LESBIAN & BISEXUAL IDENTITY IN MULTIPLE ECOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Although sexual minority individuals are embedded in a series of complex systems—legal, political, cultural, and institutional—little is known about how these diverse contexts affect sexual identity and well-being. Using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model (1979) as a theoretical framework, the purpose of this study was to better understand how proximal (e.g., interpersonal relationships) and distal (e.g., policies) environments influence the development of homosexual and bisexual women living in the United States. In this mixed methods study, 367 lesbian and 495 bisexual women completed self-report questionnaires that measured: 1) feelings about sexual orientation; 2) degree of openness; 3) quality of life; and 4) biculturalism. Analyses revealed that lesbian women fared better than bisexual women on all measures. A thematic analysis of open-ended questions identified emergent themes that centered on experiences of inclusion (e.g., acceptance) and exclusion (e.g., legalized homophobia). The discussion focuses on similarities and differences within and between groups.
Lesbian and Bisexual Identity in Multiple Ecological Contexts

The discourse on female sexuality is never simple. It has been described as a complex web of power relations, biological drives, romantic attachments and cultural relevance (Fine, 1988). The current research adds to efforts to disentangle this web by examining how proximal and distal environments are related to identity and well-being in lesbian\(^1\) and bisexual women. It compares differences in lesbian and bisexual women’s well-being and looks to women’s subjective explanations of identity development and ecological contexts to shed light on this relationship. The study considers the political nature of female sexuality and, while taking into account experiences of stigma and homophobia, also looks specifically for sources of strength in women’s narratives. By comparing the experiences and beliefs of lesbian and bisexual (LB) women, this study will take an important step in identifying how different environments are related to both positive and negative views of the sexual self.

**Identity: Development and definitions**

According to Erikson (1968), identity is defined as a set of values, beliefs and goals that frame one's life experiences. Erickson believed that identity development must be an active search characterized by "identity crisis" (e.g., a turning point where one will either grow or stagnate) and commitment (e.g., the end of the search and the espousing of an identity). He asserted that one must adhere to a "cohesive identity" in order to be psychologically developed and healthy. Similarly, Marcia’s (1966) view of identity development was that one achieved a stable identity through a series of crises and commitments. Other researchers espouse the idea that rather than turning points,

\(^1\) Please note that the term “homosexual” will be used interchangeably with the term “lesbian” throughout this paper.
identities are developed through narrative, a process of telling stories and placing one’s experiences and beliefs into a contextual framework (McLean & Breen, 2009). Inasmuch, the process of telling one’s story may contribute to the development of one’s own identity.

One’s overall identity --the schema of beliefs, values and characteristics that make a person unique-- is comprised of multiple smaller identities (e.g., occupational identity, religious identity, political identity etc). Of particular interest in this study is sexual identity; an individual’s sexual characteristics, beliefs and values.

**The sexual self: Models of sexual identity development.**

Shively and DeCecco (1977) define sexual identity as being composed of four variables: physical identity (e.g., biological sex), gender identity (e.g., the degree to which one identifies as male or female), gender ideology (e.g., beliefs about what comprise masculinity or femininity) and sexual orientation (e.g., the gender(s) to whom one is attracted). Often, sexual identity is used synonymously with sexual orientation as it is often difficult in research to parse them apart.

**Stage models of development.**

Sexual identity models of development strive to explain how one develops a sexual identity. Perhaps the most widely-used model of homosexual identity development is Cass' (1984) six-stage model. Cass' (1979, 1984) Homosexual Identity Model emphasizes the context of homosexual identity and its dependence on the individual's interpersonal environment. Cass’s model is linear and involves progression through six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis and does not include movement back to earlier
stages; an inability to resolve the conflict (e.g., confusion over one’s identity) at each stage results in stagnation or identity foreclosure. Cass’ process involves a transformation from looking at homosexuality as an outside phenomenon to understanding homosexuality to be a characterization of the self. Cass’s model of sexual identity formation also rests on the notion that “coming out” is critical to one’s positive sexual and emotional development. Other models have been developed which are generally in-line with Cass's idea of a linear identity such as Fassinger and Miller's (1996) four stages of development: awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis. Both Cass and Fassinger and Miller’s models of development end with identity integration and or developing a positive sense of self. Also notable, once integration is achieved, identity is thought to be stable over time.

According to Rosario, Scrimshaw, and Hunter (2004), such stage models of development are characterized by completion of two broad developmental tasks: identity formation and identity integration. Identity formation is characterized by increasing awareness of one’s sexual orientation, questioning the appropriateness of a lesbian/bisexual label, and exploring identity through same-sex sexual activities/relationships. Identity integration is characterized by accepting one’s bisexual/homosexual identity, disclosing this identity to others and eventual involvement with other lesbian, gay or bisexual people and activities. Acceptance of self involves overcoming one’s internalized homophobia (e.g., the internalization of society’s negative beliefs about homosexuality) (Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Rosario et al., 2004).

In terms of developmental trajectories experienced specifically by bisexual women, Fox (2005) explained that existing models of bisexual development are similar to
those of homosexual development in their focus on "milestones" or stages, including: a) first opposite-sex attractions, sex, and relationships; b) first same-sex sexual behavior, attractions, relationships; c) first self-identification as bisexual; d) coming out as bisexual.

**Alternative models of development: Fluidity & environmental context.**

Stage models of development have been criticized for being too narrow or rigid to capture an individual’s unique experiences of sexual identity development. Furthermore, Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) explain that Cass’ model was originally intended for gay men and therefore might not be generalizable to women. Moreover, they assert that the developmental trajectories of most sexual-minority women might differ from the linear narrative, and that women’s sexuality is perhaps more situational than male identity development. Specifically, sexual-minority women sometimes develop same-sex attractions later in adulthood (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995) or develop same-sex attractions as the result of abrupt changes in sexual attractions (Diamond, 2008). Identity develops in an environmental context. Variability in women's sexual development may be explained by the interaction between the individual and environment; as contexts change, identity can change as well (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; Shapiro, Rios & Stewart, 2010).

**Bisexuality: A stable or transitory identity.**

Bisexuality is often stigmatized as a transitory stage on the way to adopting a homosexual identity; or conversely, an experimental stage for people who will eventually adopt a heterosexual identity. Kinsey was the first to argue against this categorical system of sexuality as being too rigid asserting that, “The world is not to be divided into sheep
Lesbian & Bisexual Identity

and goats” (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948, p. 639). Since then, researchers have debated the nature of sexuality and, in particular, bi-sexuality, by questioning the degree to which sexual identity is socially-constructed, situation-dependent or stable across time.

Diamond's (2008) 10 year longitudinal study of emerging adult bisexual women found support for the idea that a bisexual identity tends to be stable: the majority of bisexual women did not switch their identity label to heterosexual or homosexual, but either switched between identifying as bisexual or unlabeled. For those women who did switch to identifying as lesbian or heterosexual, they did not report increases in either same-sex or opposite-sex attraction and reported lower overall same-sex attraction as compared to lesbian women. Diamond (2007; 2008) also found support for a model of generalized sexual fluidity, indicated by the greater number of transitions to bisexual identity or unlabeled identity as compared to lesbian identity or heterosexual identity and by the high number of overall identity-label changes. She explained that an unlabeled identity may sometimes represent participants' expression of being attracted to an individual, regardless of his/her gender (Diamond, 2006; 2008).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System's Model: The Sexual Self in Ecological Context

Feminist ideology asserts that female sexuality is a battleground for political, cultural, and moral beliefs (Kehily, 2002). Accordingly, the current research considers how the broader network of political and cultural systems can affect sexual identity in both direct and indirect ways. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model (1979) provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship of environment to developmental and identity processes of lesbian and bisexual women. The model can be envisioned as four nested circles, each representing different levels of ecological
proximity where interactions between individuals and their environments take place. The model is bi-directional; each level of the system can influence the others (See Figure 1).

The *macroystem* is largest ecological system and is the farthest removed from the individual – it contains the mainstream cultural norms, expectations, and ideologies that directly and indirectly influence all of the other systems. The *exosystem*, another distal, indirect context incorporates the ideals of the macroystem into cultural and legal institutions (e.g., laws, social and educational policy, religious organizations etc.). The *microystem* is the smallest ecological context. It consists of the direct dyadic interactions with the people, objects, and symbols of one's environment-- including the immediate relationships of the individual with family members, romantic partners, and friends. The *mesosystem* is the level of environment between the microystem and exosystem. It consists of the interaction of multiple microystems. This consists of the physical, symbolic or emotional relationships between different microystem relationships (e.g., how the relationship between an individual and her family interacts with the relationship between an individual and her romantic partner). Each of these contexts, independently and in concert, can play a role in the development of women's sexual selves. The following passages will first apply the ecological systems model to lesbian women and will then engage in a discussion on how the model can be applied to bisexual women.

**Being Lesbian in Multiple Ecological Contexts**

**The Macroystem: Being lesbian in a heterosexist culture.**

To understand the experiences of lesbian women, it is important to first examine how women's sexuality, independent of sexual orientation, is culturally constructed. This follows in the tradition of Adrienne Rich's (1980) *Theory of Compulsory Heterosexuality,*
a revolutionary feminist essay which decried the sexual oppression of women in general and the oppression of lesbian women in particular.

Rich (1980) explained that heterosexuality was the only socially sanctioned form of sexual or romantic relationship and that, historically, it had resulted in lesbian women being ignored, trivialized and even demonized. Although there are contemporary legal and social movements pushing to legitimize gay rights (e.g., marriage and adoption equality, protection against hate crimes), the predominant culture is one that still prioritizes the heterosexual relationship over the homosexual relationship, as is illustrated in cultural practices such as labeling lesbianism as an alternative lifestyle (Lannutti, 2008). Such practices make heterosexuality the norm and homosexuality the exception.

More recently, Allen (2007) maintained that the normative view of sexuality focuses on male sexual desire and behavior, to the neglect of female sexuality. Other researchers have found that social norms discourage women from openly discussing their sexuality (Fine, 1988; Logan & Buchanon, 2008; Welles, 2005), and from having sex (Fine, 1988; Kim et al., 1997). Kim et al. (1997) described this double-standard as a defining characteristic of masculinity---men cannot say no to sex and will actively pursue and initiate it---while women are expected to say no to sex. Women are required to act as sexual gatekeepers, passively waiting for sexual advances, but never initiating sex themselves (Fine, 1988; Kim et al., 1997). The sexual double standard creates a dynamic in which women are expected to be sexually enticing or desirable to men, but not sexually active.

