world where “birth control and Viagra use are normalized” (p. 76), allowing them to make new meaning out of sexuality in later life. While studies often emphasize either historical context *or* timing of individual lives, history also interacts with the timing of lives to produce distinct discursive possibilities in particular periods of one’s life. For instance, although older women may take more agency in defining sexuality in later life, this shift might have occurred due to changing historical discourses of women’s sexuality and reproductive rights or due to their own personal experience of aging, as older women also tend to report higher levels of self-confidence (Hite, 2000), and specifically sexual confidence (Jen, 2017a), in later life. Therefore, it is critical that both dimensions influence the conceptual framing of this study.

Within LGBTQ research, generational differences in terms of values, practices, and beliefs may be particularly notable, as Western society has changed rapidly in terms of perception and acceptance of sexually diverse populations (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). Rosenfeld (2003) claims that for older lesbians and gay men in the United States, coming of age before or after the Stonewall riots created a boundary between two divergent cohorts who experienced their sexual minority status in different ways. As a key life event for LGBTQ populations, many studies examine the timing of the coming out process and related events and compare these experiences across populations. For instance, older cohorts are more likely to report coming out processes that begin later in life (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Fisher, 2012; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006) while sexual minority women and bisexual individuals also tend to reach milestones

related to sexual identity later than gay men and lesbians (Calzo et al., 2011; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017).

Historical influences and timing may also be similar to or distinct from the larger population. While second wave feminism may have informed older bisexual women's understandings of gender in similar ways to other women, the polarizing context around feminist separatism in the 1970s also drove a wedge between bisexual and lesbian women over feminist goals (Jones, 2010; Rust, 1995). Bisexual activist Lani Ka'ahumanu provides a useful description of this legacy in the anthology *Bi Lives* (Orndorff, 1999). Ka'ahumanu came out as bisexual in midlife after having identified as a lesbian during the 1970s. Of the time, she states, "we were all in the process of coming out as lesbians. There was no room for bisexuality anywhere in the process" (Orndorff, 1999, p. 102). Westwood (2016) described this cohort of women as "lesbians by choice," who intentionally chose to distance themselves from men in every way, including disassociating with women who were open to relationships with men. Because of the lasting impact of these dynamics, scholars have argued that the historical context of polarization between LGBTQ subgroups is a necessary lens through which to interpret current bisexual stigma in LGBTQ communities (Seidmen, 2003).

Interactions between historical context and individual lives might also influence older bisexual women's discursive constructions of bisexuality in several ways. To provide some possible examples of key historical events, learning of Kinsey's claims of bisexuality as widespread might inform one's construction of bisexuality as being common but invisible, thereby offering a sense of validation or creating a pressing need to identify openly as bisexual. This knowledge would shape not only certain constructions of bisexuality, but also certain subject positions with certain possibilities

for action and feeling. Although the timing of coming out processes has frequently been measured, empirical literature has yet to account for how the coming out process is structured through language use or what impact the timing of one's coming out process might have on one's discursive meaning making relative to sexual identities in a specific historical context. The need to further examine the coming out process is of particular interest for bisexual populations, for whom the timing of identity, behavior, and attractions evolve in more complex ways compared to other sexual minorities (Rodriguez-Rust, 2000). Finally, exposure to the feminist movement, feminist separatism, and the subject position of "lesbian by choice" might contribute to internalized negative messages, contrasting bisexuality to ideal feminism and producing a stressful sense of dissonance in the negotiation of bisexual identities. Thus, the life course perspective offers a framework through which to interpret the influence of historical and discursive contexts as well as the individual motivations behind constructing bisexuality in particular ways or taking up and resisting certain bisexual subject positions.

Theoretical Implications

To summarize, while concepts related to discourse and language provide the primary conceptual framing of this study, accounting for a critical analysis of both domination and agency or resistance requires that discursive and historical contexts be theoretically linked to individual lives. Drawing on the substantive literature relative to constructions of bisexuality from Chapter 2 and the conceptual framing of Chapter 3, the Conceptual Model for the study is presented in Figure 2.

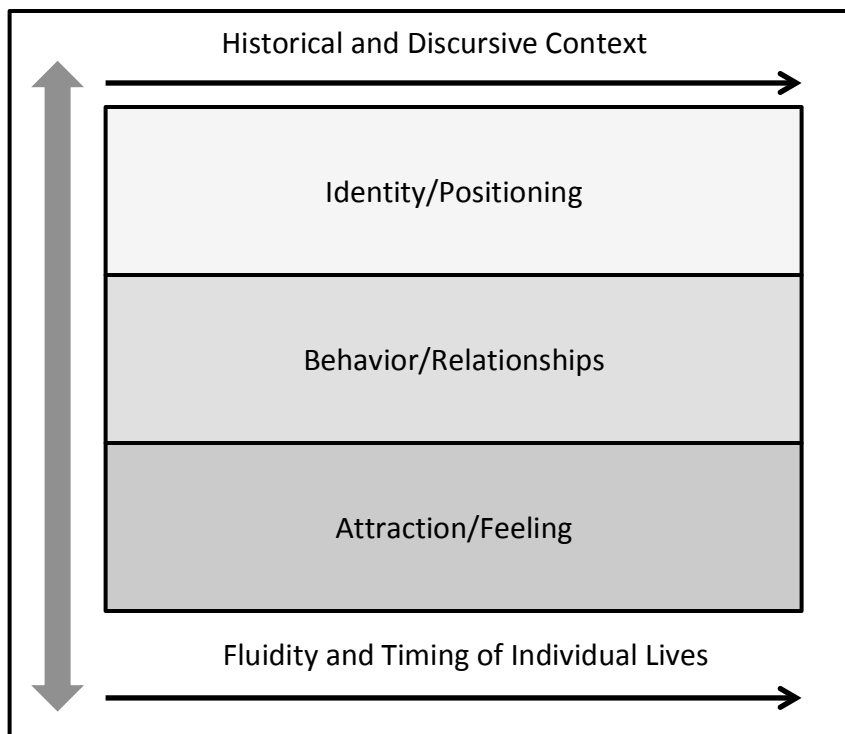


Figure 2. Conceptual Model

The building of this conceptual model began with Rodriguez-Rust's (2000) dimensions of identity (or social positioning), behavior (and relationships), and feeling (or attraction). By separating out each dimension into bordering concepts, they are able to operate individually while also having the potential to influence each other. The model is not represented as between two poles (heterosexual or homosexual) or indicative of gendered relationships (with men or women) in order to account for non-binary and fluid constructions of gender and sex, for both the bisexual person of interest and those they may be attracted to or in relationships with. The life course perspective is represented in two places. First, the arrow along the bottom of the model indicates the potential for fluidity in individual lives and dimensions of sexuality, as well as indicating

agency in influencing one's own life sequence. Second, the larger historical context locates the bisexual individual within a particular historical moment. As indicated by the arrow along the top of the model, the combined historical and discursive context changes as the individual changes and ages over time. Finally, the arrow along the left-hand side indicates the potential for historical and discursive contexts to inform the individual's life sequence and all dimensions of their sexuality, as well as the potential for individuals to enact influence on their context and make intentional decisions regarding their sexuality.

This conceptual model sets the stage for understanding how older bisexual women deploy language, situated within broader discourses, to construct their bisexual identities as well as how their situated positioning as individual lives and within broader historical and discursive contexts inform that language use. From this starting point, we can examine the historical discourses that participants may have adopted or struggled against, allowing for an in-depth, interpretive understanding of how they speak, narrate, and describe their own bisexual lives and identities.

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

The discussion of methods begins with the methodological implications of the conceptual framing for the data collection and analytic processes. The research design is presented including the sampling strategy, recruitment process, and data collection and processing. The steps of the data analysis are then described in detail. I end the presentation of methods with a discussion of my own positioning as a researcher relative to the study and a brief summary of the organization of the findings chapters.

Implications of the Methodology and Method

While the conceptual framing has discussed the epistemological and ontological bounds of discursive theory, here I provide a more thorough description of discourse analysis as a method and its implications for the study procedures. Discourse analysis (DA) developed from the linguistic turn in the 1970s and 1980s, grounded in the epistemological position of social constructivism (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012). DA analyzes language in use and how knowledge is constructed, therefore as a method it has the potential to lay bare the assumed and implicit knowledge and power embedded in or revealed by language (Gee, 2014). Because DA analyzes language in use rather than the concrete realities that language represents or reflects, research questions best analyzed through DA center on how “reality and experience are constructed through social and interpersonal processes” (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012, p. 149). Therefore, I do not make claims regarding whether participants’ language use indicates their true experience of reality. Instead, I interpret their discussions of bisexuality to be reflections of how they

see the world and themselves and ask what potential implications their language use might have for their identity negotiation process. Additionally, applying a critical feminist perspective requires that I assess potential material implications of language use given participants' relation to power structures, even if I do not make claims about their lived realities.

More specifically, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) "is a postmodern, interpretive, qualitative research method used to examine sociocultural and historical influences in the creation and maintenance of various discourses, and to challenge the rules of acceptability and power dynamics in forming them" (Van Ness, Miller, Negash, & Morgan, 2017). FDA offers the benefits of observing the everyday language use of people who can describe unique experiences (Willig, 2001) and analyzing how those individuals interact with, draw on, or reject the societal discourses they have access to (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Van Ness et al., 2017). This method is also particularly useful for examining identities through the lens of subject positions and subjectivity, offering key concepts to structure the analysis. Additionally, using Foucault's later work and applying feminist goals also allows, and in fact requires me, to account for both oppressive and resistive discourses in the data and to interpret the implicit power dynamics behind discursive constructions and possible motivations behind language use (Georgaca & Avdi, 1996; Willig, 2001). Therefore, unlike linguistic or conversation analysis, the possible interpretation of findings is not limited to the actual words that participants use or the dynamics of conversation between the researcher and participant. Rather, the researcher is also able to make meaning out of the implications *behind* the words. FDA also does not require the researcher to limit the influence of

their prior knowledge of the research topic, but rather allows for both emergent themes as well as theoretically informed interpretations.

While some qualitative methods involve participants in the process of interpretation or allow for critical consciousness-raising among participants in a group setting, DA requires researchers to interpret implicit meaning in language use. Therefore, only simple forms of participant validation are typically used in DA studies, such as reviewing transcripts for accuracy, as it may not be possible for participants to “validate something of which they may not be fully conscious” (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012, p. 150). However, DA can still be used as a tool of empowerment by exploring how marginalized individuals or groups have been oppressed or subjugated by dominant social systems and practices as well as how they resist these influences (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012).

Data Collection Strategy

Data Collection Procedures

Sampling goal. The ideal sample size for an FDA includes at least 8 and up to 20 participants (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012). As this study entailed recruiting a hard-to-reach population, I set a goal of recruiting 15 participants. The inclusion criteria required that participants currently identify as a woman, currently identify as bisexual, and be age 60 or older at the time of the interview. Individuals who were assigned male at birth would be included if they currently identified as a woman as they would also have a perspective to contribute regarding how bisexuality is currently experienced among older women. Participants had to currently identify as bisexual, but may have identified with other sexual identities at various points in time as my definition of bisexuality allows for

fluidity in sexual identities over the life course. Participants could also use multiple labels for their sexuality concurrently, as this is a common practice among bisexual individuals (Rust, 1993). The age criteria of 60 and older was determined as published anthologies of bisexual individuals have mainly included adults up to but not beyond age 60 (*Bi Lives*, 1999; *Getting Bi*, 2009) and scholars recognize a particular lack of information available on the sexuality of individuals age 60 and older in current research (DeLamater, 2012). While chronological age is not a perfect measure of whether one is considered or considers oneself to be “older,” it was necessary to set an age cutoff for recruitment purposes.

Recruitment strategy. Recruitment and interview procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division. Recruitment procedures were carried out in the greater Seattle area and included posting printed flyers in the lobbies of community centers and service organizations targeting seniors and LGBTQ communities. Prior FDAs have overlooked intersectional identities in their recruitment process and acknowledged this as an area of limitation and for future development (Lamers & Williams, 2017; Van Ness et al, 2017). To address this possible limitation and because intersectional identities have been documented to impact one’s experience of sexuality (Battle et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Woody, 2014), posting sites were intentionally chosen to reflect particularly racial, age-, and class-based diversity in order to gain richness from varied intersectional perspectives on bisexuality. For instance, when prioritizing where to distribute and post recruitment materials, differences in median income of various neighborhoods and the age range and racial composition of senior service clientele were considered. Flyers and recruitment materials were also distributed electronically through the email lists and social

networking sites of senior and LGBTQ community-based organizations as well as through the social networks of social service providers, educators, students, and previously recruited participants. Brief recruitment ads were circulated in online forums (e.g., Craigslist) and print publications, such as a small, local newspaper targeting LGBTQ readership.

Recruitment was limited to the Seattle area to allow for in-person co-creation of a physical timeline of the participant's life during the interview process. Flyers and emails included an outline of the study goals and procedures, described the researcher as a "younger bisexual woman," and provided my contact information. With individuals who made contact by phone, I discussed the study procedures in more detail, provided information regarding confidentiality and anonymity, allowed them to ask and answered questions about the study, and clarified whether they met the study criteria. For individuals who made contact by email, I asked to arrange a phone call for this purpose. After the first five women were recruited, all interested individuals were asked during the phone call for their age in order to ensure age-based diversity in those included in the study. Ultimately, all interested individuals were included. Twelve participants were recruited from aging organization email lists (N=4), LGBTQ community-based organizations (2), craigslist (2), social networks of service providers (2), community/senior centers (1), and LGBTQ social networking sites (1).

Interview structure. All interviews were completed between October 2017 and March 2018 and took place in the participant's home or a private meeting room on a university campus, although participants were welcome to choose any private or semi-private location for their interview. I conducted all interviews, benefiting from prior experiences including training in social service interviewing, semi-structured in-person

interviewing in several research studies, and advanced training in qualitative methods. Interviews lasted between 1.5-2.25 hours, averaging 1 hour and 45 minutes. Interviews began with reviewing and signing the consent documents, which informed participants of the various risks and benefits of the study as well as their rights as a research participant. After participants provided their consent for participation and audio recording, the remainder of the interview was audio recorded. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1) using a “guided conversation” style (Kvale, 1996), such that participants were also able to raise other topics of interest not addressed by the interview guide. The interview was flexible enough to accommodate follow up questions unique to each participant.

The interviews took place in a single time frame, but in two distinct halves. The first half lasted between 40 minutes to 1.5 hours and included a review of the participant’s life history, beginning with the year they were born up until the current year. Participants were asked to focus on key life events and those related to their bisexuality. During this portion of the interview, I sketched a timeline of the participant’s life course, noting key life events and changes in sexual identity with no identifying information included (see Figure 3 for an example timeline). After completion of the first half of the interview, I asked participants to review the timeline, add any key events that were not represented, and reflect on the experience of reviewing the timeline. Co-creation of a timeline of the participant’s life course served the purpose of placing sexual histories within the context of the life course and locating them within the historical context surrounding the participant’s life (Jones, in press). The second half of the interview included reflective questions to delve more deeply into issues related to sexuality and bisexuality (e.g., What does bisexuality mean to you? Is

bisexuality important to you?). The interview guide and accompanying timeline activity were designed to capture the full life course of the participant, paying particular attention to how their sexual identity developed over time, examining the influence of social, historical, political, and popular media influences, and allowing for personal reflection on the meaning and definition of bisexuality.

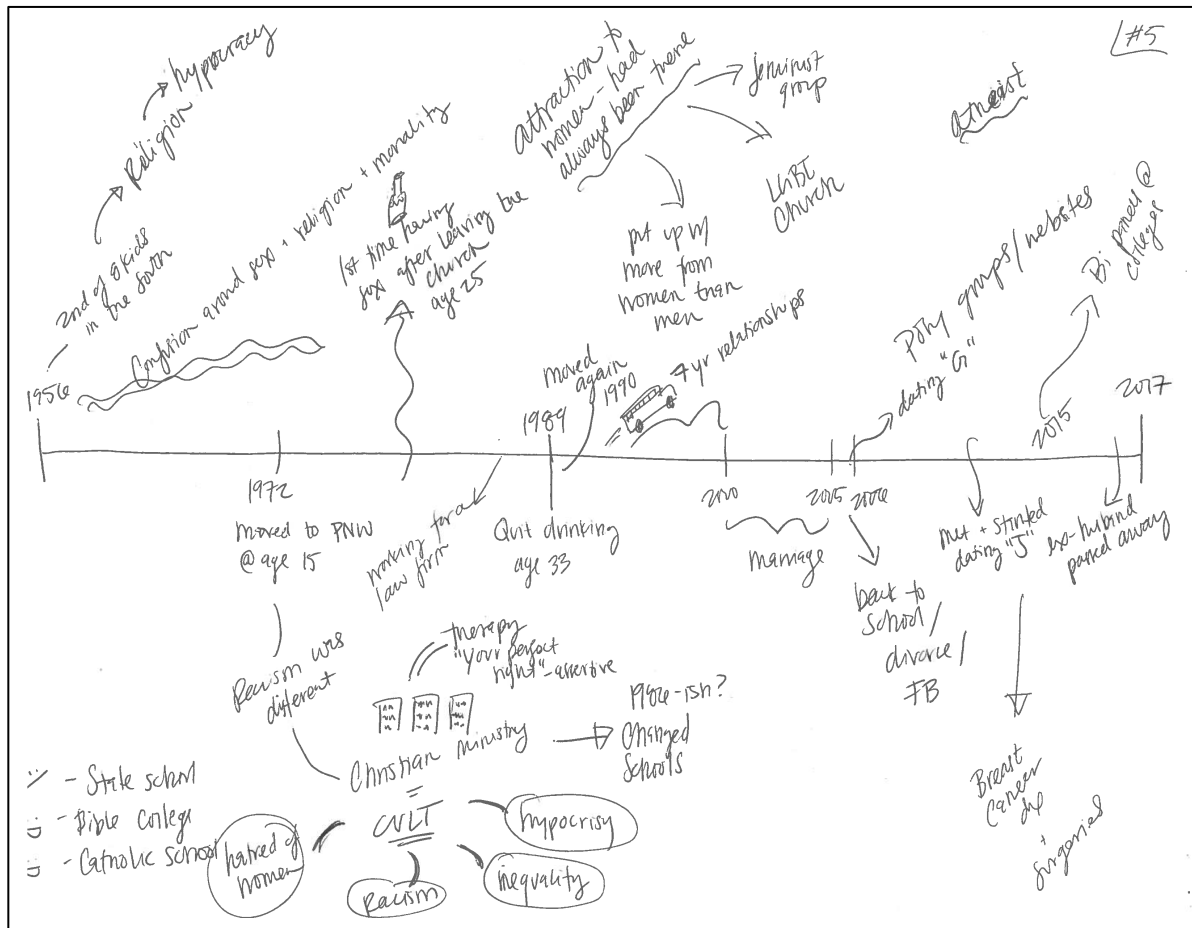


Figure 3: Example Timeline

The first two women to be interviewed were asked to provide feedback on the interview procedures and questions to facilitate clarity and flow of conversation. The interview guide was modified slightly after the first two interviews based on the participants' feedback, but also address the research questions more directly. For

instance, when the second interview did not produce as many references to broader political and societal influences as the first, I added a question toward the end of the life review process to explicitly ask participants to consider these influences. The guide was edited as needed during the rest of the data collection process to ensure that data would thoroughly answer the research questions or as new topics of interest came to light, such as the addition of explicitly asking why participants chose a bisexual identity rather than other identities (e.g., lesbian, pansexual, queer, etc.) in order to provide a means of comparing their constructions of various identities. While the questions were outlined in the semi-structured interview guide, the language of the questions was also altered at times to reflect the language used by the participant. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they would be willing to review a transcript of their interview and to be contacted at a future time by phone or email if follow up questions were deemed necessary. Four participants reviewed and returned their transcripts with additional notes or minor edits. One of these participants sent four additional written paragraphs regarding the role of race/ethnicity in her sexual life when she realized this topic had not been discussed during her interview while reviewing her transcript.

Contextualization. The context of research, and particularly qualitative research, is important in terms of timing, history, and location, which may influence the sampling strategy and findings of a study (Levitt et al., 2018). In this study, all participants were recruited from the broader Seattle area. Aging services in urban areas report providing more outreach and affirmation of LGBTQ clients (Knochel, Croghan, Moone, & Quam, 2012), where sexual diversity is perhaps more visible and socially acceptable compared to more rural geographic areas. Although Seattle has historically been considered a relatively LGBTQ-friendly city, there is only one community-based organization that

specifically serves LGBTQ seniors (*Generations Aging with Pride*, which was founded in 2017). Thus, accounting for age-inclusive LGBTQ communities is a recent shift in local context. Recruiting participants from the same area also allowed me to focus on other aspects of diversity (e.g., race, age, etc.) and to highlight patterns based on these identities rather than confounding these patterns by adding the dimension of geographic location.

In terms of political context and timing, while societal perception of sexual minorities has been increasingly positive in the U.S. over the past several years, this pattern was disrupted in 2017 when less than half (49%) of respondents in the Harris Poll stated that they were comfortable interacting with LGBT people, a decrease from 53% in 2016 (Miller, 2018). This change in historical trends is likely related to the recent presidential election, which many argue has led to conservative backlash against progressive movements (GLAAD, 2018). Given this context, potential participants may have been less likely to expose their sexual minority status despite the research procedures to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. However, Seattle is also a city with a large Democratic majority (Lee, 2017), indicating a higher proportion of progressive leaning residents who may feel more compelled to share their stories in light of the political context. This context may also influence the way in which participants contextualize their life stories and their current constructions of bisexual identities.

Data Processing. I transcribed all audio recordings, when possible, before the next interview took place to allow for time to reflect on, familiarize with, and write reflexive memos related to the interview prior to the next participant interaction. Transcription and analysis took place simultaneously with the recruitment and data collection process to inform targeting of recruitment to include greater diversity of

intersectional perspectives and to inform alterations to the interview guide. Transcripts ranged in length from 15 to 30 single-spaced pages (Mean=19.2) and included all verbal utterances of the participant and researcher, denoting overlapping speech and pauses between utterances, and non-verbal communications or gestures (as recalled by the researcher as the interviews were not video recorded). All identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Participants were asked if they would like to review their transcripts for clarity, ensuring anonymity, and making any additions to their reflections. Transcripts were then returned and transcripts and timelines were uploaded into a data analysis application. In cases where I identified gaps in an interview or questions were added to the interview guide afterwards, I re-contacted participants to pose follow up questions or ask for clarification. All participants gave permission for follow up contact.

Data Analysis Strategy

Analytic Process

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. Immediately following each interview, I documented participant summaries in one or two paragraphs including key demographic information, context information to help me make sense of their constructions of bisexuality, highlights and themes from the interview, and reflexive comments regarding my own emotional and reflective reactions to the interview. I added to these participant summaries if new themes or reflections on my own actions, thoughts, or emotions became apparent while transcribing the interview. Demographic information was compiled into a single table, presented in Table 1 (see p. 57). After the interviews had been transcribed, I carried out multiple close reads of each interview and

began to make analytic notes, not yet engaging in the coding process. I then carried out a six-step FDA analytic method laid out by Willig (2001; 2008).

Historically, there has not been widespread agreement as to what specific analytic procedures constitute an FDA, particularly as Foucault himself used a variety of methods in his work, including historical analyses of discourse (e.g., *The Will to Knowledge*, 1978), the construction of and potential available subject positions (e.g., *The Use of Pleasure*, 1980; *The Care of the Self*, 1983), and in-depth case analyses (e.g., *Herculine Barbin*, 1980). However, one of the most common methods of FDA is a six-step approach outlined by Willig (2001; 2008) that was developed for and has become widely used in the social sciences, including recent analyses of qualitative interviews that focus on constructions of whiteness (Wallis & Singh, 2014), friendships of trans men (Zitz, Burns, & Tacconelli, 2014), discourses of euthanasia and assisted suicide (Lamers & Williams, 2016), and women's sexuality (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Van Ness et al., 2017). These steps followed multiple close reads to immerse myself in the data and after limiting the text to those aspects of the transcripts that were pertinent to or might help to answer the research questions, as suggested by Willig (2001).

Step 1 focused on discursive constructions of the object of interest, which for this study was the object of bisexuality. I first coded for constructions in Dedoose (version 7), a web-based mixed-methods data analysis application (www.dedoose.com). I then exported these segments of text into an excel file to carry out further analysis, as I found Dedoose did not lend itself to sequential coding and recoding of the same segments of data. While I was working in this excel file to carry out the following steps, I also referred back to the full interview transcripts, participant summaries, and timelines so that I would not lose sight of the broader context of the participant's interview and life.

After coding for constructions of bisexuality, two types of constructions were emerging: 1) those that focused on how bisexual identities, attractions, and behaviors had emerged over the life course and 2) those that pertained to how participants viewed their bisexual identities at the time of the interview and in the context of later life.

In addition to these two types of construction, I began to realize that there were themes in the data that would not be addressed by Willig's steps. These themes were particularly relevant for the dimensions of timing and historical context from the life course perspective, such as cultural influences (e.g., movies, books, feminist writers), historical events (e.g., Civil Rights movement, Vietnam War), and periods of time (e.g., early sexual experiences, college years, later life). Although referring to the full transcripts and timelines continually helped to ground the analysis in historical and cultural context, Willig's steps are focused on linguistic tools and would not allow me to fully consider how timing and historical context interacted with discursive constructions over the life course. I also believed that these themes might assist me in making meaning out of both types of bisexual constructions. Therefore, I combined information from individual participant timelines to produce a Collective Timeline (see Figure 4 on p. 60) that reflects the life course of all 12 participants by decade, capturing changes in their sexual identity and relationships over historical time periods. I ordered the participants by age so that as I reviewed the table, I could assess differences in the relative age of each participant during each decade. I also created a list of historical events that participants mentioned (see Table 2 on p. 62). This list, paired with the Collective Timeline, allowed me to lay individual lives and historical events next to each other to assess how they might have interacted over time. This process was helpful for making sense of subsequent analytic steps.

In Step 2, I located constructions within broader discourses and societal conversations. For instance, constructions of bisexuality as a biological trait might connect to a “born this way” discourse in which sexuality is assumed to be stable and constant over time. In contrast, the construction of bisexuality as changing and fluid might connect to a broader discourse of identities as socially constructed and historically dependent concepts. This step produced a set of discourses that were either present in prior literature around bisexuality or were emergent in the participants’ narratives.

In Step 3, I explored what participants might gain by constructing the object in certain ways at a particular point in the text. I reorganized codes into groups based on similar or related discourses and then looked within and across cases to identify possible motivations for constructing bisexuality in various ways. At this point, returning to the context of participant’s individual transcripts, summaries, and timelines was useful in order to interpret possible motivations. For instance, if a participant drew on a biological discourse of sexuality they might be invested in justifying their sexual identity as stable in response to stereotypes of the confused or conflicted bisexual subject.

After carrying out the first three steps, I began to see themes across certain participants’ constructions, whereby two groups of participants became apparent based on their constructions of how their bisexual identities had emerged over the life course, the discourses they were drawing on, and their possible motivations. The Collective Timeline also supported the differentiation of these two groups, where patterns in the emergence of attractions to women were generally consistent with patterns in the coding analysis. This realization, informed by both timeline and discursive constructions, produced two distinctive groups of women. The first had recognized their same-sex

attractions relatively early in life (mid-20s or earlier) while the second group had recognized their same-sex attractions later in life (30s or older).

Steps 4 through 6 focused on the taking up of subject positions and what types of action or subjectivity might be possible from those subject positions. These steps were applied to each group of women separately and to the sample as a whole, as I continued to look for distinctions and similarities between the two groups. Step 4 allowed me to identify the subject positions participants were taking up or orienting to and what constructions of bisexuality were possible from these positions. For instance, participants might refer to their position as an older adult, using their age and historical context of their aging process to explain their constructions of bisexuality.

Step 5 asked how certain subject positions limit or broaden what a participant can say or do. From the subject position of an older woman, participants might contrast their experience to that of younger generations of LGBTQ individuals with a sense of distance, using their own historical context as a point of comparison. Finally, in Step 6 I asked what could be “felt, thought, and experienced from the various subject positions identified” (Willig, 2001, p. 111). As subsequent steps require added layers of interpretation on the part of the researcher in this form of FDA (Willig, 2001), this step required the most interpretation on my part in terms of what I believed participants might feel or think based on their uses of language and the implied emotions behind that language use.

As explained by Willig (2001; 2008), these steps were carried out in sequential order, but with the flexibility to return to earlier steps to make additions and clarifications as needed in a hermeneutic process, moving between the data as a whole and individual transcripts or excerpts. The analysis was informed by existing discourses

in bisexuality-, sexuality-, and aging-related research, but also allowed new discourses to emerge from the data. Additionally, I explored within-, cross-, and negative case examples by selecting participants who constructed bisexuality in unique ways or showed divergence from their relative group or the sample as a whole, and by comparing findings across groups of women as organized by their age, timing of the emergence of their same-sex attractions or bisexual identities, or by their racial identities, among other points of comparison.

Reflexivity and Positioning

To enhance the trustworthiness of interpretive data analysis, researchers must develop strategies to raise their awareness of internal biases and be alert to how those biases might influence the research process. My prior knowledge of aging sexuality is informed by years of academic study, prior research interviews with older women, direct practice in aging services and long-term care settings, and my personal experiences of bisexuality and LGBTQ communities. Consistent memoing allowed me to process the influence of this prior knowledge and my own positioning as a young bisexual woman and researcher throughout the full research process, providing space to make sense of and reflect on each interview and the analytic process, and to document key decisions at each stage of the analysis. The data analysis process, emerging themes, and reflexive memos were discussed and further developed or honed through discussion with academic supervisors, providing opportunities for reflection, new perspectives, and challenges to my interpretations (Gilgun, 2015). These mentors also provided their own interpretations of the possible motivations, thoughts, and feelings of the study participants, allowing for the benefit of multiple perspectives, particularly at steps that

involved more interpretation on the part of the researcher. The assessment of quality in qualitative research also requires authors to position themselves relative to their own work, allowing the audience to fully interpret the research process (Levitt et al., 2018). To serve this purpose, aspects of my own positioning that were particularly relevant to this study are presented. Additionally, certain aspects of my own positioning will be further discussed in later chapters when particularly relevant to the interpretation of findings.

Being a Bisexual(ity) Researcher. As a younger bisexual woman with a history of bisexuality research and LGBTQ community organizing, I have seen that while the term “LGBTQ” and the rainbow flag celebrate a diverse population and sense of pride, these symbols do not erase the historical and current tensions within LGBTQ communities, fractures that splinter our common goals. Openly identifying myself as a bisexual woman may have compelled participants to read me as having particular insight into this experience as a fellow traveler, sharing in the joys and challenges associated with bisexual experiences inside and outside LGBTQ community. As a pertinent example, while describing historical tensions between lesbian and bisexual women, Rennie stopped to ask me if things had “gotten better” over the years, implying that my experience might reflect her own. I have likely benefited from this perception of commonality in many instances, perhaps assumed to be safe and supportive, a welcome guest in participants’ homes, worthy of the honor of hearing their stories because in some ways, it is my story as well.

While this sense of commonality may create safety and openness in in-person interviews, I took care to remind myself of my privilege as an insider, resisting the temptation to push all others outside our circle of safety, or reinforce the “us versus

them” narrative. I reminded myself that the fractures in queer communities, which might have positioned me as an “us” and not a “them” in the minds of participants, did not arise as a result of body-obsessed young gay men, feminist separatist lesbians, treacherous bisexuals who chose to pass for protection, or trans and gender non-conforming folks whose politics make them too radical to play nice with others. These are, in fact, only stories that we tell ourselves about our own community: that trouble comes from within. Instead, my positioning as a critical feminist informs my assertion that these fractures are the all too common result of living within a society that doles out oppression and domination along strict lines of social positioning. It would be too easy for me to blame lesbians for the social isolation of bisexual women, such as in the context of Rennie’s life story. Not only is this a common story in prior bisexual narratives (Orndorff, 1999; McLean, 2008), but I too have felt hurt, judged, and held at arm’s length by many lesbian-identified women in the past.

It is telling that I feel the need to offer this clarification to quell fears of internal strife in LGBTQ communities and to avoid the pitfalls of the “bisexual traitor” archetype, for myself and for the participants in this study. Being a member of an LGBTQ community may make me suspect as a researcher in this area for how could I possibly leave my own experiences and preconceptions behind? On the other hand, I have little interest in holding my work at arms-length, so as to appear “objective,” and much more interest in being awake to and transparent about my own subjectivity. For it is my own stake in LGBTQ aging that brings me to this work in the first place.

Being a younger bisexual researcher also placed me in the role of expert in some ways and denied me expertise in others. As a doctoral candidate, I have spent five years studying, reading and writing about bisexuality and sexual identities. Presenting myself

to the world and participants as in pursuit of a doctoral degree on a particular topic may construct me as a scholarly expert in their eyes. This combined with the common assumption that older adults might be out of touch with politically correct or popular terminology related to sexuality and gender may have triggered some defensiveness or insecurity among participants. This dynamic is in part why after completing several interviews, I began to ask, “How do you define bisexuality *for yourself?*” rather than “How do you define bisexuality?” While the latter question seemed to imply that I was quizzing participants for the “correct” answer, the former implied an acknowledgement that definitions will vary by individual and could have personal resonance outside of what definition might be in vogue at the current moment.

Despite my training and age, my expertise might be questionable when it comes to knowledge and lived experiences of major historical events relevant to LGBTQ communities. For instance, my understanding of the Stonewall riots is limited to what I have gleaned from books, film, and art, placing me at a distance from this historical event. In contrast, several participants noted their personal memories of hearing about the riots on television or in newspapers and their emotional reactions at the time, memories I will only have access to through their eyes. A belief in the importance of passing down and documenting this history likely influenced some women to participate in a study like this one. Moreover, because of my lack of first-hand experience of certain historical events and popular culture references, I was able to ask for more clarification and thorough explanations than an older interviewer may have received. As an illustrative example, it was useful at times not to reveal what I have read or heard about popular figures, such as singer songwriter and LGBTQ activist Holly Near, so that

participants would more fully describe to me Near's place in history and culture from their perspectives.

Women as We Age. My positioning as a cisgender (meaning not transgender or gender non-binary) bisexual woman, similar to all participants, may have allowed them to assume I would understand the same gendered experiences and power dynamics they described. However, the common bonds of womanhood and bisexuality may have been disrupted by the difference in our ages. In my past experience interviewing older adults, this difference in age can manifest itself in many ways. Being a young person might excuse me from a lack of knowledge of historical events, position me as a beneficiary of an elder's wisdom and experience, or be a source of humor, provoking teasing, knowing smiles, and advice from participants during the interview process. Particularly when interviewing older women, I receive a good deal of "life lessons" as if I were a mentee, I am asked how my experience differs from their own and am told what to expect from my own aging process. For instance, I distinctly recall a moment in my interview with Shane who after describing her decreased sexual motivation in later life said, "You'll see," followed by a knowing smile. These conversation dynamics indicate a shared knowledge between us, for we both know that I will someday be in the same position, of the same age, looking back on more years of life lived and fewer years yet to come.

I consider it an honor to be in the position of learning from the knowledge and experience of elders who willingly share their experiences with me. However, I cannot possibly imagine what it means to have lived a life of 60 years or more through a different historical context, which limits my ability to interpret the motivations of a woman who has. For this reason, my supervisory committee played a crucial role in helping me to imagine possible motivations that might drive and inform an older

woman to tell a story in a particular way, to hedge her words, or to construct her own identity with certain discursive strategies. My supervisory committee is made up of thoughtful women who find themselves in midlife or later who have also shared with me their advice, knowledge, and wisdom. It is because of my many experiences with women mentors that I recognize when a participant has treated me as her mentee, not only sharing or reporting information, but *bestowing* knowledge.