The values of the Macrosystem prioritize male sexuality over female sexuality and heterosexuality over homosexuality. Consequently, lesbian women not only face the
challenges of living in a culture where female sexuality is stigmatized, but in a society where their sexual orientation is marginalized as well.

**The Exosystem: Institutionalized & legalized exclusion.**

The values of the Macrosystem inform the other systems of the Ecological model. In particular, heterosexist cultural values directly influence the laws and cultural institutions pertaining to relationships and sexuality. In the United States government, this is illustrated by the ban on marriage-equality. In school systems, this is manifested in the content of public school sexual education. In the research literature, this is evidenced by the difference between the larger number of studies published on gay men than lesbian women.

**Heteronormative values and legalized exclusion.**

Currently, only five states, one district and one native American tribe allows marriages between same-sex partners, three additional states perform civil unions (including Hawaii which will begin 1/12/2012), and six states recognize "domestic partnerships" (Marriage Matters, 2011).

Exclusion from legal marriage has immediate implications for the relationship systems at the Microsystem level. Marriage has ramifications on couples' finances, parenting and adoption rights, taxes, judicial proceedings, health insurance, social security, immigration, hospital rights, inheritance, and domestic violence protections (Glaad Media Reference Guide, 2010). Moreover, marriage is associated with physical and emotional health benefits; exclusion from the institution of marriage means exclusion from these as well (Burman & Margolin, 1992). Without the option to marry, there are

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2 Throughout this paper, the term heterosexist is used interchangeably with the term heteronormative.
fewer barriers to relationship dissolution (e.g., divorce is necessary to dissolve a marriage). This raises an important question--when same-sex couples are legally prohibited from certain relational rites of passage, does it impact the way they conceptualize their relationships?

Aside from marriage, LGBT people are not guaranteed equal health benefits. A recent report released by the Human Rights Commission detailing the practices of the 200 largest hospitals in the US found that only 58 percent had policies in place to prevent patients from discrimination based on their sexual orientation and only seven percent had policies to protect against discrimination based on gender identity (Delpercio, 2010).

*Heteronormative values and education.*

Michelle Fine's (1988) critique of formal sexual education in schools berated [in part] the promotion of a hetero-sexist view of sex and suppression of dialogue about female sexual desire. This is illustrated in abstinence-only education (which was given over $200 million worth of funding by the Bush administration) in which safe-sex is defined as married sex (e.g., sex between a husband and wife) (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Ironically, research has found that girls with the strongest abstinence beliefs were found to be the least likely to engage in safe sex practices, perhaps because they were afraid of looking too prepared or willing to have sex (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996; Fine, 1988). This abstinence model is a double-edged sword for lesbian women. As women, they are discouraged from being sexually agentic (e.g., taking control of their sexuality). As lesbian women they are also excluded from the abstinence-model's definition of “safe sex” since they are legally prohibited from marrying.
Exclusion in sex education can contribute to feelings of confusion and emotional upheaval when feelings of same-sex attraction are not legitimized or explained: Logan and Buchanan (2008) found that non-heterosexual women expressed feelings of denial, confusion, and alienation when reflecting on their first same-sex attractions.

**Heteronormative values in research.**

Reflective of both Rich (1980) and Allen’s (2006) theories of heteronormativity, queer research makes up a relatively small part of the amount of research produced. Lee and Crawford’s (2007) meta-analysis of PsychInfo records from 1975 to 2001, for example, found that research on lesbian women and gay men made up less than 1 percent of all studies on record. Of the research that is conducted, much of it has focused on gay men. When lesbian women have been studied they are often grouped together with gay men. Moreover, when gender was examined, lesbian and bisexual women were significantly less likely to be studied than homosexual and bisexual men.

Felicio and Sutherland (2001) explained the flaws of making inferences about lesbian women from studies on gay men by asserting that people do not transverse different types of prejudice (sexism, racism, heterosexism) in an "additive manner." For example, a black lesbian woman does not experience the same racism that a black man experiences and a lesbian woman does not experience the same sexism that a heterosexual woman experiences (Spelman, 1988, as cited in Felicio & Sutherland, 2001). Consequently, it is important to avoid making generalizations about the experience of the lesbian woman from research conducted primarily on heterosexual women or homosexual men.

**Overlapping ecological contexts: When the distal and proximal collide.**
As mentioned, women are not imbedded in only one ecological context, but are instead imbedded simultaneously in multiple environments. Consequently, women’s intimate, dyadic relationships (e.g., the microsystem of the ecological model) are affected by other levels of environment at the macrosystem level by cultural norms and at the exosystem level by cultural institutions and policies. The review of the microsystem literature will also consider the influence of other levels of environment. Heterosexist macrosystem values create a climate that encourages discrimination of LB individuals and prioritizes heterosexuality. It is also a climate where the default assumption is that everyone is heterosexual. This leads lesbian and bisexual individuals to continuously have to “come out” or disclose their sexual orientation; a process that can be full of fear and anxiety.

**Microsystems: Coming out, discrimination and social supports.**

**Minority stress.**

Research has found that the LGBT community experiences one of the highest levels of stress out of any group in contemporary society (Lewis, Derlenga, Griffin & Krowinski, 2003). Iwasaki and Ristock (2007) investigated the idea that this strain is due to “minority stress,” defined as stress arising from one's status as a marginalized member of a group/society. By qualitatively investigating LGBT people’s accounts of stress, they found that for lesbian women stress is often relational in origin. In particular, they found that stress was tied to experiences of discrimination, a dearth of social support, and decisions to hide one’s sexual orientation.

**Peer and family relationships: Disclosure, social support and rejection.**
Diamond and Lucas’ (2004) comparison of sexual minority youth (aged 13-23) to heterosexual youth found that sexual-minority youths reported more negative affect (e.g., depression, anxiety, and stress-related physical symptoms) than heterosexual youth. This effect was mediated by participants reported negative expectations and experiences in peer relationships (e.g., fear of losing friends, low locus of perceived control in romantic relationships and fear of not finding the right person). This finding was also tied to age, with younger sexual-minority participants being more likely to report friendship loss.

Similarly, Crowle, Harré and Lunt’s (2007) qualitative study on adolescents (aged 15-18) found that the youth’s primary concerns about being gay or lesbian revolved around feeling marginalized, bullied and ostracized by their heterosexual peers, having a lack of safe and welcoming spaces in which to develop their sexual identities, and having a lack of gay/lesbian peers to form relationships with. A caveat of these studies is that they cannot be used to make comparisons between lesbian and bisexual-identified women.

Social norms that prohibit women from openly discussing their sexuality (Logan & Buchanon, 2008; Welles, 2005) may hinder the processing of sexual experiences and feeling fulfilled and understood in romantic relationships. Amongst LB students, depression and loneliness was linked to the belief that sexuality needed to remain a secret (Allen, 2007; Logan & Buchanan, 2008). Similarly, Ulrich, Lutegendorf, and Stapleton’s (2003) study of HIV-positive gay men found that non-disclosure of sexual orientation was a risk factor for depression, decreased social support and decreased health.

Conversely, Jordan and Deluty (1998) found that more openness about sexual orientation was related to increased self-esteem, positive affectivity and decreased
anxiety. Similarly, Ryan, Russel, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez’s (2010) study of LGBT young adults (aged 21-25) found that family acceptance served as a protective factor in young adult’s well-being. Family acceptance predicted increased social support, emotional (e.g., increased self-esteem, decreased risk of depression or suicidal ideation) and physical health.

However, it is important to note that this is not causal research and directionality cannot be assumed. For example, while it might be assumed that a one cannot be supported for her- sexual identity if she does not disclose her sexual identity, it may also be that one is more likely to disclose if she has a supportive relationship. Moreover, the studies on gay men cannot be generalized to women.

**Microsystems: Relationships & associations with distal contexts.**

Heterosexist values in sex education can lead to negative physical and mental health issues as well as relationship issues. For example, British lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (subsequently referred to as LGBT) adolescents who received hetero-normative sex education were at greater risk for domestic violence. Adolescents described being unable to generalize knowledge about opposite-sex couples to their own relationships. Moreover, they explained that they were unable to recognize qualities of abusive same-sex relationships because they were not provided with a model of a healthy same-sex relationship (Donovan & Hester, 2008).

In a related study surveying 1,749 LGBT Australian students about the quality of in-school sex education, students reported that since the education did not speak about gay relationships they found the information they received "as useful as a chocolate kettle" (Hillier & Mitchell, 2008, p. 220). The students were unable to transfer the
heterosexual education to their same-sex relationships and were found to have higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases, and an earlier average age of first sexual encounter (often used as a measure of risk) as compared to other students.

**Mesosystem: The relationship between outness and multiple relationships.**

Coming out or being open with one’s family, friends and colleagues (etc.) is generally positively correlated with romantic relationship quality (Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; LaSala, 2000). However, outness in one type of relationship can impact the quality of other relationships. For example, in romantic relationships, in some cases, low levels of outness in one partner can be seen by the other as an invalidation of their relationship, thus leading to relationship difficulties (Jordan & Deluty, 2000). Similarly, Clausell and Roiseman’s (2009) study of romantic partner dyads found that even controlling for personality type, individuals who were more “out” to the world (e.g., non-family members) and who had partners who were more out to the world were more satisfied in relationships and had more positive and less negative affect as compared to participants who were less out.

While disclosure of sexual orientation generally has positive repercussions on mental health, it sometimes has negative consequences as well. The reception one gets when “coming out” may also impact community involvement and relationships. A study by Rabin and Slater (1993) found that lesbians who had negative early-on experiences with disclosure of identity (e.g., coming out) were less likely to be involved in the LGBT community and had less positive views of lesbian women in general.

**Lesbian resiliency and positivity, despite ecological challenges.**
Despite the challenges outlined above, it is clear that not all lesbian women are crippled by stereotypes or stunted by a hetero-normative culture. How is it that some women do have negative outcomes while others are resilient and thrive in a challenging environment? For some lesbian women, the narratives they construct around their sexuality enable them to turn their marginalization into strength. Fine and Hall (2005) assert that this positive marginality, turning one’s marginalized status into a virtue and a source of strength, involves four themes: 1) critical evaluation and reframing of marginality; 2) viewing obstacles as challenges one can turn them into opportunities; 3) creating “safe” spaces and resisting social institutions; and 4) creating a meaningful life.