Summary of Findings

As described, the coding process produced two emergent types of constructions of bisexuality: 1) those that constructed the emergence of bisexuality over the life course and 2) those that constructed bisexuality specifically in the context of later life. Thus, the findings are addressed in two chapters to reflect these two types of constructions. First, the *Unfolding of Lives* provides a description of two groups of participants who constructed the emergence and development of their bisexuality in distinctive ways and drew on different societal discourses and cultural influences in doing so. Secondly, in *Bisexuality: Limits of Language and Potential of Lives*, I illustrate that participants constructed bisexual identities as a label that is too narrow and limiting to capture the complexity of their lives and relationships. This limitation is contrasted with definitions of bisexuality as freedom, potential, and possibility. Both chapters answer the first research question by illustrating the linguistic tools older bisexual women use to construct their bisexual identities and connecting these constructions to larger discourses. Both sections also answer the second research question by accounting for the influence of key cultural and historical events as well as how those events intersected with the individual timing of participants' lives.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: UNFOLDING OF LIVES

Sample Description

An overview of the sample demographics is presented in Table 1. Twelve cisgender, bisexual-identified women participated in the study and their ages ranged from 60-77 years (Mean=65, Median=61.5). Five were born in the Midwest, three in the Pacific Northwest, three in the Northeast, and one in the Southeast. Nine women identified as White or Caucasian, two identified as Black or African American and one identified as Asian American. Participants were raised in families of origin with widely varying class backgrounds. All had attended a four-year college and a majority had completed some graduate work. At the time of the interview, five participants were in long-term relationships with women (three legally married and two partnered), five were in long-term relationships with men (three legally married and two partnered), one participant identified as polyamorous and was in relationships with two men, and one was single. No participants were or had previously been in relationships with individuals who identified as transgender or gender non-binary. While the study criteria required that participants currently identify as bisexual, most participants also used other labels to describe their identities concurrently, including queer (N=7), lesbian (N=2), hasbian (someone who *has been* a lesbian; N=2), and pansexual (N=1). Although this summary is limited to participants' sexual identities at the time of data collection, the long-term development and changes to sexual identity will be discussed in more detail throughout the findings.

Table 1:
Participant Demographics by Age

Pseud.	Born (age)	Birthplace	Race/Ethnicity	Current Relationship (number of years)	Current Sexual Identity
Mary	1957 (60)	Midwest	Caucasian/White	Married to a woman (20)	Bisexual
Naomi	1957 (60)	Pacific Northwest	Caucasian/White	Married to a man (36)	Bisexual
Tori	1956 (60)	Southeast	African American/Black	Partnered with 2 men (7, 12)	Bisexual, queer
Rennie	1956 (60)	Midwest	Caucasian/White (Jewish)	Married to a man (24)	Bisexual, hasbian, queer
Mona	1955 (61)	Pacific Northwest	Asian American	Partnered with a woman (15)	Bisexual, pansexual, queer
Rachel	1955 (62)	Midwest	Caucasian/White	Married to a man (17)	Bisexual, hasbian, queer
Shane	1952 (65)	Northeast	Caucasian/White	Partnered with a man (36)	Bisexual, queer
Joy	1951 (66)	Midwest	Caucasian/White	Single	Bisexual
Petra	1950 (67)	Northeast	Caucasian/White	Partnered with a woman (5)	Bisexual, queer
Alma	1949 (69)	Northeast	African American/ Black	Married to a woman (4)	Bisexual, lesbian
Olga	1944 (73)	Midwest	Caucasian/White	Married to a woman (4)	Bisexual, lesbian
Sydney	1941 (77)	Pacific Northwest	Caucasian/White	Partnered with a man (40 years)	Bisexual, queer

The first chapter of the findings addresses distinctions between two groups of women, the *Early Emergers* and the *Mature Migrators*. These groups were distinguished by the ways in which they constructed their bisexual identities as emergent over the life course as well as by the timing of the emergence of their attractions to women. The Collective Timeline presents key shifts in each participant's sexual identity and significant relationships and is shown in Figure 4. In the figure, birth years are indicated along with two lines for each participant: the top line indicates the participants' sexual identity and the bottom line indicates their primary sexual or romantic relationships and behaviors. Although many of the participants used more

than one label to describe their sexual identity at the time of their interview and over the course of their lives, Figure 4 is limited to the inclusion of lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual identities, which captured most participants' most significant or key shifts in identity and which provide the most important context for the interpretation of findings.

Heterosexual identities and no sexual identity are combined into a single color scheme as it was often unclear in the early stages of a woman's life whether she identified with heterosexuality, was ascribing to the "default" sexual identity as perceived by others, or was not using any identity label to define her sexuality. While I realize that this combination may unintentionally reinforce the assumption of heterosexuality as the default sexual identity, the choice also makes intuitive sense, as many individuals do not tend to "come out" as or recall a specific moment in which they began using "heterosexual" as an identity label. For instance, although Shane described falling in love with girl friends in her teens, she stated that eventually, "[she] was heterosexual, because that's what you do." Based on Shane's description, it is not entirely clear if she explicitly identified as heterosexual or simply began acting solely on her sexual desires toward men at this point. This was a common issue in reviewing the early years of participants' lives. In terms of relationships, the lines begin slightly later than identity lines indicating the time at which a participant described beginning to have sexual or romantic experiences with others. For most, this began in their teens or early 20s, with the exception of four women who reported kissing or sexually experimenting with girls and/or boys in early childhood.

Overall, it is clear from Figure 4 that seven participants had been bisexual-identified for the majority of their lives with the exception of Rachel, Naomi, Mary,

Alma, and Olga. Based on this pattern as well as patterns in the discursive constructions of bisexuality, the Early Emergers and the Mature Migrators were separated in the figure to visually illustrate the difference in the timing of their attractions to women and significant relationships. The Early Emergers were characterized by their early attractions to women (mid-20s or earlier), their emphasis on biological constructions of sexuality, and the influence of cultural and historical factors on these patterns and discursive constructions. In contrast, the Mature Migrators recognized their attractions to women in their 30s or later, were relatively disconnected from their cultural context, and constructed the emergence of their same-sex attractions as a “migration” process spurred by a “light bulb” moment, which challenged biological narratives.

Originally, it seemed that the two groups would be characterized by the timing of the emergence of their bisexual identity rather than the timing of their recognized attractions to girls or women. In contrast to most empirical literature that emphasizes identity, I chose to emphasize the experience of attractions to women since the emergence of attractions was more consistent with patterns in discursive constructions. As an illustrative example, the importance of this distinction is evident when considering Rachel’s life course. While Rachel did not identify as bisexual until her 40s, she was attracted to other young girls in early childhood and identified as a lesbian from age 21-41. Despite the 20 years she spent identifying as a lesbian, Rachel’s life course was more similar to the other Early Emergers rather than the Mature Migrators, due to spending the majority of her life as a sexual minority. Additionally, Rachel constructed her bisexuality as an innate and constant biological trait that was deeply influenced by the historical context of the Sexual Revolution and feminist movement, which was a strong and consistent among all Early Emergers.

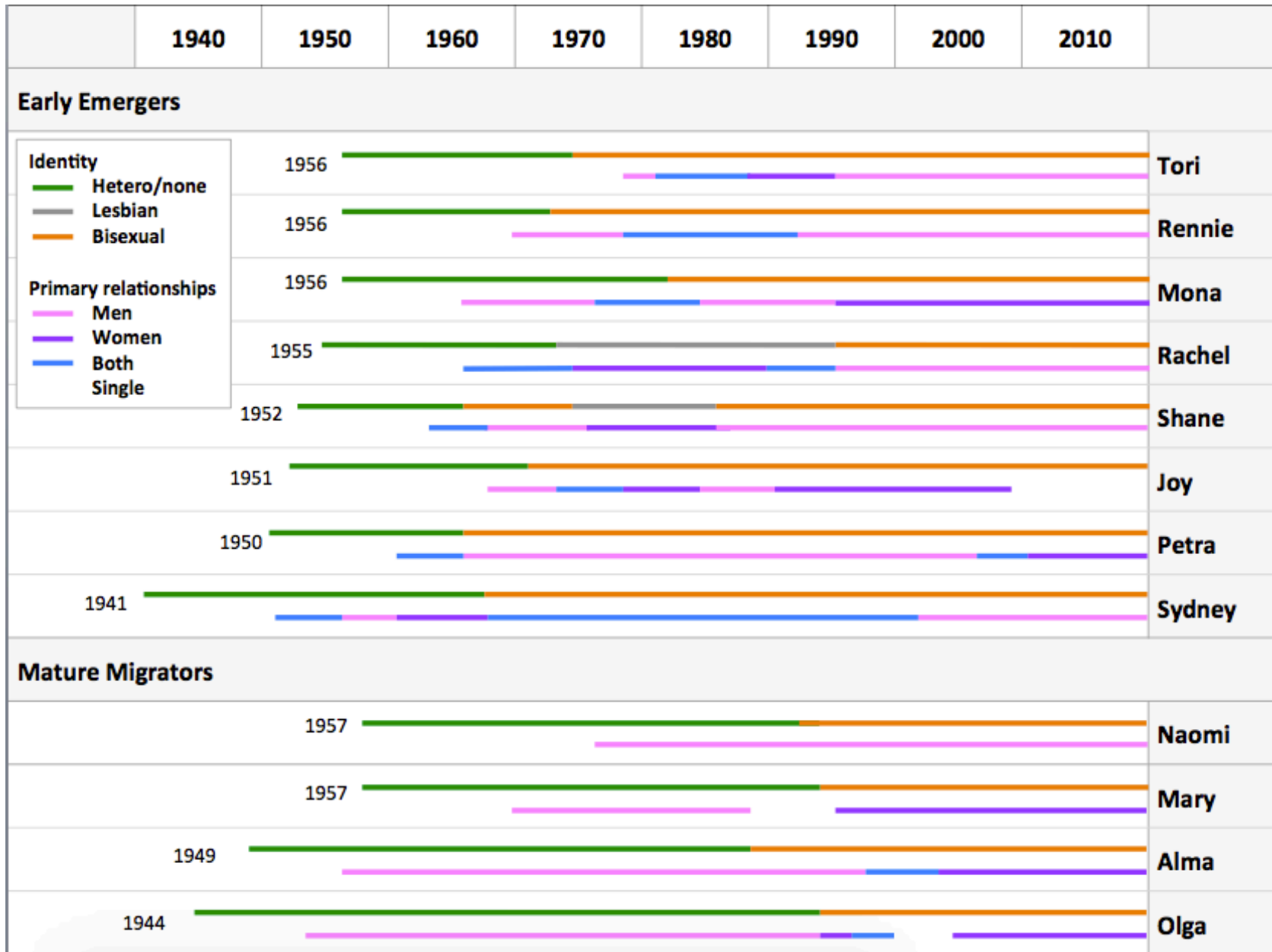


Figure 4. Collective Timeline

In order to address the historical context of the participants' lives, I also created a timeline of all the historical events that were referenced by the participants during their interviews, which is presented in Table 2. While a wide range of historical events were discussed in relation to the participants' personal narratives, a large portion of these events fell between the mid-1960s and early 1970s, indicating that this time period and contemporaneous political and social movements were highly influential in their life stories. This interpretation of the importance of events during the 1960s and 1970s is consistent with the way these events were described, particularly by the Early Emergers who emphasized the impact of the Sexual Revolution and the feminist movement in particular in shaping their bisexual constructions. These events also contributed a useful context in which to interpret the motivation and meaning behind those constructions. Some key historical events from Table 2 are included in the presented quotes, particularly including those that informed multiple participants' constructions of their bisexuality. There are also references to key historical figures or publications, such as bell hooks or the feminist pamphlet *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, which are also indicative of the influence of the Civil Rights movement, gay liberation, and feminist thinking during the 1960s and 1970s.

In the following two sections of this chapter, I present findings by group in order to illustrate the distinct discursive constructions of bisexuality first from the Early Emerges followed by the Mature Migrators. Particular discursive constructions or influences are highlighted and possible explanations or motivations for these discursive strategies are described. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings related to these two groups of women.

Table 2.
Historical Events from Interviews

Time Period	Historical Event
Prior to 1900	European Pogrom
1900s	
1910s	
1920s	
1930s	
1940s	World War II Bataan Death March
1950s	Anti-Domestic Violence Movement Legalization of contraceptives Vietnam War and Anti-War protests Civil Rights movement Black Power movement Sexual Revolution/Free Love
1960s	Feminist/Women's movement 1968- Death of MLK 1968- Prague Spring 1969- National Democratic Convention Riots 1969- Stonewall Riots Kent State shooting Early Pride Parades
1970s	Watergate scandal Gay Liberation movement 1973- Roe vs. Wade
1980s	Reagan public policy/cuts to Medicaid funding HIV/AIDS epidemic
1990s	Murder of Matthew Shepard
2000s	
	Black Lives Matter movement 2015- U.S. vs. Windsor
2010s	2016 Presidential election 2018- Me Too movement 2018- Parkland school shooting and Never Again movement

Note: Only those events that were mentioned by the participants are included in the timeline.

Early Emergers

Biological Constructions

The Early Emergers included seven women who recognized their attractions to women as early as the age of 5 and as late as their early 20s. Rachel, Shane, Sydney, and Petra described attractions to other young girls beginning in early childhood, constructing these attractions as so natural and organic that they assumed attraction to multiple genders was a common experience. These attractions began earliest for Sydney, who described her sexuality as a “hardwired” biological function.

Sydney: I think, because we’re talking about bisexuality, I should say that I was kissing girls and kissing boys. And that went on. I was very comfortable with that, that was my life and I think I was probably in adolescence before it even dawned on me that everybody else wasn’t just like me...I think there’s a lot about sexual orientation that is hardwired. And it’s so deeply hardwired that it’s hard to imagine that somebody else could be operating from another frame of reference. And I gradually realized that apparently there were people who specialized in one gender or the other.

While Petra also described, “kissing the neighbor girl behind the lilac bushes” as a young girl, she did not describe the same deeply felt, biological attraction during that time. It was not until college that Petra experienced more intense and satisfying physical contact with another woman. However, in retrospect, she stated that she had “always” been attracted to women, but was simply unable to find an outlet for her attractions in childhood beyond kissing other girls in secret. Tori also described realizing her in 20s that she “had always been attracted to women,” but had denied or failed to recognize these attractions. In fact, whether they deeply felt sense of sexual attraction in childhood or recognized their attractions only in retrospect, all of the Early Emergers’ believed they had always been attracted women. This construction of bisexuality implies a stable, biological basis of sexuality that may or may not be recognized in earlier periods of life.

In terms of broader discourses of sexuality, this biological construction aligns with or may be informed by a “born this way” narrative that has been politically useful for LGBTQ communities in normalizing or naturalizing minority sexual identities. The felt need to explain or normalize their experiences may have motivated Early Emergers to align their stories with this cultural discourse.

Heteronormative Influences

By constructing her sexuality as a biological source of difference between herself and others and “toning down [her] behavior” so as not to draw attention to that difference, Sydney acknowledged the influence of heteronormative social expectations and pressures to conform. By building on Adrienne Rich’s (1980) discussion of compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity refers to the cultural assumption of heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation and the only natural form of relations between the binary categories of male/man and female/woman (Warner, 1991). This assumption renders queer attractions and relationships culturally unthinkable or illegible as acceptable ways of being (Rich, 1980). As a result, individuals who experience same-sex attractions may repress those attractions, conceal their sexual identity, or not engage in same-sex behaviors and relationships in order to avoid internalized conflict and social marginalization.

Shane and Petra described this social pressure as preventing them from pursuing relationships with girls and women earlier in life, although they were aware of their attractions to women beginning in middle school. While Shane’s girl friends were willing to kiss her, this behavior was framed and mutually understood as experimentation and her friends made it clear that they were not interested in pursuing a relationship further. Similarly, when Petra described kissing a girl in her neighborhood, she stated a mutual

understanding that they were “only practicing for boys,” illustrating heteronormative overtones in the construction of physical contact between young girls. This construction also implies that the only acceptable form of kissing among young girls is in preparation for assumed, eventual heterosexual relationships and this social pressure was known to Petra even as an 8-year-old.

Her girl friends’ lack of interest and deeper attraction behind their sexual experimentation encouraged Shane to begin focusing her attention on boys instead, drawing on the assumption of heterosexuality as a societal norm.

Shane: ... I fell in love with [girl friend] and I knew I loved her and I was very forward, like the first person I kissed as a little girl was another girl, and I insisted that we try to kiss because I wanted that physical closeness and I was attracted to her...but she was not interested. Then I met another female friend, um [friend] who I also fell head over heels in love with and same thing, they were friends and they would let me kiss them, but then they wouldn’t let me go any further than that. So I became, you know, heterosexual because that’s what you do.

Contrary to the narrative of later recognition of same-sex attractions among bisexual women, Shane and Petra described heteronormative messages and the lack of a willing partner as the primary factors standing in the way of their early sexual experimentation with other girls. Thus, while the Early Emergers constructed their sexuality as a constant, biological trait, heteronormative pressures rendered early relationships with women inaccessible, thereby limiting their available options for sexual expression.

Discourses of Sexual Denial and Suppression

Beyond the cultural influence of heteronormativity, Early Emergers in particular described the religious values of their family of origin as creating feelings of confusion and guilt around their sexuality and contributing to their denial of early attractions to women. Nine participants, including all of the Early Emergers, had grown up in

religious homes and cited religious or moral discourses around sexuality as delaying the recognition of their attractions to women. Participants described religious families of origin as being Catholic (n=3), Jewish (2), Presbyterian (1), Christian (no specified denomination, 1), Lutheran (1), and Methodist (1). Those who were raised as Christian or Catholic placed the most emphasis on the impact of moral or religious discourses around sexuality.

While Joy's Catholic family did not communicate about sex, religious messages instilled the dangers of sexual immorality at a young age, making her attractions to women somewhat troubling at first:

Joy: I can still remember the first night that I had sexual feelings about women...that was very shocking to me having grown up as a Catholic, because I had grown up thinking that was a bad thing.

Tori also described denying her sexual attractions to women "because it wasn't something that you were supposed to admit to and certainly not something you were supposed to do." Foucault (1978) described family and religious institutions as societal structures that reproduce and maintain conventional norms and participants drew on both as influences on their early sexual expression and understanding. Both institutions transmitted messages about appropriate topics of conversation and moral or acceptable sexual behaviors, typically limited to sexual intercourse between a man and woman in the context of marriage. Petra even found the idea of discussing sexuality with her Catholic parents to be laughable and described confessing to the sin of "adultery" when she was 8 or 9 years old. Although she intended to confess to the sin of masturbation, she confused the two actions, since she only knew that both behaviors had to do with sexuality and were sinful in the eyes of the church. Tori and Shane even described violent reactions of their parents when they dared to ask about sex, contributing to

Shane's reflection that, "I learned from an early age that I couldn't talk to my mother about certain things."

Although Tori described her parents' violent outburst as directly related to their deeply held Christian faith, Shane was unsure exactly what cultural influence spurred her mother's strong negative reaction. In addition to their religious backgrounds, most women also described their families as what Rachel called the "typical 1950s family." For many, this meant that there were strict boundaries around gender norms and Rachel described feeling "humiliated" when her mother presented her with a gift of a lingerie and garter set as a teenager and interpreted this as her mother's attempt to "control" her. Traditional or conservative family cultures were also described as stifling sexual discussion or experimentation due to guilt or fear of social judgment. As a 5-year-old, Olga, a Mature Migrator, described the transmission of these messages.

Olga: A 13-year-old cousin got pregnant. And it was talked about in whispers. And whatever *it* was, you know it was all very fuzzy to me because I was five, but something had ruined her life. She did something awful and she was a bad girl. And I learned it had to do with her being pregnant...that same year [neighbor boy] ran around the neighborhood with nothing on! [laughs] And my mother came *unglued*. And I thought, "That's the same thing that happened to my cousin." I thought, "Oh, that must be what sex is. It's bad. You're naughty if you do it."

Olga gradually later came to resent these messages as she was exposed to sexism in high school and college, but the memory of this realization remained clearly emblazoned in her mind. This suppressive influence of traditional gender norms and silence or judgment around sexuality is commonly described among women raised by parents who belong to the Silent Generation (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Jen, 2017a; Loe, 2004). In the context of this study, the influence of sexual suppression due to traditional family values or norms was common among both Early Emergers and Mature

Migrators; however, the influence of familial and religious messages had an added meaning for the Early Emergers, inserting guilt and denial of one's true self into the context of early childhood, specifically in regard to their attractions to women.

The discourse of denial or suppression may have also helped Early Emergers to create a sense of coherence in uniting their biological constructions of sexuality with the ways in which their behaviors and actions did not align with that construction in their early life. Thus, their concrete biological constructions necessitated the balance of acknowledging the socially constructed discourses regarding sexuality to which they were exposed.

Normalcy of Sexual Exploration

In contrast to the suppressive influences of their childhood, all Early Emergers described a period of sexual "exploration" and "experimentation" in sexual relationships coinciding with their high school and college years. For Early Emergers who recognized their attractions to women in childhood, this period allowed them to continue experimenting sexually with men and women, while the others who had begun kissing or sexual experimenting solely with boys in childhood began to pursue relationships with women for the first time.

To characterize this period of time, several women described robust social networks of young people who were sexually experimenting outside the confines of monogamous, long-term relationships, allowing for the freedom to explore sexuality with partners of multiple genders or sexes. Rachel described her social circle in high school as "a group of boys and girls who were friends and sometimes people hooked up, but there wasn't a lot of pressure to hook up." This open, unpressured environment

allowed her to feel “comfortable being with people, both with men and women, boys and girls, safe to be flirty and extroverted and fun.” Similarly, Mona described the cultural emergence of rages, the hot tub club scene, and a collective sexual label of “free spirit.”

Mona: we would have rages all of the time and back then it was real popular to go to hot tub clubs...that’s kind of how I got to know my sexuality and that’s where all the free spirits were...we had all kinds of like, triad relationships and sexual exploits...for me, that was sexuality. That was like, I didn’t care, I just knew it felt good and it was fun.

This experimentation period was described as being fueled by the historical context of the late 1960s to mid 1970s and related cultural discourses. By aligning this historical context with the Collective Timeline, it is clear that all Early Emergers began to identify as bisexual between 1965 and 1975 aside from Mona, who was identifying either as a “free spirit” or with “no label” until the 1980s. Many women also noted the disco scene as a cultural influence during their teen and college years. Rennie described the joyful, collectivity of being in gay clubs as a young woman, dancing and singing along to “We Are Family” with her queer kin. This time period coincided with an explosion of polyamorous and experimental relationships she described as “wild and fun.” For many, this time period also brought them into close connection to LGBTQ community for the first time, creating a sense of belonging.

Participants constructed this time period of social and sexual exploration as “normal” in the context of the Sexual Revolution, free love movement, and the legal availability of birth control, the last of which were noted by Rachel and Joy.

S: Would you say you were having sex a lot in college?

Joy: Yeah, I would.

S: With a lot of different people?

Joy: Yeah.

S: Was it a good experience? Did you enjoy it?

Joy: Mostly. Yeah, mostly. But it just seemed like what everybody was doing in the early 70s when birth control was available, so that was what most people did.

S: Was pretty normal.

Joy: Yeah, it was pretty normal.

While many women of the same age have described sexual experimentation associated with this time period (Jen, 2017a; Loe, 2004), bisexual women in particular may have benefited from the normalcy of sexual exploration and openness in a different way. Exploration served as a means of recognizing and expressing attractions to women for the first time in the safety of open and accepting groups of young people. These women were not only experimenting with their sexual behaviors, but also with their sexual identities, leading to new possible sexual subjectivities.

The Non-feminist Bisexual who “Hasn’t Made up her Mind”

Several Early Emergers described introductions to feminist writing and values in their childhood or adolescence that informed their understandings of sexuality and gender. Rachel recalled bringing home *Lavender Jane Loves Women* as a teen and described an early memory of her mother reading *The Feminine Mystique* and crying for a week; Rennie’s mother gave her *A Room of One’s Own* to read when she was 12 years old; Petra stated that reading the “classic” feminist collection *Sisterhood is Powerful* as a college freshman “flipped [her] on [her] ass” and inspired her to break up with her high school boyfriend who she later perceived as having a “frat-boy mentality.” These early introductions encouraged Rachel to protest gender norms through dressing in androgynous or more masculine ways while Rennie learned to say “fuck no” to

unwanted sexual advances, and Petra developed new expectations for gendered dynamics in her romantic relationships.

These and other Early Emergers stated positive impacts that feminist discourses had on their ability to resist gendered expectations and to develop a sense of personal agency and power. This narrative is common among women of other sexual orientations and similar cohorts (Westwood, 2016). However, the participants also described the legacy of a political divide between bisexual women and lesbian communities. This divide arose in the context of the feminist lesbian separatist movement and has been documented in prior historical analyses and empirical research (Hartman, 2006; Rust, 1995; Udis-Kessler, 1995). Separatists included lesbians who chose to separate or disassociate from men, and from women who associated with men, in order to focus on building women-only communities that would not rely on, benefit from, or contribute to patriarchal structures.

In this study, lesbianism or lesbian identities were frequently constructed, consciously or unconsciously, as a philosophical equivalent to feminism or women-centered community by the Early Emergers, such as Rachel's comparison of a lesbian identity to "centering of [her] female self" and "being in community with strong women." In contrast, only two women also associated their bisexual identities with feminist ideals, indicating an internalized social message that bisexuality is perhaps of lesser moral value in the struggle to dismantle patriarchy. This influence was most clear to me while interviewing Petra when, after citing separatist activist Ti-Grace Atkinson's quote, "Feminism is the philosophy; Lesbianism is the practice," she laughed and then looked out of her living room window and quietly said, "I don't know if that's true."

As a former lesbian of 20 years, Rachel had a unique perspective to offer regarding sources of social marginalization and internalized stigma among older bisexual women. She described how her long history in a lesbian community and her former lesbian feminist separatist identity made it especially challenging for her to come to terms with her bisexuality.

Rachel: I remember the early second wave suspicion of trans issues...and I am not a TERF [trans-exclusionary radical feminist]. I have just recently in the last couple of years understood that. That's like creepy. That's ugly. That's not feminist. But I remember the etiology of that sentiment, because women's space was so sacred. And it was constantly under assault and we were very, very defensive over it and so yes, I do feel a loss [over my lesbian identity]...[a bisexual] identity neutralized my profile when I applied to the [LGBTQ organization] job, because I didn't know if bisexual women would be okay. 'Cause I knew there were dykes on the committee...and when I sat with [lesbian committee member] and came out to her I was very nervous about it. Because she's older than me and she was part of that whole...epic of intense separatism. I didn't know personally if she was a separatist. And she was reassuring, but I...in the conversation I had with her, I experienced my own personal sadness at not being lesbian identified. It was a source of great personal power and...um, so, yeah I do miss it.

Rachel had personally experienced the negative impacts of separatism as a bisexual woman, such as discomfort with disclosing her bisexuality, particularly to lesbians, feeling a sense of loss over her lesbian-identified self, and being distanced from former community members. However, she also communicated an understanding of the intended goals behind separatist ideals, not only through empathy for the movement, but also in the form of her own past beliefs, revealing a unique potential source of internalized conflict among older bisexual women. Although almost all of Rachel's lesbian friends were supportive of her transition to identifying as bisexual and her newfound relationship with a man, her narrative conveyed a deep sense of grief over her losses of her lesbian identity, former life, and sense of belonging in lesbian circles. She

stated that if the cultural and political context had been less polarized at the time, she might “have been identified as bisexual from the get-go,” but as it was, she struggled with confusion when she fell in love with a man in her 40s because she had “bought into the whole ‘You’re just a fence-sitter’ 1970s pejorative...that icky-ness around bisexuality, that they were traitors and not safe.”

Several participants also described having been frequently encouraged to “be your real self,” “choose one or the other,” or “make up your mind” when first entering lesbian communities in early adulthood. These messages imply that their only real options were to completely engage with or leave lesbian spaces, choosing to pursue relationships with men or women, but not both. These messages, while perhaps informed by feminist ideals, also indicate a broader societal inflexibility that maintains binary constructions of sexuality and contribute to the invalidation of bisexuality as a real or authentic sexual identity both inside and outside LGBTQ spaces (Eisner, 2013).

Racial and class-based differences further complicated negative experiences in LGBTQ and feminist spaces. Tori’s friends at an LGBTQ church had frequently introduced her to new acquaintances by saying, “This is [Tori]. You’ll have to excuse her, she hasn’t made up her mind yet,” in reference to her bisexuality. Her experiences of judgment or invalidation were deepened in spaces where Tori was the only or one of few Black attendees. She described longing for a community of Black, feminist women and a reliable means of transportation so that she could attend private play parties organized by and for women of color to which she had been invited. Mona spoke of her bisexuality as isolating her in both LGBTQ spaces and communities of color. A defining feature of Mona’s childhood was a complete lack of Asian LGBTQ elders or mentors she could look up to and learn from. When she joined a group of younger Asian and Pacific Islander

LGBTQ women, she described feeling judged for her age, class, and background, particularly regarding her history of doing sex work in her 20s. In answer to this judgment, she exclaimed, “This is stuff that women of color do to survive! But that wasn’t part of their analysis” in reference to the group members.

These negative experiences had a lasting influence on the Early Emergers’ perceptions of lesbians, and other sexual or gender minorities, as potential community members, friends, and sexual or romantic partners. Mona characterized a recent experience of exclusion from lesbian spaces as one of many times she had “felt the hatred of lesbian women.” Shane’s characteristic enthusiasm dropped out of the conversation when she stated that, “a lot of hard core lesbians don’t want anything to do with a bisexual.” Rennie described being attacked in lesbian organizing spaces, being thrown out of gay bars, and only dating the “lesbians who would have me.” In order to avoid negative interactions, participants consistently described coming out to potential lesbian partners very early in their relationships “because if she’s not going to be cool with it, I’d rather know.” They also used the discursive strategy of warding off bisexual stereotypes in the process, such as Petra who said to her future wife, “when I’m with someone I don’t look at anyone else, man or woman. I’m a one-woman kind of girl.”

Participants communicated that these strategies were necessitated by the context of a society unfriendly to bisexual individuals. They are also strategies that illustrate participants’ agency. While some bisexual individuals choose to conceal their sexuality in the context of long-term relationships, all of the Early Emergers described early disclosure tactics and framed them as a way to screen potential partners, acknowledge their true selves, and to protect their own time and energy.

Mature Migrants

Fluid Migration Spurred by a “Light Bulb Moment”

The Mature Migrants included Mary (who recognized her attractions to other women at age 35), Naomi (at age 39), Alma (at age 47), and Olga (at age 50). At the time of their interviews, three were in long-term relationships with other women, with the exception of Naomi who had been in a long-term marriage to a man since her early 20s, or essentially her whole adult life. The Mature Migrant’s constructions of bisexuality were frequently limited to the later portions of the interview as they did not experience themselves as bisexual individuals until their 30s or later. In fact, Alma and I talked for over an hour and ten minutes before she even used the word “bisexual” in her interview. Therefore, I focus the findings related to their narratives on the later portions of their life narratives, using their early life mainly to provide context for interpretation of their constructions of bisexuality.

For many participants, mid- to later adulthood often took the form of a more reflective approach to sexuality, and life in general, and establishing or experiencing disruptions to long-term relationships. These transitions were often described as sudden, traumatic, and confusing, particularly for the Mature Migrants. For all of the Mature Migrants, a major discursive concept was that of a *light bulb moment*, as Mary described it. When asked how her bisexuality “developed,” perhaps implying a drawn out process through my own wording choice, Mary stated a specific age at which her bisexual identity emerged within the first two minutes of her interview.

S: Okay, so starting with when you were born until today, how has your bisexuality developed?

Mary: You can put down age 35.

S: Age 35, okay. [laughs]

Mary : [laughs] I was a slow one, I guess.

During her interview, which was the third overall, I asked Mary multiple times to describe the details of her “process” of developing a bisexual identity. I asked whether she had discussed it with anyone, sought out resources to learn about it, or how she knew bisexuality was an option available to her. In response, she consistently stated that she “did not process it,” that once she recognized her attractions she “just knew.” These multiple exchanges (which I viewed, at the time, as fruitless attempts to gain clarity) indicated a disconnect in coherence such that I, in the early stages of the interviewing process, was still immersed in the construct of an extended process of identity development. While this conceptualization was informed by my prior knowledge of bisexuality and the broader LGBTQ literature as well as my own personal experience of bisexual identity formation, my inability to let go of a certain line of questioning illustrated my own limited ability to envision diverse patterns of identity development. Mary’s consistent response that her identity had altered in a single moment encouraged me to alter how I asked about bisexual narratives in future interviews, allowing participants more space to construct their own reality and placing more weight on their own interpretations of their life story.

Creating this space allowed for a key characteristic of the Mature Migrants to emerge, which was their construction of bisexual attractions as emergent and fluid. While sexual fluidity may seem at odds with the suddenness of the light bulb moment, what participants described was the potential for their sexuality to change in later life in contrast to the consistent, biological trait described by the Early Emergers and this construction requires a kind of fluid sexuality that is possible, even if not realized. Older

adults who come to identify as sexual minorities in later life are often placed into a discourse of denial, in which internalized homophobia, disapproving social context, and fears of exclusion or marginalization would keep one from admitting to, acknowledging, or recognizing same-sex attractions (Larson, 2006; Udis-Kessler, 1995). While several Early Emergers aligned their constructions of bisexuality within this discourse, the Mature Migrants did not state that they had “always” been attracted to women or that a particular cultural influence had kept them from recognizing or acknowledging their attractions earlier in life. Rather, their attractions to women were described as having come on suddenly, as an expression of one’s sexuality that was new, rather than suppressed.

Participants described their light bulb moment as a single, visceral moment of attraction to a particular woman. In fact, each woman could describe that memory in detail, including the woman of interest. For Mary, it was a mall guard, for Naomi, a fellow organization member, for Olga, a visiting colleague, and for Alma, a coworker. This light bulb moment was constructed as the turning point at which migration began. Olga was able to recall the exact location in which she stood when she was first attracted to another woman and she described this experience as a confusing new reality.

Olga: So I was never attracted to a woman sexually until I was past 50...it was a colleague who was traveling from [out of town]. And I had agreed to meet with her because we were in the same field and so we walked around [a lake] because I didn’t have much time...And I can tell you exactly where we were on the lake, we were in front of [a specific landmark] and I was *physically* attracted to her. It was so confusing! Incredibly confusing! I mean there I was, 50 years old, give or take. I was married, I mean, it was incredibly confusing. It was a source of worry, I think, because I had drunk the water of homophobia. I mean, it’s not that I didn’t like people who were gay, but I had a *thing* there.

While Olga acknowledged the potential impact of her own internalized homophobia, she does so in the context of explaining her confusion and worry, rather than explaining repressed or suppressed sexual attractions. This narrative challenges the assumption of sexual attraction as a stable or fixed biological reality, suggesting that the construction of a stable sexuality is limited in its application.

One could argue that the Mature Migrants simply continued to deny their own early life same-sex attractions, even if they are not aware of this. In fact, this reading of denial was my initial impression of Mary's story as she acknowledged the widespread nature of the discourse of denial, stating that she wondered, when she experienced attraction to a woman for the first time, whether she had simply been "slow to develop" or "blind" to her own feelings, and asking, "Where have I been all this time?" However, a discursive analysis suggests that the Mature Migrants construct their experiences not as a *coming out* process of eventually revealing one's true self, but more so as a *migration* process, acknowledging the fluidity of one's sexuality and the capacity for sexual attractions to undergo changes over the full course of a life.

Challenges of Late Life Migration

Like Olga, Alma was married to a man at the time she experienced attraction to a woman for the first time, which contributed to what she described as a difficult transition following her light bulb moment.

Alma: So I was working with some folks in the organization development department...and one of the people I was working with was this woman, [N], and she and I just got really, really tight and basically I fell in love with her and we had, I guess you would call it an affair because I was married, and um...and I tried to figure out is there any way to be married and have this relationship with her? You know, how is this going to work? Ultimately, I couldn't figure it out. So she and I broke up, which was really

hard because she and I were so intently connected, and [ex-husband] and I did a bunch of counseling stuff...for 2 or 3 years. And then we got divorced.