Fitting with the idea of critical evaluation and reframing, some lesbian women have remarked that because their orientation was different than the norm, they were freed from heterosexual expectations of gender roles and relationship roles; their “deviant” status afforded them freedom to define their relationship outside of narrow cultural proscriptions (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001; Fine & Hall, 2005). A related finding by Thompson (1990) found that lesbian narratives of first sexual experiences were marked by greater feelings of control and entitlement to sexual pleasure when compared with heterosexual narratives.

A qualitative study examining the role of religion in the sexual identities and relationship of 14 same-sex couples exemplifies both critical evaluation and creating meaning. Religion was used by the couples in their study as a way to validate their relationship by giving it a spiritual meaning or purpose, “… God has given us this relationship” (Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki & Olson, 2008, 393). While participation afforded the couples social support and personal (spiritual) growth, in many instances the
participants expressed concern that their experiences in the church did not validate them as a couple and family. Couples expressed fears of prejudice and recounted actual overt and subtle discrimination. Most of the couples carefully evaluated religious doctrine to see how they could merge their religious views with their personal ones about sexuality. Consequently, the process of critically thinking about one’s beliefs seemed to be an important process in resisting stigma and embracing difference.

This practice of re-framing and evaluating was also found to be a positive behavior in Harris, Cook and West's (2008) study of religious practices. Their study examined the relationship between religiosity, internalized homophobia, and sexual identity development. They found preliminary evidence that engaging in critical evaluation of religious beliefs was negatively correlated with internalized homophobia and positively associated with sexual identity development.

In sum, the ecological model can be used to gain an increased understanding of how the interactions of multiple systems (e.g., legal, cultural, and political) affect sexual identity. Women do not develop their sexual identities isolated from social and cultural factors. Bronfenbrenner’s model takes this into account allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how distal and proximal environmental factors contribute to an overall view of the sexual self. Although the research reviewed up until this point has been organized around the Ecological Model, research has yet to consider how women themselves make sense of the multiple environmental contexts that affect their lives as lesbian women. Thus, an important research agenda requires an inductive, narrative exploration of how ecological contexts—from macro to micro—affect sexual minority women.
The (Bi) Sexual Self in Ecological Context

What is noticeably lacking from the previous literature review is a dialogue about bisexual women. Bisexual women are, undoubtedly, embedded within the same macrosystem of heterosexist values. However, due to the lack of research on bisexual women, it is unclear if the macrosystem affects ecologies for bisexual women in noticeably different ways than for lesbian women. Bisexual women have the unique potential to be attracted to both women and men and, consequently, may be affected by contextual factors in similar ways to lesbian women if pursuing a same-sex (romantic or sexual) relationship, but might be exposed to different ecologies if pursuing an opposite-sex relationship. Bisexual women may need to traverse both heterosexual and homosexual communities in their sexual and romantic relationships. This research will delve into the challenges of bridging different ecologies and the impact doing so has on identity and well-being for women who identify as bisexual.

Bisexuality is often absent or grouped together with homosexuality in the literature (Lee & Crawford, 2007; Volpp, 2010). Lee and Crawford (2007) found that studies of bisexual men and women were less than 0.20 percent of the research found on PsychInfo. Similarly, Diamond’s meta-analysis found that from 1975-1985 only 3% of journal articles included bisexuality in the title, abstract, or subject heading. From 1985-1995, the numbers increased to 16%, but from 1995-2005, the numbers only increased to 19% (Diamond, 2008).

By grouping lesbian and bisexual women together into one category, one might be inflating assumptions about one population while ignoring another that needs more study and care (Volpp, 2010). Consequently, the current research seeks to look at the unique
challenges and experiences of bisexual women by suggesting that, while their lived experiences might be similar to that of lesbian women, the strengths and challenges of bisexual women are likely to be different enough to merit being studied separately.

**Microsystems & exosystems: Heteronormativity & homonormativity.**

**Romantic relationships, friendships and communities.**

Similar to Adrienne Rich's (1980) Theory of Compulsory Heterosexuality which asserted that heterosexuality was the only socially sanctioned form of sexual or romantic relationship, within the gay community same-sex relationships are the only allowed model of relationship, and lesbian orientation is assumed to be the norm. Bisexual women are often ignored, excluded, or demonized.

Although LGBT communities are, for some lesbian women, a source of support, several studies point out that on average, bisexual woman may be marginalized in the gay community as well as in the heterosexual community (Hartman, 2005; Hutchins and Kaahumanu, 1991; Rust, 1993). Rust's (1993) article, for example, explored the attitudes of lesbian women toward bisexual women. Overwhelmingly, she found negative opinions of bisexual women: 79% believed that bisexuality is a transitional phase for not-yet-identified lesbian women, 65% believed bisexual women were just trying to pass as heterosexual, 96% asserted that they would prefer to date a lesbian, and 74% expressed aversion to dating a bisexual. Overall, participants expressed attitudes of political distrust: the lesbian women asserted they did not trust bisexual women to lobby or work for a gay rights organization. Similarly, bisexual theorists Hutchins and Kaahumanu (1991) found that the gay community also does not support bisexual women, instead
viewing them as trying to retain heterosexual privilege or bisexuality as a transitional phase.

Hartman's (2005) pilot study explores how bisexual women relate to the lesbian community, the tensions that arise, the problem of bi-invisibility, and discrimination from the LGBT community. Hartman (2005) examined bisexuality from the view-point of the bisexual. She conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight women and eight men. Focusing here just on the female results, she found that there is a “chilly climate” between bisexual women and the lesbian community. Discrimination, while not overt, exists in the form of exclusion or rejection of the “heterosexual” side of bisexual women. Participants recalled experiences of exclusion when they dated men; feeling they were longer a part of the gay community when they were in a heterosexual relationship. They identified feeling like they had to defend their identity to lesbian women. In addition, bisexual women shared stories of lesbian women disliking bisexual women in the “dating pool” and they recounted instances of being rejected by a lesbian because of their bisexuality. Some women also explained that they felt their “heterosexual sides” were rejected and recalled instances of being asked to remove gay pride symbols from clothing. One participant explains her experiences with feeling unable to share her heterosexual side with the gay community:

I can't talk about my heterosexual relationships when I can talk about my homosexual relationships . . . people don't really understand . . . you’re straight you like the opposite sex, fine. You're gay, you like the same sex, fine. But wait, you like both sexes? Why? How? (Hartman, 2005, p. 68).
Participants in Hartman’s (2005) study believed their “chilly reception” in the gay community was most likely due to stereotyped beliefs about bisexual women. This idea is supported by a variety of research highlighting the stereotypes held by the gay community about bisexual women including that they are a) trying to maintain heterosexual privilege; b) uncommitted to gay and lesbian politics; c) sexually promiscuous or overly sexual; and d) against monogamy (Israel & Mohr, 2004; McLean, 2008; Morgenstern, 2004).

Other women explained the political nature of the tension by asserting that when a member of the queer community dates a man, she removes herself from the daily political struggle of being part of a marginalized group (Hartman, 2005). A similar study on Australian bisexual men and women found that many bisexual women abstained from participation in the gay community due to fears of discrimination. Of those that were active members in the community, most felt obliged to hide their heterosexual side (e.g., they kept their bisexual identity quiet or hidden; McLean, 2008).

The explanation given for bi-phobia (e.g., discrimination against bisexual women) was also political in nature. Lesbian feminist communities viewed dating women as a form of resisting patriarchy and, consequently, sexual and/or romantic involvement with men was viewed as being subversive to their goals (McLean, 2008).

**Effects on bisexual well-being: Discrimination from both sides.**

Unique to the bisexual experience is that discrimination can come from both the gay and straight communities. Herek’s (2002) telephone survey of 1,335 participants found that heterosexual people rated bisexual people more negatively than any other religious, ethnic, or political group, save intravenous drug users.
The increased marginality of the bisexual can come with increased risks. Warner et al.’s (2004) study found that bisexual people were less likely to be open about their sexual orientation than gay men and women. When triangulated with the research which suggests that non-disclosure of sexual orientation is associated with physical and emotional health risks (Allen, 2007; Logan & Buchanan, 2008; Ulrich et al., 2003), this may place bisexual women at greater risk than lesbian women. Volpp's (2010) analysis of the mental health literature also reveals that bisexual women may be at an increased risk for mental health issues. Although she asserts that there are some limitations with the literature (e.g., LGBT people may be more likely to disclose personal or stigmatizing information), there is still evidence that bisexual people may suffer more than homosexual or heterosexual individuals. Cochran and Mays’ (2007) California Quality of Life Survey found that bisexual women had higher levels of self-reported psychological distress than heterosexual or homosexual individuals. Interestingly, the second highest level was reported by women who had previously had homosexual experiences but currently identified as heterosexual, followed then by homosexual women and finally heterosexual women. This suggests that the experiences of more-marginalized sexual identities may place a role in psychological distress.

In several studies where sexuality is defined behaviorally rather than by self-reported identity, bisexuals have been found to be at greater risk of mental illness or risk behaviors. Udry and Chantala's (2002) study of adolescents (grades 7-12) found that girls who had both male and female sexual partners were more likely to self-report engaging in risk taking behavior and were more likely to report depression. Mathy (2002) found that bisexuals represented a larger percentage of documented youth suicide attempts, and
were more likely to report using drugs. By contrast, Warner et al. (2004) did not find any significant differences in lifetime drug use when comparing bisexual and lesbian women. The literature does show mixed findings, but the authors try to explain possible reasons for increased risk, citing “minority stress, social stigma, isolation, discrimination, and violence” (Volpp, 2010, p. 46).

**Bisexual resiliency & positivity despite ecological challenges.**

Interpersonal relationships have been found to be an important protective factor against bisexual stigma. A study by Sheets and Mohr (2009) found that general social support (e.g., not related to sexuality) positively predicted levels of life satisfaction and negatively predicted depression. Sexuality-specific social support negatively predicted internalized bi-negativity (e.g., internalized homophobia as pertinent to a bisexual identity), such that higher levels of social support resulted in lower levels of internalized bi-negativity. Saewyc et al.’s (2009) analysis of protective factors in the lives of bisexual adolescents found that bisexual girls reported less feelings of connectedness to their families and to their schools as compared to heterosexuals, but reported similar levels of family, religious and school connectedness when compared to lesbian-identified youth.