Following their divorces, Alma and Olga dated both men and women for a period of time before finding their eventual wives. While Mary, who was single at the time of her light bulb moment, did not appear to engage in a complex or difficult self-discovery period, both Alma and Olga described a multi-year process of transition and self-acceptance, which for Olga was punctuated by devastating moments, in which she managed the fallout of her divorce and kept the “lesbian side” of things quiet in her work life for several years. It was not until she met a middle-aged gay man who shared with her a similar story of confusion and self-doubt that she was able to find a “lifeline” to hold onto. These differing reactions to the same shift in identity illustrate the wide variety of possible identity-based narratives, even among women who migrated to a new sexual identity in mid- to later life. Mature Migrators also clearly described potential challenges related to coming to identify as bisexual in the context of midlife, such as coming out to and protecting one’s children, accessing LGBTQ peers after half a lifetime lived outside LGBTQ communities, and navigating this new experience while having a well-established and reputable career to maintain.

Although Naomi’s identity migration process had looked somewhat similar and occurred at a similar age compared to the other Mature Migrators, her life context differed greatly from the others’ at the time of her interview. Naomi’s shift in identity did not coincide with the end of a long-term relationship nor the start of a new one, as she had been married to the same man since her 20s. She and her husband both developed bisexual attractions within the context of their long-term marriage and attended swinging parties together for several years. However, as Naomi’s husband

began to experience declines in physical ability, their sexual lives became more and more limited, until Naomi felt she was playing more of a caregiving role than that of a wife. In recent years, as the quality of her marriage began to decline due to caregiving tensions, she had formed an intense emotional relationship with a woman who lived in the same retirement community as Naomi and her husband. However, shortly before her interview, this friend had moved to a more affordable location and they were unable to see each other regularly. That woman had been one of the only retirement community members who Naomi had felt comfortable coming out to. For Naomi, the context of later life had clearly brought its own challenges that intersected with and reinforced the relative invisibility and unexplored nature of her bisexuality.

Disconnected from Cultural Context

Another significant difference between the discursive constructions of bisexuality between the two groups was the influence of cultural context during early adulthood. As the only Mature Migrator to describe a period of sexual exploration similar to the Early Emergers, Alma humorously declared that, “in college, because it was the ’60s and because you could, I basically slept with a lot of guys” and regretted only that she had not yet realized “that women were an option” at the time. Although Alma had a similar experience of explorative sexuality in early adulthood, she also pointed to a key point of contrast between the experiences of the Early Emergers and Mature Migrants, which was their sense of connection to cultural context.

Alma was raised in a politically involved family. Her brother, who was involved with the Black Panther party, brought revolutionary thinkers home to visit and the family would engage in debates regarding the relative merits of the Civil Rights and

Black Power movements over Friday night dinners. However, although Alma was highly aware of racial issues and her own Black identity as a child and while she fondly recalled living through the turbulent 1960s during her undergraduate college years, the immersive medical school and residency experience of her 20s and 30s limited Alma's exposure to the women's movement.

Alma: I always say I went to school at the best time to go to college, because it was the late '60s, early '70s, so there was a lot of social engagement going on. People were protesting the Vietnam War and there were social issues and civil rights issues...but one of the things about med school and residency is that I feel like I missed...like the peak of the women's movement. I was like totally distracted from any of that stuff that was going on. Just totally missed it. So I had to get caught up later on...Because people were having consciousness-raising groups and, you know, look-at-your-cervix groups and I had no idea that any of that stuff was going on, so it was something I had to learn about.

It was in midlife that Alma returned to graduate school, exposing her to scholarly writing of women of color, such as bell hooks and Cherrie Moraga. At this time she described developing feelings of distance between herself and her husband, contributing to her recognition of attractions to other women and her eventual divorce, which she described as a major "turning point" in her life story. Olga also described being immersed in her studies and moving outside the continental U.S. where she felt distanced from the turbulent political context of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Olga: I might be an outlier in this sense because um...I was a very serious student, born into a very serious circumstance...So I was studying so hard that I whipped through university...then I lived in [European city]...then we came back and I did my doctoral program. So all of this stuff going on, it was sort of in the background, I mean, Watergate, it was sort of in the background of what I was doing, which was studying like crazy...we were pretty riveted on our careers so we missed some of the cultural stuff. I missed out on a lot of the social stuff.

As another example of the Mature Migrants' disconnection from cultural influences, discursive constructions of bisexuality as in tension with lesbian communities or philosophically distanced from feminism were largely limited to the Early Emergers. Although two Mature Migrants, commented that they were aware of the biphobic stereotypes and stigma in lesbian or feminist communities, they were describing historical dynamics they learned of later in life, in contrast to the deep personal hurt and grief described by Early Emergers. Thus, the Mature Migrants may not have benefitted from the same positive influences of feminism, but they also did not seem to carry the same sense of hurt or grief related to negative experiences in feminist or lesbian communities as the Early Emergers. As further evidence of this discursive impact, Mature Migrants Olga and Alma even described using both "lesbian" and "bisexual" as labels for their own sexual identity in varying contexts in later life, which would seem an unthinkable discursive possibility for the Early Emergers, a limitation likely imposed by their perception of mutually exclusive categories informed by their relation to feminist philosophies.

Summary

The *Unfolding of Lives* reveals two groups of women who construct the emergence of their bisexual attractions, behaviors, and identities in different ways. Early Emergers construct early sexual attractions as biological and innate, suggesting a stable or fixed sexuality that is ultimately revealed or recognized despite culturally imposed pressures. Their narratives supported the confining influence of cultural and religious context, shaping denial as a key factor that delayed recognition of their attractions to women. In contrast, Mature Migrants' challenged the construction of a typical "coming

out” process and the discourse of denial, instead creating space for fluidity and potential for change in their sexuality over time. These differences call for acknowledgment of the validity of diverse discourses in describing the unfolding of bisexual lives. The opportunity for migration in later life, allowed bisexual women to construct their sexuality as fluid, relieving them from the assumption that they denied or failed to recognize their own attractions to women at earlier stages of life. By combining a discursive analysis with the context of the life course, we can see a more nuanced understanding of the possible ways that bisexual lives might unfold overtime and how bisexual individuals might make meaning out of that process in retrospect.

CHAPTER 6
FINDINGS: BISEXUALITY - LIMITS OF LANGUAGE,
FREEDOM IN LIVES

The second chapter of findings presents an analysis of how participants constructed their current bisexual identities and potential subject positions they might take up or orient to, specifically in the context of later life. Most participants reported deeply ambivalent feelings around the relative usefulness and limitations imposed by labels and language that are historically and contextually specific. Although participants perceived labels mainly as divisive, their constructions of bisexuality as a source of freedom, capacity, and potential in their lives provide a stark contrast to the limiting impact of language. By constructing bisexuality as a source of freedom, participants resisted the narrow confines of bisexuality as a sexual identity label, positioning themselves within the context of diverse sexual and romantic relationships, requiring that they situate their bisexuality within a storyline rather than allowing the label of bisexuality to speak for itself.

Limits of Language and Labels

Ambivalence toward Bisexuality as a Label

Most participants were very clear that they held ambivalent feelings toward the concept of “labels,” which they perceived as placing overly narrow confines around their experiences of sexuality. This ambivalence was informed by their historical, generational, and age-related positioning, as several participants described how

language of LGBTQ identities had shifted over the course of their lives and across social, cultural, and political contexts. Issues around labels and language use were often raised in the context of discussions about what bisexuality meant to the participant, why they identified themselves as bisexual, and whether the impact of bisexuality had been a positive or negative influence for their lives. While I intentionally asked about “bisexuality” and “bisexual identities,” participants frequently described how they felt about “labels” in return, indicating a disconnect between our perceptions of what “identity” might refer to, perhaps informed by generational or historical shifts in discursive understandings.

As a bisexuality researcher, I have at times wondered if the bisexuality as a term or label would eventually be replaced, particularly in the current, rapidly shifting context in which, as Mona stated “everyone is queer or trans or non-binary now...that’s the language.” When I posed this question to Mona, she described bisexuality as a label with an unpredictable, but waning shelf life.

S: Do you see bisexual as being a term that will fade away at some point?

Mona: I do. I really do.

S: You do. Do you have a prediction about when?

Mona: No. Um...it took about 25 years for some of my older friends to use the word “queer.” I see some of my older friends now using the word “queer.” That wasn’t the case like 10, 15 years ago. They’d get all pissed off. So around the elders back then, I used to use “LGBTQ” or “lesbian” to identify them and try to go with how they identify. And I see it moving farther from that. It’s like using the term “non-binary.” It just now seems like some of my older friends are being like, “What’s that?” And I’m like, “Well, let me tell you what I’ve learned from younger people. There’s this thing. It’s called non-binary. And it’s a revolution!” [laughs] And so it’s sort of like...this is how we evolve. People learn things. If they don’t learn it, they know they’re going to be isolated as an old fogie and they want to be contemporary.

Mona struggled with the term “bisexual” and socially imposed pressure to define her sexuality for most of her life. Although she had no personal felt need for a label or definition to give her a sense of self or belonging, people around her consistently would have negative reactions to her unwillingness to define her sexuality.

S: Were you thinking of yourself as someone with a sexual orientation then as a label or just as a sexual person with no label?

Mona: I went without a label for many, many years. Everybody would ask me, “Are you gay?” and I would say, “I don’t have a label. I identify as a free spirit.” And people would get pissed off, like in the ’90s when I said that, people would get pissed off with me. So I finally said, “Well, okay. If I’m anything, I’m bi.” It was a forced sort of, you’re coerced into making a choice. And it didn’t fit right, it didn’t feel good, but people would look at me confusedly when I would say I had no label. I hated being told who I was and what I was.

For Mona, the eventual decision to label herself as bisexual was the result of social pressure to choose as well as her felt responsibility to be out, spurred by the historical context of the AIDS epidemic and related discrimination of bisexual people around her. Similarly, Rennie described having to identify openly because of the 1970s mindset of “we had to be out or they’ll kill us all!” Sources of this felt need to identify had historical roots prior to the time that Mature Migrants had experienced attractions to women or begun to identify as bisexual, but for several Early Emergers the choice to use the label of bisexual was a result of social pressure more so than a personal need or desire to identify themselves.

Apart from Mona, many participants stated that they held negative feelings toward labels in general and they constructed bisexuality as one of many possible aspects of difference that might be indicated by labels. Some compared coming out as bisexual or dating women openly to the stigma attached to biracial relationships in the context of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as dating across lines of age, nationality, or

ability status. Participants also described the limitations or negative uses of labels in general. Having been disowned for marrying a Black man in her 20s, Mary felt that most of her life had been spent trying to bridge the deep divides created by social categories of difference. She described labels as tools used to marginalize and target certain populations and continued to feel the derogatory weight of terms such as “queer” and “fag.” Even when labels were used to create a collective sense of pride and community, Mary described the need to label groups and individuals as a “divide and conquer” tactic and Joy claimed that labels “have been more divisive than anything.”

Specifically in terms of bisexuality, nine of the 12 participants stated that they only use the term “out of convenience,” “because there’s nothing else that fits me,” or “it seems like what I’d be best classified as by others,” even though they might not have felt that the term truly suited or defined them. Sydney emphasized the awkward construction of the word “*bi*-sexuality” as similar to “running a knife down the middle” of a person which comes off as “quantified” or “*bi*-furcate[d]” into equal attractions to men and women and she felt the need to explain her feelings about the term when introducing herself as bisexual. Joy described the “*bi*” of “bisexuality” as a “misnomer,” connecting to recent discussions around the limiting nature of the word itself.

Joy described the experience of “not fitting” as a “theme” in her life. Having dated across lines of race, age, and ability, living with multiple disabilities, and feeling ostracized or not trusted in lesbian communities, laughed and stated, “where do you fit in comfortably and is it *ever* acceptable? So I think as a result of that, I kind of have this ‘fuck you’ attitude about it all.” As a result of consistently experiencing difference, Joy and Sydney described their “fuck you” attitudes as less of a choice and more so the only possible option as normalcy was never a part of their lives.

Historical Shifts, Out-of-Touch Elders, and Aging Issues

Participants sometimes explained their ambivalence toward labels through historical and generational context, illustrating how the very idea of labels and issues related to language access, use, and meaning have shifted over time. While Mary connected the use of terms to the division of people, she also seemed to express a concern that she may appear out-of-touch with current sexuality-related terminology. When I asked if she identified with the term “queer,” she prefaced her response with, “I’ve read everything and I know exactly what’s what.” Her felt need to declare this to me, as a young bisexual woman, may indicate a triggered feeling of defensiveness, fighting off the positioning as an *out-of-touch elder*. This sentiment of worry that one might become out of date in their terminology may be common among older members of LGBTQ communities, especially for someone who adopted a sexual minority status relatively later in life and within a cultural moment when political-correctness has become proof of one’s commitment to social justice while also coming under attack as a misguided liberal pursuit.

Like Mona, who described her older friends as not wanting to be “isolated as an old fogie,” Petra also directly gave voice to this concern when I asked if she identified with terms such as pansexual, omnisexual, or queer.

Petra: But now there’s all these definitions, like “pansexual,” what the hell does that mean? A person my age is like, “Okay, I get it. I guess that’s what I am now. I want to be cool and with it. Don’t want to offend anybody”...I do understand the “them.” I understand that group a lot. I have a good friend whose daughter is a they, wants to be a they, doesn’t want to be pigeonholed. I...I see myself in her...I get why these things are in the culture now and I don’t have a problem with it. Sometimes I make fun of it, ’cause I’m like, “Oh, I’m old. I can’t change. There’s boys and there’s girls.” But I can change. I joke about that. I think, “Oh, I’ve gotta get more stodgy.” But if bisexual is an old term, well I’m an old broad. That’s where I am.

Although she expresses some incredulousness around the increasing complexity of terminology that appears to be more and more specific in nature, Petra could also empathize with the need for new terms and what those terms represent for marginalized individuals.

Petra indicated that she felt some affinity and empathy for individuals who use gender-neutral or gender non-binary pronouns of “they” and “them.” Several participants described not only understanding, but actually identifying with newer terms but chose not to use them. For instance, several women described childhoods in which their first recognized aspect of “difference” was in their gender rather than their sexuality. For Mona, accessing more diverse possible sexual identities helped her to name the “weirdness” she had been feeling around her gender for many years. Rennie identified her gender as “queer,” and stated that, “if that were an option, I probably would have been a ‘they.’”

Rennie’s thought process illustrates another possible reason that certain labels or the very idea of labels might not resonate with older bisexual women. Her quote implied that even as terms emerge, the moment for applying them to oneself or to alter one’s identity may have passed. The choice not to change one’s identity, label, or pronouns was not, as Petra indicated, due to a lack of *ability* to change, but a lack of *desire* to change. Participants connect this need to label oneself with individuals of younger ages and more recent generations. Petra stated that while she does not go around saying “I’m bisexual” or introducing herself with this particular identity, she could also understand why the need to identify oneself might be of greater importance for younger people, people in their 20s and 30s “where everyone’s trying to figure out who they are and what

they are and all that stuff.” She connected a need to label oneself with formative life sequences, where labels might have more relevance than in later life.

Petra’s described using labels to identify oneself as a practice one might need or use more frequently during one’s earlier life. This stage might align with what is called the “coming of age” process or Erikson’s stages of adolescence and young adulthood, in which individuals are balancing their personal identity with the social roles, the need for intimacy with isolation. In contrast, participants often felt that aging had given them the confidence to define themselves outside of the confining influence of labels.

Additionally, aging-related concerns were described as dominating one’s thinking to the point where sexuality might fall to the wayside. For example, Shane felt that dealing with sexual relationships, monogamous and polyamorous, took up a lot of energy in her youth, but in later life she wanted to prioritize time for writing and socializing more so than maintaining and negotiating sexual relationships. Several participants also described issues with vaginal dryness or declines in libido that complicated or lessened the importance of sex as they aged. While it is common for older women to feel that bodily concerns present challenges in terms of maintaining sexual contact (Jen, 2017a), some participants in this study also described the lack of time and space to continue processing their sexual identities in particular. For instance, although Rachel expressed the desire to continue learning about her own bisexuality, the predominance of chronic pain, financial planning, and parenting issues had kept her from focusing energy on this task.

Rachel: The aging piece tends to dominate because of body realities. So when I’m not feeling the impacts of chronic pain or being pissed off about dealing with cancer stuff and I can feel flirty and strong and...then it’s a nice experience. So I guess I would say that aging tends to overshadow sexuality pretty frequently and because sexuality at least, when I think of

embodied sexuality rather than sexual identity, sexual responsiveness is subordinate to physical comfort and in terms of sexual identity...you know, the things that are foremost around age are: Will I ever save enough for retirement? And I don't have birth children who are going to dedicate their lives to taking care of me so...those are the things that really predominate.

S: It sounds like your bisexual processing gets bumped to the back. It's like the thing on my To Do list that keeps getting bumped because more pressing things keep come up every day.

Rachel: Yeah. The hierarchy of needs. So, but it's great to talk about it, it's fun to talk about. I think because [husband] and I, we've been partners for 20 years and married for 13. So um and we just dived into households and kids and everything else that comes along with that and I was like, "Yeah, I'm bisexual. Okay. But do they need permission forms to go on the field trip?" That kind of thing. So I'm looking forward to thinking more about this especially if I can read some theory, which I love reading theory 'cause then I get to see where I am, like "Oh I never thought of it that way."

Rachel constructs her bisexuality as a lesser hierarchical need compared to aging-related concerns, although she described wishing to further expand her understanding of and engagement with bisexual theory, which she requested as I left her home in the form of a suggested book list.

Confidence in Difference

As I began to ask participants more varied and pointed questions to unpack feelings of ambivalence, it became clear that they were not necessarily discounting the influence of bisexuality as a life sequence or a way of being; they were simply discounting the need for a simplistic term to describe their sexuality. They expressed frustration with this label that should have helped them escape the limiting boxes of expectation rather than reinforcing them. This distinction between bisexuality as a label versus a life was further contextualized in the ways that participants described their resistance to categorizing their experiences in simple ways.

When I asked if one of Sydney's long-term relationships was "open," she responded by explaining how access to terms to describe her relationships or identity had shifted across various stages of her life, illustrating the intersection of the timing of her own life with discursive shifts.

S: So, you and [partner] were in what sounds like an open relationship?

Sydney: I think that's what we'd call it today...there's a lot of terminology that's come up during my life. You gotta remember, all of this was before Stonewall. I know that sounds like we went out and petted the dinosaurs, but [laughs]...and I think similarly, you asked about "bisexual." I don't think I heard that term until relatively late. ...when I heard [the term bisexual], I thought, "Oh, that's interesting, that would apply to me. That's a term that would define me," but it wasn't, "Now I'll go around and call myself bisexual." It was just, "Oh, wow. That's really interesting." [laughs]

Sydney did not hear the term bisexual until the 1970s, when she was in her mid-30s and had already been in open relationships with men and women for almost 10 years. While some bisexual people have described feeling an instant sense of relief, recognition, or belonging when finding an appropriate label for their sexual identity (Ochs & Rowley, 2009), Sydney felt grounded and confident in her bisexual *life* before she knew a term that would define her experiences.

Sydney seemed to embody a common discourse in the interviews, particularly among the Early Emergers, which was a *confidence in difference*. When I told Sydney it seemed as though she had no need for a "traditional" life, she simply replied, "well, that wasn't offered." As a short, Jewish, dark-haired child growing up with attractions to boys and girls, Sydney was accustomed to feeling like "the other" early in life. For Rennie, it was the combination of her Jewish background and gender fluidity "in a very gender un-fluid Midwestern state," while Mona recalled being called a "China doll" as a child and wanting to wear boys' clothes. Tori described having to "be representative of

all Black people” and Alma learned to be “self-sufficient” in her teens due to being one of the only Black children in her high school.

These women seem to embody a sense of resilience and self-confidence informed by their experiences with many sources of difference, which preceded their access to sexual labels that would define them. Having learned to live outside of societal expectations early in life allowed participants to distinguish between the limitation of labels and language as compared to the freedom that bisexuality offered in their lives.

Bisexuality as Freedom in Lives

In contrast to the limitations of labels, participants defined bisexuality using words that connote a sense of opening to options, possibilities, and the ability to live non-traditional lives that gave them a sense of freedom in sexual expression, relationships, and life choices. By way of presenting a compact version of the findings related to constructions of bisexuality as freedom, I created a “research poem” (Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006) from participants’ transcripts (see Table 3). These portions of text were gleaned from how participants answered interview questions regarding how they define, make meaning out of, and understand bisexuality as a positive or negative influence in their lives. While a limitation of the research poem is the loss of context of full interviews, it is a valuable, evocative tool for communicating “affective realities of thick qualitative descriptions” (Furman et al., 2006, p. 25) that presents themes in a condensed way.

Table 3.
Bisexuality Is - A Research Poem

Bisexuality is...	<p>someone who is comfortable being sexually involved with a man or a woman being attracted to both men and women</p> <p>being able to have sexual relationships with either sexual attraction and the capacity for emotional bonding with both genders to love either attraction to people who are the same gender as me and people who are a different gender or maybe no gender</p> <p>comfort to be with any gender</p> <p>blindness to the physical trappings of a person</p> <p>an appreciation of both...and not a preference for either a really positive thing</p> <p>capable of being attracted to people irrespective of gender nothing fancy</p> <p>the ability to have homoerotic and heteroerotic feelings</p> <p>“there’s a nice looking dude” or “she’s hot”</p> <p>a feeling of desire that comes to us</p> <p>mother nature’s way of giving me a fair playing field</p> <p>to not be confined to only loving one person of one sex not a traditional life</p> <p>finally being true to myself</p> <p>a gift</p> <p>the freedom to be me...to be with who I need to be with at that time</p> <p>being able to express my sexuality in ways that make me feel like I’m free</p>
Bisexuality means...	<p>everyone is a possibility.</p>

Note: All statements are direct quotes or near exact quotes from study participants in answer to the questions: What does bisexuality mean to you? How do you define bisexuality? And Has bisexuality been a positive or negative thing in your life? Words in bold indicate a common theme of freedom, ability, capacity, or and a lack of confinement.

Openness and Possibility

In defining bisexuality, participants emphasized their capacity for openness to people of multiple genders in their attractions, desires, and relationships, be they sexual or romantic. Rachel described this as a “capacity for emotional bonding.” For Mary it was the “comfort to be with any gender.” Joy “considered it “a gift...not to be blinded by

the packaging that people come in,” similarly to Petra’s claim, “I’m attracted to people, not their equipment.”

In terms of broader discursive influences, several Early Emergers cited the influence of the Kinsey studies as informing their definitions of bisexuality, such as Rennie and Rachel who placed their own and their current partner’s identities on the Kinsey scale. Petra stated that her definition of bisexuality had not changed for many years, becoming stable since her exposure to Kinsey’s work in a college course on human sexuality. Participants seemed to resonate with this scientific construction, connecting their own understandings of bisexuality to a historical shift that had contributed more expansive possibilities for bisexuality due to the use of a continuum. One aspect of this work that participants deemed positive was Kinsey’s claim that the majority of individuals experienced bisexual attractions. This construction seemed to give participants the sense that their attractions were actually widespread, common, and aligned with their biological constructions of bisexuality as being innate, but frequently denied or repressed. All of the women who cited Kinsey had also encountered his work in early adulthood and near the time they developed a lesbian or bisexual identity, indicating that the timing of this education might explain how influential his theories had been on their current constructions of bisexuality.

As a natural extension of constructions of openness and possibility, two participants described their felt need to incorporate trans and non-binary identities into their definitions of bisexuality. Rachel emphasized the need to consider how attractions to transgender individuals would fit into her evolving understanding of bisexuality. Having spent some time thinking through this change in construction, Tori explained how her definition had evolved beyond the gender binary, stating that, “now the way I

look at it is I am attracted to people who are the same gender as me and to people who are a different gender or maybe no gender,” directly contradicting narrow definitions that reinforce assumptions that bisexual people are attracted to only two genders, are equally attracted to men and women, or must be involved in relationships with both a man and woman at once. Tori also felt that this recognition had opened her eyes to new potential relationships and expressed a desire to experience an intimate relationship with a person who was trans- or gender queer identified, perhaps indicating a hunger for more diverse possible experiences.

Non-Traditional Lives

Constructions of bisexuality that emphasize openness and possibility extended beyond the people one was attracted to or in relationships with. Bisexuality was also described as offering the freedom to choose a “non-traditional” or “non-conformist” life. Although Sydney described her non-traditional life as the only option that “was offered,” she and others took pride in the fact that their bisexuality had allowed them to “make conscious choices” to structure their lives beyond an assumed heteronormative life sequence by choosing not to have children, choosing not to marry, engaging in polyamorous relationships, and experiencing relationships across lines of difference or with people of multiple sexes or genders.

These reflections indicate that participants saw the expanse of potential actions and feelings available to the bisexual subject are one of the largest benefits of being bisexual. Most of the Early Emergers in particular had made intentional choices not to have children or not to get married at some point in life. This ability to live a life beyond assumed structures informed participants’ perception that bisexuality had mainly been

a positive thing in their lives, or at least in Sydney's words, "definitely not a limitation." She described bisexuality as "mother nature's way of giving me an equal playing field...like if I was only looking for those *very* few women or *very* few men, I wouldn't have a chance" due to her natural "pickiness" in choosing romantic partners. The potential for many possible relationships was described as being particularly important by women who made a transition from long-term marriages with men toward being able to date people of multiple genders or sexes. For Petra, this was operationalized as being able to "post Match.com profiles" seeking people of multiple genders.

The most radical way that participants described this positive influence, not only within their sexual and romantic relationships, but also for their own sense of self, was through the construction of bisexuality as freedom to be ones true self. Mary defined bisexuality as the "the freedom to be me...to be with who I need to be with at that time" and Tori contrasted this ability to be free to her earlier stages of life, characterized by guilt and denial.

S: So we've talked about some of the negative aspects or impacts that bisexuality has had. Have there been positive impacts that bisexuality has had?

Tori: Wow. I guess the most positive impact I can think of is just feeling like I'm finally being myself. I'm finally being true to myself. Because that was something that I just didn't feel I could do, you know? When I'd be thinking about women when I masturbated when I was a kid, I just always had this feeling that I was doing something wrong. ...during that time, I obviously didn't feel I was able to be true to myself. And I would have to say that the most positive thing for me about being bisexual is being able to be true to myself.

Mona similarly described bisexuality as freedom, stating that she had spent much of her life trying to "feel liberated" and struggling against the limiting nature of sexual identity

labels. When she looked back over the course of her life, she reflected that labels did not matter to her as much as her ability to connect with people in an authentic way.

S: Sure. So what would you say being bisexual means to you?

Mona: [pause] I think in some ways it's just being able to express my sexuality in ways that make me feel like I'm free. So we are trying every day to feel liberated and what are the things that we can access? What are the things that make us feel like our authentic selves? And being an authentic me is that I really don't give a fuck about labels, I really don't give a fuck about gender, I really don't give a fuck about how that person sees me. What I give a fuck about is: can they connect to me? Can I connect to them?

The Context of Lives

One agentic strategy that participants took to convey this freedom and capacity for complexity was by sharing their life stories of bisexuality rather than simply introducing themselves as a bisexual person. Although Rachel experienced some trepidation around disclosing her bisexual identity, particularly in the company of lesbians who were her age or older, she also described recent instances in which she was able to explain her past as a lesbian-identified woman and her history of relationships in the context of a “deep conversation.” She described these opportunities as an invitation to share not only her current bisexual identity, but also what that identity has meant to her in the context of her life story. Petra also described taking this approach when coming out to new acquaintances.

Petra: I am meeting new people all the time, like the two women I was talking to at [the gym]...they know I have a wife. Do I say, “I'm bisexual”? No. I just say, “This is my wife.” If they were to ask me, I would talk about it. When they say, “Tell us about yourself” and I tell them, “Oh I was married for 23 years [to man], but I've always been a person who's been bisexual so after I got a divorce I knew the person I wanted to meet was a woman, I wanted to spend the rest of my life with a woman”...And I'd say, “Oh I've been bisexual my whole life” or “That's been my whole life” or “That's my life story. Woman, man, woman, didn't make a difference to me.”

She described presenting her bisexuality in the context of a full life to those willing to ask and ready to listen. My interview with Sydney also left me with an impression of how the potential for freedom might point the way forward for younger generations, creating space for them to embrace their own sexual needs and desires, even when labels are inaccessible or inadequate. She did so by comparing the historical context of her own life to my own and those of younger people trying to find their way in the world.

Sydney: Bisexuality suggests a label and little else. You know, a convenient label, but if it works, it works. And maybe, by the time you're my age [laughs], there will be a greater appreciation of the fluidity of sexual attraction? And even gender identification? Gender identification is coming quickly, but I think the issue of sexual attraction being more fluid...I know when my kid was about 6 or 7, I think one day we were talking and he said, "I don't get it. Are you gay or are you straight?" And I said, "I'm both." And his eyes got very big and says, "Can you *do* that?!" [laughs] I said, "I'm living proof."

Sydney's hope for the future gave me hope as well, that one day a younger generation, exposed to more possibilities for their own choices and lives, might live unencumbered by narrow definitions. Olga described this potential as balancing sexual identity labels with the need to make one's own way. She suggested that labels are temporary things stuck to one's forehead, social constructions that have material consequences, but are held and ascribed to lightly and can change at any time. It was this balance that enabled her to move between the labels of bisexual and lesbian in varied contexts of her life.

S: What would you say the two identities mean to you? Like what does being a lesbian mean versus being bisexual? Or what makes you choose one over the other in a certain context?

Olga: I want to say, I hold all labels really lightly. They're just labels. They're not super glued. You know, I appreciate the fact that they're social

constructs. I mean it's one thing to say, "there aren't races," but it's important to know that racism is an important construct based on the belief that there are.

S: Right. Social constructs with material effects.

Olga: Right, but I hold all labels just really, as I said, lightly. And for other people as well. I mean, I can see how some people get wound around the axle based on identities and can get really confused by that. Much as some of my confusions were based on, okay, "that would mean..." and then getting really confused by the label that I just popped onto my head. And then realizing, "Oh no!" Take it off! It's a thing. It's a word...the things that matter more are how we show up in the world. I want to be kind. I want to be present.

For me, Olga's description brought to mind the image of a population of people walking around with post-it notes stuck to their foreheads, temporary labels that we can take off, edit, or swap out for another post-it note to balance both the material reality and constructed aspect of labels.

Summary

Participants took a historical perspective of the evolution of terms and their own aging process, shedding light on possible reasons for their ambivalence around using labels, including the label of bisexuality. One of the most common ways that participants explained this ambivalence was through constructing bisexuality as merely one aspect of difference, allowing them to compare bisexuality to other labels that had been used to divide and marginalize more so than to create a sense of community. This finding indicates the relative limits of discourse, suggesting that participants may have struggled to find room for agency in their use of sexual identity labels, either due to social pressures to identify themselves or due to the limits of available language at a particular time. Although bisexuality as a label was constructed as a limiting influence, participants' personal definitions and lived experience of bisexuality was described as an

overall positive influence. The contrasting construction of bisexuality as freedom, potential, and openness provides a positive counter-narrative to the limits of language, creating space for bisexual lives that are not limited to particular forms of relationships, life sequences, or social expectations.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was originally motivated by the need to better understand how older women construct their bisexual identities in later life as well as how their identity negotiation process is informed by their historical and discursive context. Analyzing the discursive constructions of bisexuality and bisexual subjectivities as an unexamined factor offers a fruitful preliminary step toward a better understanding of how older women make sense of their bisexual identities in the full context of their lives that contributes meaningful implications to the larger fields of bisexuality and aging research. To address these implications I first examine the substantive knowledge this study contributes to research on bisexuality and aging among women and to LGBTQ and aging literature more broadly. I then examine the limitations of the study, including issues related to sampling and recruitment, the analytic method, and my own positioning as the researcher and interviewer. The study concludes with a presentation of implications for future research, including methodological and theoretical gains, as well as implications for practice and community building.

Discussion

This study offers a fresh perspective on the importance of discourse in the lives of older bisexual women as a marginalized and often unheard population. By centering these women's voices, the analysis revealed various ways that they chose to discursively construct their lives and identities. The participants' uses of language were limited to

some extent by their societal context which influences their perspective on language and identity, the key historical movements and events they see as significant, and discursive constructions of sexuality and bisexuality they might draw on, internalize, or struggle against. Participants themselves were highly aware of this influence and pushed back on these limitations in various agentive ways, by creating new and resistive coming out narratives, denying the importance of labels, and creating space for freedom in the place of the normative lives they were told to want and have. While this study contributes specific, detailed accounts of constructions of bisexuality among older women as biological, fluid, limiting, and freeing, as well as new possible narratives of sexual identity emergence, the findings also have the potential to contribute to the examination of any marginalized community that requires models of agentive and resistant uses of language that begin to radically break from traditional, legible, or normative discourses and narratives. By sharing their perspectives on language and identity, participants also shed light on the responsibility of researchers and practitioners to aid in the creation, promotion, and maintenance of resistive discourses through theoretical development, methodological planning, and critical assessment of one's own discursive influences and constructions. By becoming more aware of these discursive constructions, both in the narratives of participants and in our own work, we might meaningfully expand the bounds of what is seen as legible and acceptable ways of being and aging in the world.

Early Emergers and Mature Migrants

The emergence of two distinct groups of participants characterized by the timing of their attractions to women and their discursive constructions of bisexuality contributes added nuance to current understandings of how bisexual lives unfold over time and within a specific historical context. Previously, Westwood (2016) illustrated

distinctions between older lesbians who took divergent pathways to their current sexual identity, describing the historical context that might contribute to their different life patterns and might explain their motivations for choosing a lesbian identity. Similarly, this study suggests that older bisexual women can be distinguished by how they construct their life course in ways that are specific to or have different meaning in the context of bisexual lives.

Understanding and contextualizing the distinction between the Early Emergers and Mature Migrators requires an understanding of both the usefulness and complexity of carrying out life course interviews with older women who are able to look back on their lives with the benefit of retrospective sense-making and interpretation. One strength of this process is that the data produced may provide a more coherent narrative compared to analyses of processes still underway; however, retrospective narratives may also appear to be tidied up accounts of a complex reality that seemed much more murky in the past (Bublitz, 2014). While the field of bisexuality research benefits from knowledge of when and how bisexual attractions emerge in life sequences, in the context of discourse analysis, whether the participants truly experienced attractions to women over the full life course (as opposed to applying this meaning in retrospect) is not necessarily relevant (Bauman, 1986). Rather, what their interviews indicate is that women have certain ways of explaining their sexual narratives that construct bisexuality in certain ways and those constructions have implications for how bisexuality is understood and experienced (Willig, 2001).

While bisexual women are often described as recognizing their sexual attractions at a later average age than lesbians and gay men (Calzo et al., 2011; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017; Rodriguez-Rust, 2000), several Early Emergers described attractions that

began in early childhood, drawing on a biological construction of bisexuality. These stories align with a coming out narrative that relies on the construction of innate and stable attractions, which might be repressed or denied. Therefore, a biologically-focused narrative, which has been described in prior research with older lesbians and gay men (Rosenfeld, 2003; Larson, 2006), can also serve as a useful linguistic tool for some bisexual women in retrospectively creating coherence in and validating their experiences (Bauman, 1986; Bublitz, 2014). For women who began sexually experimenting with girls in childhood, their early sexual behaviors were described as being so natural that they were beyond question. For participants who began this experimentation in their teens and 20s, their bisexuality was framed as having been unchanged, but denied or unrecognized for its full potential. The biological construction allowed participants to claim a stable sexual identity that directly challenges or resists stereotypes of the confused or indecisive bisexual, thereby establishing bisexuality as a real and valid sexual identity based in natural, biological functions of desire and attraction. By drawing on this biological discourse of having been “born this way”, which has been politically useful for sexual and gender minority populations more broadly, participants also contributed to a sense of legibility for bisexual individuals who claim this narrative.