Heath and Mulligan (2008) found that involvement in community might have positive effects on physical and mental well-being. However, this involves the selection of a community which is supportive, as some bisexual women reported feeling unwelcome in the lesbian and gay community (as also evidenced in the research outlined above). Moreover, bisexual women reported engaging in lesbian communities but there was virtually no mention of the reverse (i.e. lesbian women engaging in bisexual communities; Heath & Mulligan, 2008). Bisexual women reported being able to carve out
support systems or communities that were separate from the LGBT community (Hartman, 2005).

Hartman (2005) explained that the absence of a formal bisexual community could enable women to form a “small close-knit community of bisexual women that facilitates free expression of identity” (p.63). Similarly, sociologist Shokeid (2002) explored the lives of bisexual people in New York City and found that their support did not come from the “gay” community but from bisexual social networks (as cited in Rust, 2001). Not having an institutionalized bisexual community allowed women to define their relationships and their identities as they desired.

In a recent study exploring the question: “what is good about being bisexual?” Rostosky, Riggle, Pascal-Hague and McCants (2010) found 11 positive identity aspects, including: “freedom from social labels, honesty and authenticity, having a unique perspective, increased levels of insight and awareness, freedom to love without regard for sex/gender, freedom to explore relationships, freedom of sexual expression, acceptance of diversity, belonging to a community, understanding privilege and oppression, and becoming an advocate/activist.” Their study offers evidence that positive marginality is possible for bisexual women as well as lesbian women. By finding the positive aspects of a bisexual identity, women were able to turn their (doubly) marginalized status into a source of strength.

**The Difficulty of Multiculturalism: Being Lesbian & Bisexual in Multiple Contexts**

Culture is defined as “the behavior, patterns, beliefs, and all other products of a particular group of people that are passed down from generation to generation” (Santrock, 1998, p.411). According to this definition, the gay community has a particular
culture that is separate and distinct from the heterosexual community. Lesbian and bisexual women live within the broader heteronormative society and are consequently faced with the task of navigating multiple cultures.

The current research is investigating how different ecologies affect women’s identities and relationships. Vannewkirk’s account of her own experiences as a feminine lesbian captured the challenges of navigating multiple cultures. She asked, “Why am I femme when I play in the queer community and a tomboy when I play in the straight community?” (Vannewkirk, 2010, p.73).

Vannewkirk's identity is perceived differently in different contexts, but it is unclear if her identity itself also changes in different contexts. A better understanding of this issue is a goal of the current research. This will be accomplished through the use of semi-structured, qualitative interviews that allow women to tell their stories. Story-telling allows one to process not only the events, but the underlying subscripts and meanings of one's life. It permits us to “put things into perspective” but also allows us to make cognitive order out of confusing chaos.

Crawley and Broad's (2004) research on how members of the LGBT community use story-telling (both personal and political) revealed that LGBT members often followed a formulaic “coming-out” tale. Participants on an LGBT panel spoke to students at the university with the intention of decreasing homophobia and increasing awareness of the diversity of people within the LGBT community. Specifically, they sought to portray themselves as unique individuals in order to counteract negative stereotypes that their predominantly heterosexual audience may have held about the LGBT community.
Ironically, the panel-members’ beliefs about others’ stereotyped views led them to depict a restricted view of themselves.

Vannewkirk’s (2010) statement is also tied to the question of authenticity, exploring the idea of legitimacy in the gay and heterosexual communities. Because Vannewkirk does not have an outward appearance of “gayness,” she finds that in both the straight and gay communities, her sexual orientation is continually challenged. Unlike race or sex, sexual orientation is usually not immediately visible. Accordingly, the covert nature of sexual orientation often leads lesbian women to the process of “coming out” or explaining to others that they are not heterosexual. Vannewkirk (2006) connects “coming out” to heteronormativity, asserting that both resisting and enforcing heterosexuality is the norm. Coming out challenges other people’s perceptions of who is gay and what it means to be gay, but at the same time reinforces the idea that one is first assumed to be straight. Importantly, “coming out” for bisexual women may also involve establishing an identity in the gay community as well as in the straight community. Bisexual women may not only be facing the challenge of heteronormativity in the heterosexual community, but also of homonormativity in the gay community.

Beyond the experience of “coming out” both lesbian and bisexual women might experience tension between heterosexual cultural norms and cultural norms of the gay community. It is predicted that bisexual women will experience more of this “tension,” as the need to navigate very different ecologies in the context of dating is unique to the experience of being bisexual.

**Ecological Systems: A sense of time**
Bronfenbronner’s ecological model includes one additional level called the "chronosystem," which represents time. When examining an individual in context, it is important to understand that cultures and systems change over time. Inasmuch, changing contexts may contribute to differences in identities. For example, a 40 year old lesbian woman will have experienced different ecological contexts over the course of her life as compared to the ecological contexts experiences by an 18 year old lesbian woman.

Vaccaro’s (2001) qualitative study compared the lived experiences of younger and older LGBT members to see if there are generational differences. She compared three generations of LGB people: Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960), Generation Xers (born 1961-1981) and Millennials (born after 1981). Vaccaro interviewed 49 individuals (15 Baby Boomers, nine Gen Xers, and 25 Millennials) and found that her older participants assumed the younger generation has an ‘easier’ time of coming out and were able to embrace their sexuality at a younger age. Conversely, millennial participants actually faced difficulty with coming out, even when family role models were present. Interestingly, Vaccaro found that participants who came out in college (as opposed to earlier in life) faced less discrimination. However, most Millennials still experienced unsupportive or even negative relationships with their families. While some participants expressed that their parents “tolerated” their gayness, often this came with the price of invisibility as one participant explained, “My parents haven’t disowned me. They haven’t cut off financial support. They’re just like, ‘Don’t talk about it around us. We don’t want to see it’” (Vaccaro, 2001, p. 119) Although Vaccaro found that many of her participants expressed feelings of same-sex attraction early-on, they often took years to embrace their identity, hiding their sexual orientation until high-school or college.
Baby boomers and Generation Xers, by contrast, were likely to delay coming out until the 30’s or 40’s. Although many Baby boomers and Generation Xers believed that Millennials have an easier time with homophobia and experiences of prejudice, many Millennials explained that this was not their reality, having experienced both homophobia and prejudice. There was an observed generational difference in identity development; specifically, the older generations described feelings of "being different" and "searching for a sexual identity" while Millennials described "complex and fluid identities" as well as navigating multiple identities. It remains to be seen if, in the current study, age-effects will still be evident, especially in the context of the current research exclusively studying women.

**Summary and Contribution of the Current Study**

Foremost, the current study hopes to fill a large gap in the literature by addressing the criticism that most sexual identity research has focused on gay men, to the detriment of our understanding of sexual minority women. Furthermore, the current research aims to parse apart differences between bisexual and lesbian identities and experiences by making comparisons between such identified women rather than making comparisons between heterosexual women and sexual minorities (which also runs the risk of making heterosexual women the “norm” and sexual minority women the “other”). As mentioned by Shapiro et al., (2010), few studies have included women’s narratives in the design or validation of models of sexual identity development. Moreover, additional research needs to examine if existing models apply to lesbian and bisexual women. While the current study does not seek to test existing models of development, it does offers an
important contribution to the study of sexual identity development by conducting a comparison of lesbian and bisexual women’s narratives of identity development.

This research will consider how the broader network of political and cultural systems can affect the sexual identity and well-being of LB women in both direct and indirect ways. The majority of studies on LB women have focused on the negative outcomes associated with being a member of a marginalized/stigmatized group. Accordingly, measurement has focused on outcomes such as internalized homophobia, minority stress (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007) and increased risk of mental health issues (Stapleton, 2003; Volpp, 2010). Although this research is useful, the narrow scope of this work is limited in several ways. First, the development of LB women does not exist in a localized vacuum where they are passively and exclusively influenced by the direct processes that occur in their daily lives. Thus, research needs to address the indirect and distal factors (e.g., policies) that affect developmental processes and outcomes. This is particularly important for understanding individuals who do not identify with the heterosexist majority given that they are often embedded in a series of complex systems—legal, political, cultural, and institutional—that affect their lives in a variety of ways. Second, surprisingly little research has focused on how LB women turn the challenges of being marginalized into a source of strength (Fine & Hall, 2005; Rostosky et al., 2010). Thus, an important research goal includes understanding processes and contexts associated with resilience. Finally, researchers must not make assumptions about what policies and institutions affect the lives of LB women; rather, LB women must be part of the research dialogue by defining and explaining how institutions, policies and contextual factors influence their lives.
Application of the ecological model will increase our understanding of resilience and positivity and will fill a large gap in the literature. The ecological model allows one to simultaneously examine multiple contexts (e.g., romantic relationships, community, institutions, cultural values, laws) -- as they affect and are affected by each other. In the current study we focus on identifying challenging (e.g., where stigma and discrimination exist) and supportive contexts, and measuring their relationship to positive or negative views of sexual identity and quality of life. Application of this model will increase our understanding of how lesbian and bisexual women develop positive or negative views of identity and how identities are resilient to challenging environments. For example, having to navigate identity in multiple contexts (e.g., the heterosexual community and in the gay community) may itself be a source of stress, or it might be perceived as a source of strength.

In sum, the current research seeks to tease apart the changing nature of identity by answering the following questions:

- What are the challenges to identity faced in multiple ecological contexts and what strengths do women use to cope with those challenges?
- How do environmental contexts—both proximal and distal—contribute to the development of positive or negative views of the sexual self?
- Do lesbian and bisexual women differ systematically in their experiences of (positive and negative) environmental contexts and across patterns of sexual identity development?

**Justification for mixed methodology.**
A mixed methods study is the best-suited methodology to answer these research questions. Quantitative measures are necessary for increasing external validity of the study, as they will enable the researchers to collect a large sample of representative data. Moreover, the quantitative measures will foremost be used to allow the researchers to make comparisons between lesbian and bisexual women on a number of dimensions: feelings of negativity or positivity about sexual orientation, degree of openness about orientation, quality of life, and level of biculturalism. Secondly, the quantitative measures will be valuable for examining the relationships between dimensions (e.g., how is outness related to the feelings about identity or quality of life)? By contrast, open-ended qualitative questions will delve into the direction and nature of these relationships by assessing how specific environments affect lesbian and bisexual wellness and identity. More importantly, qualitative measures will also allow women to explain their experiences in their own words.

Quantitative Hypotheses

The current study will test the following specific hypotheses:

1. Bisexual women will be less out than lesbian women about their sexuality.
2. Bisexual women will have a lower quality of life than lesbian women.
3. Bisexual women will have more feelings of negativity about their sexual orientation than lesbian women.
4. Increased outness will predict increased quality of life.
5. Increased outness will predict more positive feelings about identity.
6. Bisexual women will have a higher degree of biculturalism than lesbian women.
Method

Eight hundred sixty-two adult lesbian and bisexual women (18 years of age or older) participated in this mixed-methods study by completing an online survey consisting of both quantitative and qualitative measures.

Participants

Ethical considerations.

Prior to the study’s beginning, informed consent was obtained from all participants. All materials and interview recordings were kept confidential and were seen only by the researcher and research assistant(s). Due to the sensitive nature of sexuality, all participants were ensured of confidentiality and anonymity. When direct quotations were used in this paper, identifiable information was changed (e.g., names, locations). Participants were also provided with the contact information for the GLBT National Help Center: a Toll-free hotline 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564) which caters to the needs of the LGBT population and can connect callers to local resources if they experience distress after taking the survey.

Gable, Gonzaga, and Strachman (2006) found that the process of sharing a positive event is related to increases in subjective well-being and positive affect. Their most important finding was that it was responses to positive events that made partners feel understood and validated. Similarly, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) found that discussing or even writing about traumatic events is critical in helping one to categorize or make sense of life events. Regardless if events are perceived as positive or negative, it is critical that women are able to freely and openly discuss them. Participation in this study gave women a chance to discuss their sexuality and, for the aforementioned
reasons, might have been a positive experience by helping them to understand more about themselves. Other than the benefit of personal insight, this study benefited participants indirectly by identifying factors that can lead to both positive and negative construal of female sexual identity.

**Recruitment.**

Participants were recruited through an advertisement purchased on Facebook, a social networking website (facebook.com). The criteria set for the display of the advertisement were that it be shown only to women over the age of 18 residing in the United States. Participants were also recruited through an email sent to the SUNY New Paltz student body, through a Hudson Valley LB listserv and by “snowball” sampling on Facebook; a recruitment message was sent to the primary investigator’s Facebook contacts asking those people to take the survey or forward it to friends who might be interested. These recruitment strategies resulted in a sample of adult women of diverse ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic characteristics.

**Initial sample demographics.**

A total of 1,695 participants began the survey. From this initial sample, participants were excluded from the present analyses for not meeting certain criteria. Women who did not identify as homosexual or bisexual (e.g., identified as heterosexual, mostly heterosexual or mostly homosexual) were excluded (n=605). Women were excluded who failed to indicate their sexual orientation (n=10). Because there was a limited number of respondents, transgender participants were not included in the analyses (n=9). Participants who did not identify as female (n=6) or were under the age of 18 (n=12) were also excluded. Participants who abandoned the survey after indicating only
their sexual orientation (e.g., did not answer any outcome measures) were excluded (n=339). Lastly, participants who indicated that they had not lived in the United States for the majority of their lives were also excluded from the sample.

**Final sample demographics.**

Women were asked to identify their sexual orientation along a continuum in support of the idea that sexuality is not categorical; however, in order to be as precise as possible, the present research questions specifically address lesbian and bisexual identified women (e.g., women who identified with the end and middle of the spectrum). Consequently, in the final sample (n = 862), only women who indicated their sexual orientation to be bisexual (n=495; 57.4%) or homosexual (n=367; 42.6%) were included in the analyses. The demographic section was at the end of the survey and as a result, demographic information is only available for part of this sample. However, reluctance to fill out the demographics section may have also been due to participants concerns about internet security or providing potentially identifiable information. See Table 1 for demographic information.

To determine if bisexuals and lesbians differed systematically on demographic variables, a series of independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests were run. A significant difference was only found between the mean ages of the bisexual group (range 18-50, $M=24.25$, $SD=7.14$) and lesbian group (range 18-62, $M=28.46$, $SD=10.04$), $t(329.59) = 4.94$, $p<.01$, such that the lesbian group was significantly older than the bisexual group.

No significant differences were found between the annual income of bisexuals ($M=42,844.29$, $SD=44,318.02$) and lesbians ($M=33,615.50$, $SD=32,780.31$),
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$t (245.56) = -1.89, p > .05$. No significant differences were observed between reported ethnicities, $\chi^2 (4, N = 444) = 3.82, p = .42$, highest level of education, $\chi^2 (3, N = 440) = 4.53, p = .21$, or relationship status, $\chi^2 (3, N = 445) = 3.02, p = .43$.

As would be expected, a significant difference was found between the gender of lesbian and bisexual romantic partners, $\chi^2 (4, N = 413) = 213.28, p < .001$. Bisexuals were more likely to have an exclusive male partner ($n=104$) than lesbians ($n=0$) and less likely to have an exclusive female partner ($n=40$) than lesbians ($n=149$). Bisexuals were more likely to be dating both men and women ($n=52$) than lesbians ($n=1$). Bisexuals ($n=35$) and lesbians ($n=30$) were equally likely to be single. Bisexuals ($n=1$) and lesbians ($n=1$) were also equally likely be dating someone of other gender.

**Procedure**

**Online survey.**

Subjects took a survey hosted on Survey Monkey, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey’s quantitative measures examined the relationship between sexual orientation, biculturalism, openness about sexual identity (e.g., “outness”), positive and negative views of the sexual self and quality of life. Open-ended qualitative questions delved into the direction and nature of these relationships by assessing: 1) the types of environments that participants felt were most supportive and detrimental to their sexual identity, 2) the types of laws and policies most salient to sexual identity and 3) the settings and relationships salient to participants’ narratives of sexual identity development.

**Quantitative Measures.**

The following measures comprised the quantitative portion of the survey:
Sexual Orientation Scale.

Sexual orientation was measured using a five-point scale ranging from Homosexual to Heterosexual, with Bisexual in the middle (see Appendix A).

The Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000).

Negative feelings about one’s sexual identity were measured using the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS). Scores on the LGBIS ranged from 1) indicating disagreement (and lower feelings of negativity) to 7) agreement (high feelings of negativity). This 27-item measure is designed to assess five different domains of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity: Need for Privacy, Internalized Homonegativity, Need for Acceptance, Identity Confusion, Difficult Process and Superiority. Explanations for the subscales are as follows:

Negative Identity is a composite score and is the average of Internalized Homonegativity, Need for Privacy, Need for Acceptance, and Difficult Process

Internalized Homonegativity measures negative feelings about one’s lesbian or bisexual orientation and the belief that LB orientations are inferior to heterosexuality

Need for privacy measures feelings that one’s sexual orientation is private and personal, and carefully controls other’s knowledge- fears negative consequences from lack of control.

Need for Acceptance measures a preoccupation with others views of one’s sexual orientation/identity.
**Difficult process** measures one’s perception of their identity development as being quite difficult.

*Identity confusion* measures uncertainty or confusion about one’s orientation.

*Superiority* measures the belief that heterosexual people are inferior as compared to LGB people.

The LGBIS is a modified version of the Lesbian, Gay Identity Scale (LGIS). Unpublished results indicate that the scales are virtually identical. Previous estimates of internal reliability on the LGIS ranged from (α = .68–.70) for the subscales. In the current study, internal reliability estimates ranged were generally high with the exception of the superiority subscale: Negative Identity composite scale (α = .87), Need for Privacy (α = .80), Internalized Homonegativity (α = .69), Need for Acceptance (α = .75), Identity Confusion (α = .84), Difficult Process (α = .73) and Superiority (α = .34) (see Appendix B for scale).

**Outness Inventory (OI)** (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000).

Openness about sexuality was measured using the Outness Inventory. This 11-item measure is designed to assess the degree to which lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are open about their sexual orientation. The scale assesses 3 domains: family, everyday life, and religion. An average of all items on the Outness Inventory was computed to create a measure of *Overall Outness*. Three subscales were also computed to measure outness in different domains: *Out to Religion, Out to Family* and *Out to World*. For all outness measures, scores were based on a 1-7 scale, with (1) being the least out and (7) being the most out. Items answered as “not applicable” were scored as missing data. Previous internal reliability ranged from (α=.74-.97) for the subscales (Mohr &
Fassinger, 2000). In the current study, overall internal reliability on the Outness Inventory was high, $\alpha=0.92$ and ranged from $\alpha=0.72-0.82$ for subscales (see Appendix C for measure).

*Quality of Life Scale (QOLS)* (Flanagan, 1979).

This 15 item scale measures five conceptual domains of quality of life: material and physical well-being, relationships with other people, social, community and civic activities, personal development and fulfillment, and recreation. Scores were based on a 1-7 scale, with (1) indicating the least satisfaction with life and (7) indicating the most satisfaction with life. An average of all items on the QOL survey was computed to create a measure of *Total Average QOL*. The scale has previously shown high reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$ to 0.92) and high test-retest reliability ($r = 0.78-0.84$). The scale also has shown construct validity through high correlations with the Life Satisfaction Index-Z (LSI-Z) ($r = 0.67$ to 0.75) and low to moderate correlations with the Duke-UNC Health Profile (DUHP) (as cited in Burckhardt & Anderson, 2003). In the current study, the QOLS showed high internal reliability, $\alpha = 0.87$ (see Appendix D for scale).

*Biculturalism scales.*

The Lesbian Culture and Bisexual Culture scales measured the extent to which participants felt they belonged to certain cultural domains. These measures are adapted from validated acculturation scales meant to measure acculturation in Chinese-American populations (e.g., The General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ), Tsay, Ying & Lee, 2000) and had high internal reliability, $\alpha = 0.92$ but moderate test-retest reliability, 0.57. In its original form, the measure had two versions, measuring participants’ orientation to American and Chinese cultures; in this adapted version, the form measures participants’ orientation to lesbian and bisexual cultures. The adapted GEQ does not include the
section on language and several questions that did not translate from an ethnic culture to a social one were removed (e.g., questions about food, language, names etc.). The adapted GEQ exhibited high internal reliability for the lesbian version, $\alpha = .84$ and for the bisexual version, $\alpha = .92$.

Items were scored on a scale of 1-5 with (1) indicating strong disagreement, (3) meaning neutral and (5) indicating strong agreement. Participant’s scores were averaged to create a composite measure for each scale. Participants with high scores on both bisexual and lesbian scales (scores with a mean over three) can be termed bicultural, women affiliate with both lesbian and bisexual cultures (see Appendix E-F for scales).