In contrast, the Mature Migrants’ construction of a migration process spurred by light bulb moments clearly indicated the need for another possible discourse, requiring different discursive strategies to make meaning out of their bisexual identities since they could not rely on more common coming out scripts to construct their experiences (Plummer, 1995). Rather than seeing their lack of relationships or sexual behaviors with women as stemming from denied or repressed desire, the Mature Migrants illustrate a

counter-narrative, a distinct construction in which same-sex attractions emerge in mid-to later life in a single, deeply impactful moment of change. Rather than drawing on a discourse of denial or repression that would imply that they had spent a significant portion of their lives denying or failing to acknowledge their true selves, Mature Migrators instead produced a counter-narrative of emergence and fluidity that does not take away from or question their former relationships, behaviors, or sense of self, but rather reaffirms the sincerity of those experiences.

In distinguishing between these two groups of women, one might rightfully ask if constructions of stable versus fluid sexuality are contradictory or can coexist. While it may appear that these two constructions of bisexuality contradict one another, they can also be interpreted as illustrating the need for multiple, more varied possible discourses and narratives to make bisexual behaviors, identities, and lives legible in the context of a society that questions their reality and sincerity. As discourses are ways of constituting knowledge that made available certain ways of being in the world, these varied constructions of bisexuality can be seen as the participants' agentive use of language as a social practice that creates new ways of being in the world and that resist or challenge existing discourses in powerful ways.

Cultural Influences. There were many ways in which the Early Emergers and Mature Migrators experienced their bisexuality and drew on discursive and historical context to make sense of that experience in different ways. While the Early Emergers emphasized the influence of social institutions and systems that maintain certain dynamics of power (Foucault, 1978) such as heteronormativity, family cultures, religion, and social movements, the Mature Migrators described being disconnected from cultural context. This disconnect was likely protective in some ways and limiting in

others. Because of this disconnect, the Mature Migrants did not question if they had repressed or denied their true selves in early life due to cultural norms, they lacked the same deeply felt hurt and grief over exclusion from or the loss of lesbian community in early life, and as a result, they seemed to have less emotional baggage attached to cultural perceptions of their sexual identity. This enabled them to understand their sexuality in certain ways, such as using either a bisexual or lesbian identity in various contexts, which would likely have been unthinkable for many Early Emergers. In contrast, the Early Emergers spent the majority of their lives as a marginalized sexual minority and that visibility often comes at the cost of victimization and exclusion (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017). However, Early Emergers also carry with them the history and positive nostalgia of sexual exploration and early experiences in LGBTQ communities that contributed to affirmation and validation of their choice to live non-conformist lives. Thus, the Mature Migrants might lack the same positive experiences and thus may lack the same sense of pride in and positive affirmation of their bisexual identity and life sequences.

Beyond the well documented negative impact of feminism in terms of driving a wedge between lesbian and bisexual women (Hartman, 2006; Rust, 1995), the Early Emergers also illustrated how this history might negatively influence a bisexual woman's sense of her own sexual identity or produce anticipated stigma in the context of coming out to older lesbians. As a widely used theoretical framework in LGBTQ studies, the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) describes internalized stigma and anxiety around disclosure of one's sexual identity, conveyed through the concept of rejection sensitivity, or the expectation of being rejected based on one's sexual identity. Bisexual individuals often express anxiety in coming out to their family, acquaintances,

and romantic or sexual relationships due to a realistic fear of rejection (DeCapua, 2017; Feinstein et al., 2012). However, while the Minority Stress Model primarily highlights this expectation in the context of coming out to non-LGBTQ individuals, the participants in this study emphasize this experience *within* LGBTQ communities, particularly as informed by historical tensions between lesbians and bisexual women. This revealing dynamic indicates the need for an understanding of bisexual identities as contextualized in both LGBTQ communities and the broader society at once in order to more fully account for sources of internalized stigma and conflict in one's sense of self.

The process through which identity-related stigma develops and negatively impacts social interactions in both layers of context is of particular interest for health-related outcomes as internalized stigma and having a less positive sense of one's sexual identity are significant risk factors that contribute to poor mental health directly (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Kertzner et al., 2009) as well as indirectly by influencing identity disclosure and access to social resources (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2016). Lower identity valence and weaker connections to LGBTQ community have also been shown to mediate the relationship between bisexual identities and negative health outcomes (Kertzner et al., 2009) and these factors might influence the Early Emergers and Mature Migrators in unique ways that are informed by how they differentially relate to historical and discursive contexts.

Age, Cohort, and Historical Context

While measuring sexual identity over the full life course offers a better understanding of the timing of individual lives, the methodology also contributes an understanding of how two dimensions of the life course perspective, individual timing and their interaction with historical times, influence discursive constructions of

bisexuality. By aligning discursive constructions and individual lives with their historical time frames, through combining the discourse analysis, Collective Timeline, and list of historical events, we are able to understand the relative timing of women's identity negotiation processes in context. This alignment also made it possible to observe that most Early Emergers came to identify as bisexual during the period of time between 1965 and 1975. As the Early Emergers included women of a wide range of ages, including one of the youngest participants (at age 60) and the oldest participant (at age 77), this pattern indicates the relative importance of historical influence rather than the importance of age in shaping the emergence of a bisexual identity. An alternative approach would have been to align the individual lines by age; however, this arrangement did not reveal a similar critical mass of identity emergence to the same degree. Rosenfeld (2003) claims that for lesbian and gay older adults in the United States, coming of age or growing into adulthood before or after the Stonewall riots created a boundary between two distinct cohorts. However, in this study having been deeply engaged in or influenced by a particular historical context seemed to be more important than experiencing that context at a particular age, which suggests that the patterns of emergence for bisexual women might differ from those of monosexual sexual minorities and that the emphasis on formative years may not suit bisexual narratives to the same degree.

Issues of Migration. In addition to introducing the concept of migration spurred by light bulb moments, Mature Migrators also illustrated significant issues that might arise in the context of later life migrations, including aging-related concerns related to finances, illness, ability status, and parenting that tend to dominate one's thinking. While Naomi's issues related to caregiving demands were unique in this sample, they

are also likely anticipated for other bisexual women as they age along with the growing concern of one's own aging- and health-related issues. Naomi's story also raises issues that might arise when a migration occurs in the context of later life and a long-term relationship, closing off the potential for exploring in-depth relationships with other women. In some ways, her narrative did not fit neatly into the discourse of migration, as she might be understood as not being able to "complete" the migration process by engaging in relationships with individuals of multiple genders and she expressed grief over the fact that she had not been able to explore the full potential of her bisexuality. This construction of an incomplete migration is likely experienced by other older bisexual women who may never have the opportunity to experience primary relationships with women, resulting in complex feelings associated with that loss. The context of their lives also does not allow for Mature Migrators to engage in or build connections with LGBTQ communities earlier in life, which may have been compounded for Naomi by her relative invisibility as a bisexual woman in the context of a long-term marriage with a man. Naomi's story presents challenges for those researchers and practitioners who would seek to support older bisexual women in pursuing good quality of life, due to limitations related to spousal caregiving responsibilities and a lack of social support and validation as she did not feel safe sharing her life story or sexual identity with those around her.

Labels, Identities, and Lives

While I listened to Mona predict that bisexuality as an identity would die out and as participants described their ambivalence toward bisexuality as a label, I became somewhat disheartened about the usefulness of the term and the shelf life of my own research. I started to wonder, what a study on bisexuality would contribute if

participants themselves do not appreciate the label. Recognizing the contrasting discourse of freedom and identifying the distinction between labels and lives, I began to feel that I was experiencing a miscommunication with participants. Eventually, I realized that the more I asked about “identity,” the more participants responded by describing labels and the more I asked about “meaning,” the more they described the importance of bisexual lives. This realization was also aided by the participants’ tendency to compare bisexuality to other identity labels, helping a listener to understand what might be common across these aspects of difference.

The finding of ambivalence toward labels and language raises the issue of the conceptual difference between an identity and a label as well as the historical context around language that participants described as rapidly shifting. Labels impose the externally visible categorization of individuals and the relative usefulness of this categorization has been debated for many years (Butler, 1997; Fraser, 2000; Young, 1998). Feminist scholars in particular debate the influence of categorizing labels as a tool of oppression as opposed to a tool to advance the political advocacy of marginalized groups (Duggan, 1994; McLaren, 2002). More specifically, the concept of “labels” continues to be a consistent conceptual concern for bisexual individuals and bisexuality scholars (Garber, 1995) and this study provides a better understanding of why labels are seen as unproductive from the participants’ own perspectives. In some ways, their critiques echo concerns over the tendency of labels to be used as a tool of domination (Fraser, 2000) through what they referred to as “divide and conquer” tactics. Nancy Fraser (2000) also controversially claimed that sexual identities served as a means to achieve social and cultural recognition only, rather than producing any real change in the redistribution of resources or political representation. The participants also seemed

to agree that bisexuality was more so a socially constructed concept that had little material impact on their lives, in contrast to the ways in which they had *lived* bisexuality. They pushed back on the felt pressure to identify as bisexual for the purpose of making themselves more legible as valid sexual subjects to others. In fact, they appeared to resent the idea that they should make themselves legible in a society that did not offer them a normative life and required them to establish a confidence in their difference at an early age.

The participants' perception that labels had been "more divisive than anything," was also shaped by their experiences of being excluded due to their bisexual identities in LGBTQ spaces. Although many had found belonging and comfort in these spaces at various times, they also described the lasting impact of experiences with exclusion in a community that is meant to be a safe haven for all sexual and gender minorities. In the words of Lisa Duggan (1994), "Every production of 'identity' creates exclusions that reappear at the margins like ghosts to haunt identity-based politics. In lesbian/gay politics, such exclusions have included bisexuals and transgender persons, among others" (p. 5). The relative age of the participants also likely influenced their exasperation with increasingly complex ways of labeling one's sexuality or gender. In an age of political correctness, identity politics can take a "more progressive than thou" (Duggan, 1994, p. 5) tone in answer to anyone who might question the usefulness or reality of various identities. This cultural context along with the age difference between myself and the participants likely provoked an underlying fear of becoming seen as aged and out of touch, a positioning Mona described as the anxiety of being "isolated as an old fogey." In contrast to these identity-based arguments that have been and will likely continue to be debated in bisexuality scholarship, the discourse of freedom in lives

offers a perhaps more fruitful interpretation of the positive influence of bisexuality in participants' lives.

Implications of Freedom

By choosing to emphasize the freedom of their lives and experiences in contrast to the limits of language, participants enacted agency in taking back positive aspects of their bisexuality. Rather than emphasizing the ways in which they were subjected to the limitations of language, they emphasized their own subjectivity and what they could do, be, say, and feel outside of the confines of labels. Allowing for the emergence of creative and agentive discourses in the data rather than focusing solely on the limiting impact of normative discourses enabled me, as a researcher, to avoid some of the foreseen pitfalls of an FDA approach as being overly deterministic and critical of an individual's tendency to be influenced by dominant discourses (Hanna, 2014; Peers, 2012). Instead, participants conveyed Foucault's (1978) claim that discourse is at once an instrument of power, "but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (p. 101). As a result, they were able to emerge as "agentive subjects...capable of agency within the constraints of power/knowledge" (Hanna, 2014, p. 155). Others have called this creativity in narrative, offering individuals the space to reach outside of cultural constraints in language use and available subjectivities (Crapanzano, 1996).

The findings beg the question: What are the potential implications or benefits of the discourse of freedom and non-conformist lives? For one thing, this discourse provides a unifying message in answer to the judgments and negative stereotypes associated with bisexuality and bisexual as a label. If bisexuality is conceptualized as overly narrow or reinforcing a binary approach to gendered attractions (Ochs, 2007),

the discourse of freedom provides a direct challenge to that construction. This challenge is consistent with Bennett's (1992) claim that rather than constructing bisexuality as an either/or, a more productive framing of the identity's possible contributions might be framed as both/and, connoting an opening to possibility and complexity rather than implying a choice between two polar opposites of homosexuality and heterosexuality.

The free bisexual subject might be understood as having a wide range of possibilities in subjectivity and action, such that being free offers "a discursive location from which to speak and act rather than prescribing a particular part to be acted out" (Willig, 2001, p. 111). Indeed, these women enacted their freedom through resistance not only to the limits of language, but also to prescribed heteronormativity by constructing non-conforming or non-traditional lives. This finding was produced due to the ability of FDA to illuminate different constructions of bisexuality as an object, allowing me to distinguish between bisexuality as a *label* and a *life* in interpreting the meaning of the identity. For instance, although prior studies have found a sense of ambivalence toward bisexuality among younger and older bisexual adults (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Rust, 1993; Jones, Almack, and Scicluna, 2016), this study indicates that although the label of bisexuality produces ambivalence, the experience of bisexual lives is described as a positive one.

In light of this distinction between limits of labels and freedom of lives, how might we balance the confining nature of bisexuality as a label with the widely varying lives that can be encompassed under this label? This is a question that has repeatedly arisen in queer studies, whereby the argument to destabilize binary gender and sexual categories comes with the threat of losing categories through which we find pride, community, and a sense of belonging (Butler, 2002). Conceptual tools and lines of

thinking from queer studies may be productive in navigating this conversation and might help to destabilize the notion of fixed, continuous, and binary categories of sexuality and gender without losing their usefulness as categories of analysis and sources of political power and community. Additionally, as bisexual individuals often do not benefit from LGBTQ communities to the same degree as lesbians and gay men (McLean, 2008), they may have little to lose from the act of destabilizing the lines around their sexual identities in order to take the lead in advocating notions of fluidity.

Although participants emphasize the positive impact of bisexuality in their lives, the fact remains that the term “bisexual” leaves much to be desired, either in linguistic construction or cultural understanding. Their critiques of the term echo long-standing scholarly debates (Ochs, 2000). However, the diverse and diffuse nature of definitions of bisexuality make a large-scale social redefinition challenging. Thus, it remains to be seen whether our understanding of the term will evolve or if the term itself will become obsolete in accordance with Mona’s predication that language will eventually evolve beyond the label of bisexuality. However, research must also ask if younger generations feel similarly regarding the term, as younger adults use the label of bisexual more frequently than older adults (Gates, 2011). It is also crucial not to deny the importance of bisexuality as a chosen identity for those who have a positive sense of resonance with the label, such as Petra, Tori, and Shane who take pride in their bisexuality and capacity for self-definition. Even if the term eventually becomes obsolete, the discourse of freedom illustrates the potential lessons to be learned from the resistive, agentive, and non-traditional ways that older women have negotiated their lives and sexualities.

Along these lines, one lesson to carry forward comes from Olga’s construction of bisexuality as a temporary label stuck to one’s forehead. This image is an example of a

“necessary fiction” (Weeks, 1995), in which sexual identities are understood as social constructions that are at once both politically powerful as well as an oversimplification of a complex reality. This balance between using labels when helpful, but not letting them limit our lives echoes Hakeem’s research on trans-gender identities and his assertion that if one “could tolerate some fluidity within one’s own interpretation of gender” then gender would cause less confusion in one’s own lived experience and interpretation of self, thereby making gender a “variable which may be invested into as much or as little as one consciously chooses” and gender would not need to be “unhelpfully either over-attended to, or denied” (Hakeem, 2010, p. 142). Similarly, Olga argued that when we encumber ourselves with our supposedly super-glued labels, we take on a “symptom of society” (Hakeem, 2010, p. 145). By way of pointing toward a potentially positive future, Sydney hoped that the acknowledged fluidity of sexuality and gender become more important than their labels, where change is so socially acceptable and even expected such that the idea of “phases” is no longer stigmatized.

As Judith Butler (1999) wrote, “no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible,’ illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose [the] question” of what is the use of “opening up possibilities” (p. viii). Similarly, whether the term bisexuality remains in use, the positive construction of sexuality as freedom, openness, and possibility has the potential to shape new, broader, and more flexible discursive possibilities and opportunities for future generations of LGBTQ individuals.

Limitations

Although this study contributes a fresh theoretical and analytic perspective on older bisexual women's lives and identities, it is important to note limitations related to the study sample, analysis, and my own positioning to consider. In terms of the sample, while efforts were made to produce a diverse sample, all participants had some years of college education and were born in the U.S. Although participants were raised in diverse locations and in families of origin of different socioeconomic positions, all were living in a relatively urban and liberal environment and few could be described as being of lower socioeconomic status at the time of data collection. Of particular importance are issues of access to higher education since participants referenced the importance and influence of being exposed to formal education around sexuality in college and graduate school as well as being exposed to social movements in the context of college campuses. It remains to be seen how women who did not have access to or were not exposed to higher education might produce different or similar constructions of bisexuality. While the study was not designed to produce findings that would generalize to the broader population of older bisexual women, these patterns in the sample limited my ability to assess issues related to differences in current class status, access to higher education, and geographic location. These aspects of identity could also have been more deeply integrated into the interview guide to ensure they would be described and examined in more detail. Additionally, although women of color represented one-fourth of the study sample and described unique experiences related to their racial identities, the interaction between racial and sexual minority identities could have been more deeply integrated into the interviews as well.

In terms of methodological issues and data analysis, while retrospective interviews offer a unique source of text for discursive analysis, they are also limited in some ways as is the analytic method of FDA. Both retrospective interviews and FDA focus on the creation of narratives rather than material realities and therefore cannot answer questions of the lived reality of lives with absolute confidence (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012; Willig, 2001). FDA also entails an interpretation of what a participant might feel or think or be motivated by, which cannot possibly be known to the researcher, but are only indicated by language use. My own analysis relies on an interpretation of what language can possibly mean as well as possible messages beyond language, such as interpreting the possible emotional content behind discursive structures (e.g. reading of sadness in Shane's description of being rejected by lesbians as potential partners).

My own positioning as a younger bisexual woman also likely influenced the ways in which participants presented their narratives, giving rise to certain emergent themes. For instance, the pattern of defensiveness in relation to queer terminology likely would not have stood out to a non-queer researcher and the very defensiveness may not have arisen if the interviewer was not a younger bisexual person. Therefore, my own positioning may have contributed to the emergence of findings that would not be replicated with an interviewer in a different social position. These influences could also have been discussed and analyzed if multiple interviewers with diverse identities had been involved. Finally, if we attempt theoretical consistency by using Foucault's concepts within his own epistemological beliefs, my presentation of findings is also shaped by a constraining context, as "all forms of knowledge are constructed through discourse and discursive practices...[including] scientific knowledge" (Willig, 2001, p. 121). As a result, my own presentation cannot be evaluated outside of a discursive

framework and the reader must assess whether and in what ways my own analysis and presentation of knowledge are constrained.