A portion of the Benet-Martinez Acculturation Scale (BMAS) was adapted from its original form as a measure of Cuban and American cultural affiliation. It was changed to measure heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual cultural affiliation. Participants were told, “We would like to ask you about your cultural identity, that is, the culture(s) you feel you belong to, the culture(s) you share your beliefs and values with.” Participants were asked how much they agreed, on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree), with the following statements: 1) I am lesbian, 2) I am bisexual and 3) I am heterosexual (See Appendix G for scale). Participants with scores over three on a scale can be said to belong to that culture.

Demographic Questions.

These questions obtain basic background information such as age, ethnicity and relationship status in order to describe the sample (see Appendix H).
Quantitative Results

Hypothesis Testing: Multivariate Analyses

Multivariate analyses of variance were conducted using sexual orientation (lesbian or bisexual) as the independent variable and age as a covariate. Follow-up independent samples t-tests were performed to assess group differences. Lastly, multiple regression analyses were used to test the predictive nature of select dependent variables. See Table 4 for a group comparison of means and standard deviations with flagged significant results.

Hypothesis 1.

It was expected that bisexual women would be less open or “out” about their sexuality than lesbian women.

A one-way MANCOVA, using sexual orientation as the fixed factor and age as a control variable was used to assess group differences on the outcome variables, Overall Outness, Out to Religion, Out to Family and Out to World. Multivariate Wilks’ Lambda criterion tests revealed a significant main effect for Sexual Orientation ($F(4, 409) = 4.37, p<.01$). The interaction between sexual orientation and age was not significant ($F(4, 409) = 0.63, p > .05$).

Follow-up independent samples t-tests revealed that on the Outness scale, bisexuals ($M= 4.66, SD=1.64$) were significantly less open overall about their sexual orientation than lesbians ($M=5.88, SD=1.23$), $t(617.85)=10.64, p<.001$. On the subscales Out to Religion bisexuals ($M=5.48, SD=3.10$) were significantly less out to their religious communities than lesbians ($M=6.27, SD=2.53$), $t(645.58)=3.60, p<.001$. On the Out to Family subscale, bisexuals were significantly less open with their families ($M=4.21$, $M=4.02, SD=1.13$, $t(645.58)=3.60, p<.001$).
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$SD=1.92$) than lesbians ($M=5.85$, $SD=1.37$), $t(642.65)=12.74$, $p<.001$, and on the Out to World subscale, bisexuals ($M=4.57$, $SD=1.96$) were significantly less open about their sexual orientation than lesbians ($M=5.67$, $SD=1.54$), $t(637.98)=7.99$, $p<.001$.

Hypothesis 2.

It was hypothesized that bisexual women would have a lower quality of life than lesbian women.

Although overall bisexual women ($M=5.26$, $SD=.83$) had a lower average quality of life than lesbian women ($M=5.49$, $SD=.95$), the results of an ANCOVA, with Age entered as the covariate, did not find this to be a significant difference. There was no significant main effect of sexual orientation, ($F(1, 396) = 1.70$, $p>.05$). The interaction between sexual orientation and age was also not significant, ($F(1, 396) = 0.47$, $p>.05$).

Hypothesis 3.

It was predicted that bisexual women would have more feelings of negativity about their sexual orientation than lesbian women.

A one-way MANCOVA, using sexual orientation as the fixed factor and age as a covariate, was used to assess group differences on the outcome variables, Internalized Homonegativity, Need for Privacy, Need for Acceptance, Identity Confusion, Difficult Process, Superiority and Negative Identity. Wilks’ Lambda criterion tests, revealed significant main effects for Sexual Orientation ($F(6, 387)=2.16$, $p<.05$). The interaction between sexual orientation and age was not significant ($F(6, 387)=0.11$, $p>.05$).

Follow-up independent samples t-tests using sexual orientation as the independent variable revealed that on the Internalized Homonegativity measure, bisexuals ($M= 2.09$, $SD=1.06$) had significantly more negative feelings about their sexual orientation than
lesbians (M=1.63, SD=0.95), t(658.30)=5.98, p<.001. On the Need for Privacy subscale bisexuals (M=4.24, SD=1.41) had more desire to keep their sexual orientation private and more fears about not being in control of disclosure of their sexual orientation than lesbians (M=3.69, SD=1.41), t(676)=5.10, p<.001. On the Identity confusion scale, bisexuals (M=2.63, SD=1.68) expressed significantly more confusion about their identity than lesbians (M=1.46, SD=.96), t(633.38) = 11.47, p<.001. On the Difficult Process scale, bisexuals (M=3.03, SD=1.33) expressed significantly more difficulty about their identity process than lesbians (M=2.82, SD=1.46), t (596.17) = 1.98, p<.05. Lastly, on the composite, Negative Identity Scale, bisexuals (M=3.01, SD=.97) expressed significantly more negative feelings about identity than lesbians (M=2.68, SD=.97), t(630) = 4.15, p<.001.

There were no significant differences observed between bisexuals (M=2.77, SD=1.33) and lesbians (M= 2.70, SD= 1.33) on scores on the Need for Acceptance scale, t(676) = 0.71, p>.05 or between bisexuals (M=2.29, SD=1.24) and lesbians (M= 2.29, SD= 1.32) on the Superiority scale, t(690) = 0.03, p>.05.

Hypothesis 4.

It was predicted that a high degree of “outness” would be predictive of a higher quality of life, and less negative feelings about identity.

The results of a simple linear regression with Total Quality of Life entered as the dependent variable and Overall Outness entered as the independent variable were significant (ΔR²=.02 F=11.45 [1 .502] p<.001, β=0.15). However, this effect was relatively small, accounting for only 2.2 % of variance in the equation.
The results of a simple regression linear regression with Negative Identity entered as the dependent variable and Overall Outness entered as the independent variable were significant ($\Delta R^2=.28$, $F=219.39 \ [1,562] \ p<.001 \ \beta=-.53$). This effect was moderate, accounting for 28.1% of variance in the equation. The relationship between outness and negative identity is negative, such that as “outness” increases, negative feelings about identity decrease. When this analysis is run separately for each sexual orientation, it becomes clear that the predicable relationship between outness and negative feelings about identity is slightly stronger for bisexual women ($\Delta R^2=.32$, $F=148.21 \ [1,319] \ p<.001, \ \beta=-.56$) than it is for lesbian women, ($\Delta R^2=.28$, $F=51.64 \ [1,241] \ p<.001, \ \beta=-.42$).

**Hypothesis 5.**

*It was expected that bisexual women would indicate a higher degree of biculturalism than lesbian women.*

A one-way MANCOVA, using sexual orientation as the fixed factor and age as a covariate, was used to assess group differences on the Lesbian Culture and Bisexual Culture scales. Wilks’ Lambda criterion tests, revealed significant main effects for Sexual Orientation ($F(2, 362)=15.01, p<.001$). The interaction between sexual orientation and age was not significant ($F (2, 362)= 0.77, p >.05$). Follow up independent t-test analyses using sexual orientation as the independent variable, reveal significant differences between the cultural orientation scores of lesbians and bisexuals on the Lesbian Culture Orientation scale, $t(487) = 9.54, p<.05$, and on the Bisexual Culture Orientation scale, $t(424.50) = -19.77, p<.05$. As mentioned previously, mean scores over three indicate orientation toward a particular culture. Lesbian women were oriented
toward the Lesbian culture with a mean score of 3.67 ($SD=0.52$) but not orientated toward Bisexual Culture as shown by the low mean of 2.46 ($SD=0.63$). Bisexual women can be described as bicultural as they had a mean score of 3.2 ($SD=0.54$) on the Lesbian Culture scale and a mean of 3.55 ($SD=0.57$) on the Bisexual Culture scale. Bisexual women answers reveal that while they affiliate more with bisexual culture, they do feel part of both lesbian and bisexual cultures. On the other hand, most lesbian women do not affiliate with bisexual culture. Possible implications for bisexual identity will be discussed in the next section.

Participants were also asked to indicate the degree to which they belonged to a lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual cultural identity on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). The results of a MANCOVA analysis, with age entered as the covariate revealed significant main effects for Sexual Orientation ($F(3,429)=62.38$, $p<.01$) and a non-significant interaction between sexual orientation and age ($F(3,429)=0.67$, $p>.05$).

Follow-up independent t-tests found significant differences between lesbian and bisexual women’s espousing of a lesbian cultural identity ($t(458.63)=25.80$, $p<.05$), bisexual cultural identity ($t(526)=42.39$, $p<.05$) and a heterosexual cultural identity ($t(482.03)=16.25$, $p<.05$). Lesbian women strongly identified as belonging to a lesbian culture ($M=1.18$, $SD=.74$) and disagreed with belonging to either a bisexual ($M=5.42$, $SD=1.02$) or heterosexual culture ($M=5.80$, $SD=.88$). Conversely, bisexual women, were neutral about belonging to a lesbian culture ($M=3.68$, $SD=1.45$), agreed to belonging to a bisexual culture ($M=1.59$, $SD=1.04$) and disagreed somewhat about belonging to a heterosexual culture ($M=4.06$, $SD=1.55$).
Qualitative Method

Qualitative methodology will adopt some characteristics of feminist psychology and Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, a research approach often used with stigmatized groups. This approach reduces experimenter bias in the research by allowing marginalized populations to share their experiences of policy and marginalization in their own words (Kidd & Kral, 2005). PAR challenges traditional notions of power and hierarchy in research by asserting that the “subjects” are the true experts, rather than the researchers. As explained by Michelle Fine (“A Brief History of the Participatory Action Research Collective”, n.d.), “PAR recognizes that those ‘studied’ harbor critical social knowledge and must be repositioned as subjects and architects of research.” Qualitative measures reflect the feminist stance that knowledge can be “derived from personal, lived experience, particularly when that lived experience comes from a place of marginality, not privilege, and, as such, challenges social structures and institutions” (Smith & Yoost, 2009, p. 200). This phenomenological approach is consistent with the methodology of Iwasaki and Ristock (2007) that focused on understanding how lesbian women and gay men make sense of the world.

Qualitative Sample Demographics.

Given the large sample size, a subset of participants was randomly selected for qualitative analyses. The qualitative sample consisted of 111 participants: lesbian (n=60; 54.05%) and bisexual (n=51; 45.95%). Given that sexual identity development is developmental in nature, a stratified sample was selected so that age differences could be examined systematically. From the overall sample of participants who completed all qualitative questions, lesbian and bisexual participants were randomly selected from each
of the following age groups for analysis: 18-19, 20-29, 30-39 and 40+. All age groups had an n-size of 15, except for bisexual women in the group 40+ which only contained six participants (which is reflective of the overall younger bisexual sample). Although participants answered multiple qualitative questions (e.g., the political question, positive and negative environments, and chapters of sexual identity) participants were anonymous during the coding process. Participants were paired with a random number so that coders would be blind to sexual orientation, age and all other demographic information. See Table 2 for qualitative demographic information and Table 3 for a comparison between the overall sample and qualitative sample demographics.

**Qualitative Procedure**

Women were given four open-ended qualitative questions at the end of the survey, after the quantitative measures. Women were given the simple instructions to “Please answer the following open-ended questions about your identity” and were provided with blank text-boxes which permitted participants to type between 800 and 1000 characters. For the history of sexual identity question, women were given 10 text boxes (five for the chapter titles, five for the chapter explanations) with space to write 80 characters in each box. Women were asked the following open-ended questions:

1. Describe the setting in which you feel most positive about your sexual identity?
2. Describe the setting in which you feel most negative about your sexual identity?
3. If you were a politician with the power to change laws and policies, describe the first change you would make.
4. Describe the history of your sexual identity in five chapters. What were the chapter titles and what stands out most for you in each chapter?
Qualitative coding.

Data processing.

As qualitative questions were answered online, responses were already in print form and no transcription was necessary. Participants were identified only by a number randomly assigned by the online survey host, Survey Monkey.

Trustworthiness.

Qualitative questions were analyzed using an inductive, grounded theory approach (described below). With the exception of the political question which was coded in PASW (formerly called SPSS), participants’ answers were imported into NVivo 9.0, a software program used for qualitative coding. In an effort to increase reliability, two researchers coded interviews independently (reaching high percent agreement of 89.19% for the political question, high average percent agreement of 99.20% for the positive and 97.34% for the negative environments questions, and 85.90% average percent agreement for the chapters’ of identity meta-themes). Researchers were kept blind to the sexual orientation and demographic information of participants (as much as possible as some women mentioned their ages and sexual orientation in their narratives) by use of random participant numbers. The initial agreement level for the subthemes of the chapters question was insufficient. To address this issue, a third coder evaluated the internal consistency of all codes and any coding disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Inductive coding.

Typical of a grounded theory approach (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967), an a priori theoretical framework did not drive data analysis; rather, analyses were based on patterns
and themes that emerged from the data. Open-ended qualitative questions were coded for common themes that emerged from the data. This is a departure from traditional hypothesis testing in that hypotheses did not drive analyses; rather, the analyses were based on themes, constructs and ideas that were “built up” from the data.

Grounded theory is based on the premise that analyses are intended to interpret how participants explain, analyze and make sense of their lives and experiences. Grounded theory relies on participant’s own words and descriptions, taking the stance that the way women describe their lives and experiences is meaningful and empirically useful. Coders look for commonalities and differences in the themes and ideas that emerge from participant’s words; both within and across participants.

*Open coding.*

At the initial stage of coding, independent coders read through a random selection of participants’ answers for each of the qualitative questions and came up with a list of emergent themes. This process was repeated with several random samples of the text. At this stage, coders were inclusive of any and all ideas that emerged from participant’s answers. In other words, they did not attempt to derive meaning or group participants’ responses, but instead “free-coded” or created lists of any and all themes mentioned.

*Comparing and contrasting.*

At this second step, emergent themes present in more than five percent of the sample were included in the analysis. In this stage codes were compared to each other to ensure that each code represented a unique and clear construct. Codes that were confusing or overlapping were combined or clarified. Moreover, codes that did not answer the intended qualitative questions were removed.
Coding using text search.

NVivo 9.0 has a feature that allows for searching by keyword. This feature was used to clarify existing codes and to establish a sub-group of codes based on exact text.

Grouping.
Themes that theoretically clung together were condensed into larger “meta-themes,” larger umbrella themes containing similar constructs and ideas. For example, in the political question, “If you were a politician with the power to change laws and policies, describe the first change you would make,” some of the themes that emerged from women’s answers included: Marriage Equality, Adoption rights; Healthcare and End of Life Decisions. What these themes had in common was that they described rights that come with heterosexual marriage; these themes were condensed into the overarching meta-theme: Equal Partner Rights.

Identification of patterns by sexual orientation and age-group.
The final analyses involved making comparisons between lesbian and bisexual women as well as between age group. In order to make these comparisons, as a last step, each participant’s reply was coded by sexual orientation and age group.

Political Question.
In the first step of analysis a total of 11 themes and ideas were identified. Codes that were present in more than 5% of the sample were included. As a second step, codes were combined into three meta-themes. Themes were then analyzed by sexual orientation to determine if lesbian and bisexual women reported different political changes as being critical to sexual identity.

Positive and Negative Settings.
As described previously, the first step in analysis was to create and name a list of codes that represented distinct ideas, concepts, and themes that emerged from the interviews. A total of 25 positive themes were initially identified and a total of 34 negative themes were initially identified. As a second step, positive codes were combined into four meta-themes and negative codes were combined into four meta-themes. Themes were then analyzed by sexual orientation to determine if lesbian and bisexual women report different environments as being positive or negative influences.

**Chapters.**

As described previously, the first step in analysis was to create and name a list of codes that represented distinct ideas, concepts, and themes that emerged from the interviews. A total of 48 themes were initially identified. As a second step, positive codes were combined into three meta-themes. Meta-themes and sub-themes were then analyzed by sexual orientation to determine if lesbian and bisexual women report different developmental trajectories.

**Qualitative Results**

The following descriptions of the qualitative themes represent emergent data. It is important to keep in mind that percents capture only what women stated to be most salient to their experiences. Women did not choose their responses from a standardized list or measure as these were open-ended questions. Inasmuch, we can only make inferences about what women reported and should not make generalizations beyond the data. For example, the fact that a woman did not mention a particular theme in her narrative does not necessarily mean that it is not important or relevant to her story. Although the following analyses do make comparisons between lesbian and bisexual
women, these comparisons reflect differences in the stories women told and do not capture the entirety of their experiences.

**Policy Changes**

This open-ended question asked women to explain the first change they would make if they were a politician with the power to change laws related to sexual identity. Inasmuch, this question really was intended to give participants a chance to address how the current legal situation inadequately addresses their needs as lesbian and bisexual women. The initial set of emergent themes resulted in nine different themes. However, at the second stage of coding, themes comprising these themes were condensed into larger meta-themes based on statistical prevalence and theoretical basis; revealing three overarching themes: Equal Partner Rights (encompassing Marriage Equality; Adoption rights; Healthcare and End of Life Decisions), Overall Equal Rights, and Protection from Discrimination (including protection from hate-crimes, protection from work discrimination, and the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell). It should be noted that some participants indicated multiple reforms and are therefore captured in multiple codes. Refer to Table 5 for explanations of themes and percent coded by sexual orientation.

**Equal partner rights.**

*Equal Partner Rights* was the most widely coded theme, mentioned by 67% of the sample. Perhaps due to the saliency of the current political discussion, the subtheme, *Marriage Equality* was at the fore-front of suggested policy changes: 70% of the lesbian participants and 63% of the bisexual sample expressed a desire for marriage rights. Within this theme, participants explained different reasons for wanting marriage equality. For some participants this discussion focused on obtaining the right to marry the person
of her choosing as a means to show love and commitment to a partner. One woman asks for, “100% legalized marriages with all the trimmings...legal rights the same as everyone.” She explains further, “We fall in love and want to commit too, and, do live happily ever after...it’s about living the American dream too” (lesbian, age 49).

Likewise, another participant asserts her desire, “for marriage to be equal, that marriage wasn't a gender, but based on the love two people feel about each other and want to spend their lives together” (bisexual, age 19).

However, for others the right of marriage was more fundamental. Participants tied the idea of marriage exclusion to feeling like a second class citizen. For these participants, the right to marry was expressed as a testament to human rights and feeling equality. As one participant explained, “I would make gay and lesbian marriage legal. Denying that right means that we are not people” (lesbian, age 19).

For others, the desire extended beyond the love-union to encompass the more practical legal rights that come with marriage. In the following quotation, one participant explains that she wants the same rights inherently afforded to someone who is heterosexual; namely the right to marry, to insure spouse and child and the right to adopt; “I would make it ‘allowable’ for people of the same sex, to have the same basic rights as others (For example.... marriage, adoptions, life choices, shared responsibilities should be recognized)” (bisexual, age 36). Similarly, one woman asserts that “Homosexuals don't want more rights or less rights than heterosexuals, but we do demand the same rights. The right to marry whom we choose, the right to have our loved ones included in our work benefits and insurance policies, and the right to adopt a child if we are physically and financially able. ..” (lesbian, age 37).
Protection from discrimination.

The second most salient theme was the desire for Protection from Discrimination. Nearly a quarter of the lesbian (20%) and bisexual (22%) sample expressed a need to make changes in this area. For some women, this was expressed as a need for laws promoting safety; including stricter punishment for hate crimes, violent acts carried out as an attack against one's sexual orientation. For others, this was expressed as a need for laws promoting freedom and respect of queer persons, such as laws making it easier to be open about one's sexual orientation in schools and at work. One bisexual woman expresses the opinion that she "would make changes concerning the coming out of teenagers. Most public high schools prohibit same-sex relationships which is a violation of the constitution" (bisexual, age 21).

Lastly, at the core of many of these messages was a plea for human rights. Women expressed the sentiment that institutionalized discrimination (e.g., Don't Ask Don't Tell) cultivates a climate of prejudice and makes LGBT people second-class citizens. One participant poignantly explained her desire to abolish Don't Ask Don't Tell, “if the government doesn't respect the fine folks who willingly fight for what America stands for, then why should hetero Americans feel bad about disrespecting a "lesser" American?” (lesbian, age 31).

Overall equality.

The last meta-theme, Overall Equality, mentioned by 13% of the sample (12% lesbian; 14% bisexual), directly addresses the human rights argument. Specifically, some participants stated that across the board, they wanted to be treated as "equal to heterosexual people." Some participants were quick to point out that this desire for
equality referred to both "rights and protection." While some participants compared their rights to heterosexual people, others were careful to phrase their desire for sexual and gender identities to be included as protected categories in the bill of rights. One well-informed participant explained her desire for equal rights:

Equal rights/benefits from governments, equal protection, and an expectation of equal duties should be granted without regard to sexual or gender identity. . .