Implications for Research

Theoretical Implications

In both theoretical and methodological practices, researchers have a responsibility to intentionally contribute to and inform discourses of bisexuality that validate the complexity and diversity of bisexual lives. The emergence of two divergent groups of women answers Halberstam's (2005) call for a queer temporality that decentralizes reproductive narratives in the formation of life sequences, thereby deprivileging heteronormative assumptions regarding how a life should unfold or be organized. The term "biphobia" was first coined by Bennett in 1992, and was defined as "the denigration of bisexuality as a valid life choice" (p. 207). This framing of bisexual stigma indicates that it is not only one's identity or relationships that might be denied or invalidated, but also the fullness of their lives in general. This interpretation of biphobia offers a useful lens through which to view the importance of bisexuality in the context of a full life for the participants in this study. As a result of this theoretical distinction between a label and a life sequence, the telling of bisexual lives offers a more complex understanding of how bisexuality might be defined and experienced beyond its use as a label.

While the Early Emergers' experiences are reflected in other coming out narratives, the Mature Migrants' description of light bulb moment maps more closely onto Diamond's (2008; 2012) theory of dynamic sexuality, constructing sexuality as fluid and changing over the life course with moments in which existing patterns are

disrupted and must be adjusted. Diamond's (2012) theory argues that specifically in women's sexuality, "*patterns emerge, stabilize, change, and restablize over time as a result of ongoing interchanges between individuals and their environments*" (p. 74, emphasis from original). This construction of bisexuality requires more theoretical attention to flexibility in sexual life patterns. While Diamond (2012) argues for the need to acknowledge fluidity, her theory does not discount the construction of a stable sexuality as she argues for the *potential* for fluidity. Therefore, this theory is consistent with both the Early Emergers' and Mature Migrator's constructions of bisexuality and may be useful in future theorizing of bisexual lives.

The timeline activity also revealed some reasons for the discrepancy between the three factors of Rodriguez-Rust's (2000) model of bisexuality. Women's identities do not always have clean breaks, distinct transitions from one identity to another, such that their identities flow together and occur concurrently. Although this issue has been acknowledged among sexuality scholars for many years, there have been few theoretical attempts to explain these potential discrepancies, which are particularly common in the case of bisexual individuals (Rodriguez-Rust, 2007). Although my own conceptual model accommodates the three dimensions of Rodriguez-Rust's (2000) model of bisexuality (feelings, behaviors, and identities), this model does not yet account for a more complex conceptualization of time beyond a single, straight line. A more complex, non-linear model might better illustrate how these three dimensions might evolve or interact over time and this theoretical step might be achieved through combining Rodriguez-Rust's three dimensions with Diamond's (2012) theory of dynamic systems to produce another queer temporality that accounts for non-linear patterns of sexual development. These suggested steps for future theorizing are applicable to developing a

knowledge base specific to the experiences of older bisexual women, but could be applied beyond this population in order to increase theoretical sensitivity to issues of sexuality and life course processes more broadly.

As another important factor in life course analyses, the concepts of age, cohort or generation, historical timeframe, and cultural context influenced the development and understanding of bisexual lives in unique ways, indicating that LGBTQ aging literature must take care to apply these concepts with more intention and greater theoretical specificity in order to more fully understand their influence on life histories. This is particularly true for bisexuality and aging research, as the interplay of these concepts appears to influence the unfolding of lives differently or might have unique meaning for older bisexual individuals in contrast to the lives of lesbian and gay counterparts. In order to reveal the impact of these concepts related to timing and history, Foucauldian discursive concepts and Willig's (2001) 6-step approach to FDA were not sufficient to fully assess how historical context interacted with individual lives to inform participants' language use in a detailed way. Thus in future discourse analysis studies, researchers must take care to critically assess the conceptual and analytic limitations of FDA and creatively introduce supplemental conceptual perspectives steps of analysis in order as needed.

Methodological Implications

In future qualitative research, the combination of Foucauldian discursive concepts and the life course perspective produced a new and useful perspective on both the data collection and analysis process, offering findings with discursive interpretations that are deeply relevant to processes of identity formation and meaning-making. The future use of discourse analysis methods may further shed light on additional discursive

constructions, particularly with other samples, such as older bisexual men, younger bisexual individuals, and individuals who experience bisexual attraction or behavior but do not identify as bisexual. These studies would offer fruitful comparisons of discursive constructions across populations. Although bisexuality research often examines the experiences of individuals who identify as bisexual, the findings of this study support the need to account for identity, behavior, and attraction in order to fully grasp the complexity of bisexual lives rather than privileging identity as the primary component of sexual orientation. This will likely mean recruiting bisexual populations in ways that acknowledge bisexual histories and attractions as well. In order to more fully assess the influence of intersectional identities on discursive constructions of bisexuality, future studies might also intentionally incorporate issues of race, class, education, and geographical context into the research questions and interview guide. Other forms of qualitative methodologies may also offer further interpretation of discursive concepts that emerged in the findings. For instance, given the visceral, embodied descriptions that Mature Migrants offered when discussing the light bulb moment, this concept would be an ideal topic for a phenomenological analysis that would assess how these sudden, embodied moments are experienced and to examine their emotional salience, such as traumatic transitions characterized by confusion or anxiety.

In the data collection process, the timeline activity and discursive analysis proved useful for analyzing the complex interactions and differences in construction between dimensions of attraction, identity, and behavior. By illustrating how identities and significant relationships have developed concurrently and examining key life events that contributed to these developments, the findings offer some clarity to a long standing issue in sexuality research, namely that “sexual identity claims do not map neatly on to

sexual histories” (Jones, in press, p. 1). Future qualitative studies may benefit from an interviewing process that would entail the co-creation of a timeline representing all three dimensions of bisexuality between the interviewer and participant. This method would serve as a useful strategy to open discussion regarding the various dimensions of sexuality and patterns in each dimension, which would shed light on the seeming contradictions between sexual identity, attraction, and behaviors or relationships.

In terms of issues related to reflexivity, researchers undertaking discourse analyses must be mindful of their own biases and influence on the discourses that take shape in a given study. As my own relative youth and bisexual identity likely informed the participants’ tendency to take up or orient to the subject position of an out-of-touch elder and the ways in which they described the influence of historical time periods on language use and understandings of bisexuality, the relative positioning of the researcher must be incorporated into any analysis of discursive constructions. Future qualitative studies would likely benefit from having multiple interviewers of differing social positionings carry out interview procedures in order to assess how their own intersectional identities influence the data collection and analysis process as well as the findings that emerge.

In quantitative studies, survey items might also be designed to address each dimension of sexuality as well as allowing for multiple shifts in these dimensions over the life course. Quantitative surveys often measure timing of key life events or coming out experiences in terms of “firsts” (e.g. first recognition of same-sex attractions, first coming out, first use of a sexual minority label) (Calzo et al., 2011; Rodriguez-Rust, 2000). This operationalization allows room for only a single emergence or transition, which would not account for multiple shifts from one sexual minority status to another.

Measuring “first” experiences, such as first recognized attractions, also privileges the biological or denial discourses by implying that same-sex attractions were present prior to their recognition, which may not be true in the context of a sexual migration process. Rather than framing coming out experiences as a series of “firsts,” which may undermine the complexity of sexual narratives, operationalizations of bisexual identity emergence should allow for added fluidity of sexual experiences and multiple shifts in identity over time. In particular, the distinction between two groups of bisexual women who recognized their attractions to women, experienced sexual and romantic relationships, and established certain sexual identities in widely varying timeframes illustrates the limitations of assessing these experiences through the simplistic form of an average age at which these events occurred. In contrast, allowing for multiple life patterns to emerge in quantitative studies would offer more accurate possible interpretations of these findings.

Implications for Practice

On the Front Lines

Practitioners would benefit from an understanding of the diverse pathways by which an older woman might come to identify as bisexual. While the Early Emergers struggled to process past experiences of exclusion or judgment as well as histories of denial or repression of their true selves, the Mature Migrators may be dealing with a different set of issues. Coming out in the context of later life can lead to sudden and traumatic shifts in long-term relationships. Mature Migrators also struggled to find ways to disclose their new sexual identity to their children and in the context of established careers while aging-related issues began to take focus away from their

sexuality. They may also feel disconnected from LGBTQ communities and history given the relatively later emergence of their attractions to women and their bisexual identities. These lingering internalized issues and major life events are contextual factors that practitioners should be aware of when seeking to support and serve older bisexual women.

Presenting bisexual lives in the context of a life story, punctuated by significant relationships and experiences rather than identities, also conveys a way forward for those who seek to better understand, validate, and appreciate bisexual identities in direct practice with older adults. Participants described seeking opportunities to share what bisexuality has meant to them in terms of shaping their life sequence and meaning making processes, rather than conveying a sexual identity label alone, which would not offer the same kind of complexity, nuance, and understanding. Rather than placing a simplified label on their sexuality that would only convey what their sexual identity is called, they sought opportunities to convey what that identity *means*. By creating space for older bisexual women to share more of the nuance of their life histories in practice settings, we might allow for them to feel seen, acknowledged, and valued for their wholeness and uniqueness as individuals as well as gaining an understanding of how we might better support them as they age.

In terms of cultural competency or humility, trainings that address practice with LGBTQ older adults rarely acknowledge issues specific to bisexual individuals and would benefit from including bisexual case examples to illustrate their unique life sequences and the cultural and historical influences that have impacted their lives (Jones, Almack, & Scicluna, 2018). Like researchers, practitioners also have a responsibility to critically assess the impact of discourses of bisexuality they

acknowledge and promote. Therefore, trainings would also benefit from acknowledging the potential positive associations that bisexual individuals ascribe to including the discourses of freedom, openness, and possibility, thus providing a counter-narrative to bisexual-specific stereotypes, assumptions, and sources of stigma.

Community and Coalition Building

It is commonly suggested that practitioners must be aware that bisexual older adults may not be or feel welcomed in LGBTQ spaces (Johnston, 2016). The Early Emergers particularly shed light on the historical tensions that older bisexual women might feel in spaces that they share with older lesbians and other sexual and gender minorities. A natural solution would entail the creation of bisexual-specific spaces and social opportunities. Although aging-related concerns can dominate one's thinking in later life, participants also indicated a lack of spaces and opportunities for older bisexual women to continue processing and making sense of their bisexual identities in later life where they can find support or validation of their unique life sequences. As half of the participants did not know other older women who share their sexual identity, participants would likely benefit from the creation of social opportunities for bisexual women to meet and share their life stories.

However, practitioners and administrators working with older adults also often comment that in the absence of sufficient numbers of bisexual clients, what else might they do to include and validate these individuals? Since the relative social marginalization of bisexual women compared to lesbians is well documented (Erosheva et al., 2016; McLean, 2008), this issue may require additional attention for bisexual women in later life, considering the importance of social contact, benefits of LGBTQ community, and the negative impacts of loneliness in later life (Fredriksen-Goldsen et

al., 2016; Kuyper & Fokkema, 2010). The participants who expressed fears of being seen as an “old fogie” or out-of-touch elder also indicated that the pressure to be politically correct and keep up with rapidly changing terminology around sexuality and gender might also be a barrier for older bisexual women who wish to access intergenerational LGBTQ spaces. As such, addressing these age-based dynamics within LGBTQ communities would also be a necessary hurdle for increasing understanding across generations and reducing the social isolation of older community members.

Beyond these barriers to accessing community, there is also a theoretical and political issue at stake in this discussion. The participants described labels as seeking to “divide and conquer” and Foucault also referred to the categorization of individuals as one means of exercising power to exclude and marginalize (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999). If we chose to, as a result, create bisexual-specific spaces, we may only deepen the internal tensions among LGBTQ elders rather than resisting this practice of domination. In light of these barriers to accessing community, the creation of bisexual-specific spaces would reduce sources of historical tension, but they would not produce a sense of healing. Rather than further dividing this marginalized group, a productive and powerful next step would be to attempt to heal past tensions by emphasizing a sense of community across LGBTQ subgroups. The discourse of freedom might be a fruitful tool to engage critical consciousness-raising among LGBTQ communities that would address our commonalities while not erasing our distinct experiences. Rather than emphasizing labels and the negative stigmas or stereotypes attached to them, the discourse of freedom has the potential to build up a positive discourse that is applicable to any LGBTQ individual. By emphasizing the shared experiences of non-conformist or non-traditional lives that offer potential and possibility, we might create a stronger base for

community- and coalition-building across subgroups, rather than continuing to silo opportunities for engagement to target increasingly specific populations.

Conclusions

This study contributes a detailed and complex understanding of how older bisexual women construct and making meaning out of their bisexual identities, attractions, behaviors, and relationships. These findings present a crucial step toward forming a better understanding of how bisexual lives unfold and how language is used to produce discourses of bisexuality in later life. Additionally, this knowledge will inform more nuanced interpretations of the factors related to the health and well-being of this marginalized and often invisible population as well as contributing to more complex and accurate ways of theorizing and measuring sexuality and sexual identities in the full context of the life course. Combining Foucault's later conceptualization of discourse with a critical feminist lens allows us to emphasize the ways in which older bisexual women enact agency in creating their own emergent counter-narratives of freedom and possibility to resist heteronormative assumptions and life sequences. These lessons in agency and creativity will have lasting contributions for future research on sexuality by demonstrating the ways in which we might disrupt current constructions of legible and acceptable sexual subjects. These findings also contribute significant gains in knowledge regarding the life sequences and meaning of sexual identities for older bisexual women as well as potentially powerful tools for building community among LGBTQ populations to support their equitable achievement of health and well-being as they age.

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APPENDIX 1

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
INTERVIEW OUTLINE

* General notes on the interview structure/script: This script is a general guideline of the possible questions, clarifications, and topics to be addressed. The participant should guide the interview in the first half (the life review) as much as possible. The interviewer should make every effort to use the language that the participant uses in describing their identity, history, relationships, etc. so as not to introduce or interfere with their language use. The life review should provide an overview of their life, but with a focus on their sexual identity and any relevant events, memories, or changes. If additional topics of potential interest are raised by the participants, these topics should be tracked and noted for inclusion in later interviews.

1. Introduce consent document and give participant time to read each page: *This is an informed consent agreement; it is three pages long. Please be sure to read it thoroughly and feel free to ask any questions about the document or the study.*
2. Give opportunity for questions and answer them thoroughly: *Do you have any questions about the informed consent document or the study procedures?*
3. Interviewer and participant sign document: *If you are comfortable with allowing me to audio-record this interview, please check here. If you are comfortable with me potentially contacting you in the future to clarify your answers, please check here. If you are comfortable agreeing to participate in the study please sign here.*
4. Remind participant that they may refuse to answer any questions and can stop participation at any point: *Before we begin, I would like to remind you that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions and you can stop participating in the study at any time. You will receive \$20 to compensate your time regardless of how long the interview lasts. I have also brought some water and fruit if you get hungry or thirsty. Please let me know if you would like to stop and take a break at any time.*
5. Start recording and interview. Introduce the life review timeline and portions of the interview: *The interview will generally include two halves. For the first half of the interview, we will be filling out this timeline that reflects your life so far, beginning with your year of birth and ending with the current year. I'm going to interject as little as possible. I really want to focus on the story of how you arrived to this point in your life. After the first half, we'll have more time for clarification and reflection. I may ask you to clarify some specific pieces of your story, to provide more context, or to reflect on your story as a whole. At the end,*

I'll also make sure we have some time for you to raise any additional things I didn't ask about. Are you ready to begin?

6. First half of the interview: Life review timeline
 - a. *So to begin with, what year were you born? We'll work from there to the current moment in time, which is 2017 at the other end of the line.*
 - b. *Can you start by telling me a little about your family background and then we'll move forward from there? How did your story start?*
 - c. *Possible prompts to move through the life review:*
 - i. *And what would you describe as the next period of your life?*
 - ii. *And what was that time period like for you?*
 - iii. *Were there any important events that happened during that time period?*
 - iv. *Were there any important political or historical events that happened during that time? How did they influence your sexuality?*
 - v. *Did your understanding of your sexuality or your sexual identity/orientation change during that period? How did it change? Why did it change?*
 - vi. *Can you tell me how that happened?*

7. Second half of the interview: Clarification and Reflection Questions
 - a. *So in looking back over your life, what has being bisexual meant to you? What does it mean to you today?*
 - b. *How do you define bisexuality? Has that definition or your understanding of bisexuality changed as you've gotten older?*
 - c. *Does being bisexual have implications for you or your life on an individual level? And on a social level? And on a political level?*
 - d. *Is being bisexual important to you? Why or why not?*
 - e. *What, if any, have been positive/negative impacts of your bisexual identity?*
 - f. *What, if any, other sexual identities have you called yourself or identified with over the course of your life? How are those identities different from or similar to being bisexual?*

8. Ending the interview: *We have reached the end of the questions I had prepared. Are there any additional topics that you want to talk about or that you feel are important that I did not ask about? If you have nothing else to add, I will turn off the recorder.*

9. Interview follow-up questions [**for pilot interviews only**]:
 - a. *Do you have any feedback on the flow of the interview and the questions asked? Do you have any suggestions for reordering the questions?*
 - b. *Do you have any suggestions for additional questions to ask or topics to be covered?*
 - c. *Did you feel comfortable with the wording of the questions? Do you have any suggestions for how to change the wording of questions?*

10. Ask about future contact: *Would you like to read over your transcript when it is completed? And would you like to receive the final study results when they are complete?* Make note of preferences and if participants would like to be contacted.

11. Close the interview: [If participant asked to review the transcript: *I will send you a copy within two weeks.*] *If you think of anything you would like to add or any questions you have in the future, my contact information is on the copy of the consent form I gave you earlier. Please feel free to contact me at any time. If you asked to receive any study results, I will send them to the address you indicated. My study should be complete by June 2018. Thank you very much for your time and participation.*