Acceptance by our Government must be blind to our sexual/gender identities just as they are suppose to be to our age, race, ethnic group, and religion.

(bisexual, age 47).

**Policy changes analyzed by sexual orientation.**

A Chi Square analysis did not find any significant differences between lesbian and bisexual women’s policy suggestions of partner equality ($\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.04, p = 0.31$), anti-discrimination laws ($\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 0.003, p = 0.96$) or overall equality ($\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 0.11, p = 0.75$).

**Positive and Negative Environments**

These open-ended questions asked women to describe the setting in which they felt most positive about their sexual identity and the setting where they felt most negative about their sexual identity. As described previously, the first step in analysis was to create and name a list of codes that represented distinct ideas, concepts, and themes that emerged from the interviews. A total of 25 positive themes were initially identified and a total of 34 negative themes were initially identified. As a second step, Positive themes were condensed into four larger meta-themes based on statistical prevalence and theoretical basis: *Everywhere, Microsystem-level Environments, Accepting Environments*
and Queer Communities. Similarly, Negative themes were combined into four meta-themes: Nowhere, Experiences of Prejudice, Religion and With Family.

This question was left open-ended to allow participants a chance to describe any level of environment (e.g., proximal or distal) as being salient to identity. Participants identified both proximal (e.g., relationships with friends and family) and more distal (e.g., legalized homophobia, queer communities) environments as contributing to how they felt about their sexual identity. More specifically, environment was defined as interpersonal relationships for some participants (e.g., relationships with family, friends and romantic partners), communities for others (e.g., queer communities) and by specific relational qualities that lead to the individual feeling accepted or understood (e.g., anywhere I am accepted).

Themes from the “positive environments” question centralized on inclusion (e.g., experiences of acceptance) while themes from the “negative environments” question focused on exclusion (e.g., experiences of prejudice). It should be noted that some participants indicated multiple environments and are therefore captured in multiple codes. Please see Tables 6-7 for explanations of themes and percent coded by sexual orientation.

Positive environments.

Queer Communities.

The most commonly mentioned positive environment was women’s involvement in queer or LGBT communities; mentioned by 28.83% of the overall sample. However, the meaning of “community” varied according to the individual. For some women “community” referred to physical places and tangible groups, while for others it simply referred to knowing or being friends with other lesbian, gay or bisexual people.
LESBIAN & BISEXUAL IDENTITY

_LGBT People._

The majority of women coded in this category (15.32% of the overall sample), referred to relationships or time spent with other lesbian, gay or bisexual identified individuals. More specifically, 9.91% of the sample mentioned lesbian women while as compared to only 0.9% who mentioned spending time with bisexual women. For example, one woman asserts, “I feel most positive about being a lesbian when I am around other members of the LGBTQ culture” (lesbian, age 32). Some women explained that this had to do with feelings of belonging or being based on having similar sexual identities, “I enjoy mostly when we are around other lesbians when we are in a group, because... I feel lesbians can relate more to what I am talking about in terms of [certain] situations” (lesbian, 29).

_Places & spaces._

Some women were coded in Queer community for describing groups of people interacting in a shared environment (9.01% of the overall sample). For example, some women simply stated that they were most comfortable in a “gay community” or being “out and about in lesbian communities.” Some women were more specific; asserting that they felt most positive in public spaces that were predominantly frequented by lesbian women such as gay bars, clubs or lesbian events. One lesbian woman gives her definition of spaces, “… I do receive positive energy from places/events that are gay or lesbian. For example, Pride parades & festivals; LBGT film festivals, the lesbian films; Melissa Etheridge concerts” (age 49).

_Activism._
For a sub-group of women in the queer communities theme, community was enacted rather than experienced (7.21% of the overall sample). Such women described belonging to a gay community through activism or politics, explaining that being at gay pride or fighting for equal rights helped them to feel positively about their identities. One lesbian one explained that she felt best, “When I volunteer at our local LGBTQ youth center. Knowing I'm a positive role model for them is an affirmation of my sense of self” (lesbian, age 31). Another participant gave a more political reason for her involvement in activism, explaining that she felt best about her sexual identity at, “Gay activist rallies, and volunteering events. Mostly at large gatherings of openly gay people celebrating their identity and fighting for equal rights” (lesbian, age 18).

**LGBT community analysis by sexual orientation.**

A Chi Square analysis revealed that overall, lesbian participants (36.67%) were significantly more likely than bisexual individuals (19.61%) to describe belonging to a queer community as a positive environment, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 3.91, p = .05$. More lesbian women (20.00%) than bisexual women (9.80%) described spending time with other LGBT people as a setting where they felt positive about their identity; however, this difference was not significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 2.21, p = 0.14$. A subsequent analysis revealed that 0% of the lesbian participants and only 1.79% of the bisexual participants named spending time with other bisexuals as a positive environment (Chi square analyses could not be run due to the low cell count). Conversely, 13.33% of the lesbians and 5.88% of the bisexuals named spending time with other lesbians as being a positive environment, a difference which was not significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.71, p = 0.19$.  
Although lesbian women (10.00% of the lesbian-identified sample) were more likely than bisexual women (3.92% of the bisexual-identified sample) to name activism as a positive environment, this difference was not significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.52, p = 0.22$. Similarly, while 11.67% of lesbian women reported feeling positive in queer spaces compared to only 5.88% of bisexual women, this difference was not significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.13, p = 0.29$.

**Everywhere.**

Some of participants (23% of the sample) explained how regardless of specific environment, they felt positive "all the time" and "Anywhere, anytime." Some of the participants answered this question in a manner that reaffirmed their queer identities as an important, natural and integrated part of their overall identities. These participants indicated that not only did they never feel negative, but that they were proud of their identities:

I feel most positive about my sexual identity all the time...I am who I am and my sexual identity is a part of me I have known since I was very young...my earliest memory of knowing I like girls was when I was four years old going into school. I always admired the beauty of women (lesbian, age 30).

There is no particular setting in which I feel most comfortable because I am always comfortable with my sexuality. I will always be myself and that includes being bisexual and I wouldn't have it any other way. I feel this way where ever I am (bisexual, age 19).

The emotional tone of women's answers to this question was angry or defiant, especially at the prospect of not being accepted or having to hide their identities. One
woman asserts, “I feel positive about my sexual identity no matter where I am. I don't care if people judge me. I am who I am and if they don't like it, well fuck them” (bisexual, age 18). Another explains, "I feel positive about my sexual identity all the time. I am not one to hide myself" (lesbian, age 22).

**Everywhere Theme Analyzed by Sexual Orientation.**

Although lesbian women (26.67%) were more likely to report that they felt positive everywhere as compared to bisexual women (19.61%), this difference was not significant, 
\[ \chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .77, p = 0.38. \]

**Microsystem-level environments.**

Some women referred to dyadic relationships (49.55% of the overall sample) as being an important positive environment; these women mentioned friends, family or partners.

**Friendships.**

Nearly a quarter of all women referred to their friendships as an important positive environment (24.32% of the overall sample). Women’s explanations of why friendships were important varied, but generally included feelings of being understood and supported. Specifically, some women explained that their friendships provided a space free from judgment.

Others explained that friendships provided a space where their sexuality did not take precedence; more specifically, these women described friendships where sexuality was a non-issue. One bisexual woman explains feeling best about her identity when, “When I am surrounded by both homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual friends, openly
discussing viewpoints, knowing that I am not being judged” (bisexual, 18). A lesbian woman explains a similar situation of feeling most positive about her sexual identity “...when I am with my friends who mostly know. They don’t care whether I like boys or girls” (lesbian, age 24).

Rather than focusing on avoiding judgment or their sexuality, other women emphasized the importance of having friends know and understand them; “Whenever I am with my friends. They accept me for who I am” (bisexual, 30). These friendships were described as providing a space for women to be open about their sexuality. This sub-group also included women who preferred to make friends with people of a similar sexual orientation. One bisexual participant explains:

When I’m with friends who already know who I am as a person and have accepted me for who I am. They are the people that I can relate too and tell anything to be, and that makes me feel safe and therefore quite positive about my identity.

(bisexual, age 18).

Friendship analysis by sexual orientation.

Lesbian women (16.67%) were significantly less likely to report that friendships were a positive environment than bisexual women (33.33%), \( \chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.16, p =0.04. \)

Romantic partners.

Overall, 15.32% of the sample explained that when they were with their partner or significant other, they felt most positive about their sexual identity. Women’s accounts of why romantic partners were a positive environment were similar to the explanations of why their friendships were noteworthy. Namely, that when with their partners they were
understood, supported and able to be open about their sexuality; women’s responses varied slightly, but included explanations of partners making them feel safe, loved, accepted and proud of their sexual orientations. One bisexual participant expounds, “My husband is strictly heterosexual, but he supports me completely and encourages me to go to Pride parades. He is joining PFLAG… I am very lucky” (bisexual, age 28). Similarly, another participant explains how her partner make her feel supported:

I feel most positive about my sexual identity when I am with my partner of 10 years...We have a relationship that most couples, gay and straight, would envy. No one in love as much as I am, especially since that love is returned, could ever feel negative about their identity, be it straight or gay. (lesbian, age 37)

*Romantic partner analysis by sexual orientation.*

Although lesbian women (17.65%) were slightly more likely than bisexual women to report romantic partners as being important (13.33%), this difference was not significant, $\chi^2$ (1, N = 111) = .40, $p = 0.53$.

*Family.*

Just fewer than 10% of the sample (9.91%) cited family or home as a positive environment. Of those that did, most of the women did not go into details about why they felt positive. When women did offer larger explanations, they were about feeling accepted or not judged. For example, one bisexual woman in her 40’s explains that she feels best about her identity, “In my home, with my family by choice (closer than friends, but not related by blood) or in any environment where I am not being judged by the gender of the people to whom I'm attracted” (bisexual, age 47). Another participant refers to feeling supported by her family, “My family supports me 100%, which I know a
lot of people [whose] family doesn't accept them! My family told me when I came out that it was about time!” (lesbian, age 24).

*Family analysis by sexual orientation.*

Although bisexual women (11.76%) were slightly more likely than lesbian women (8.33%) to refer to family as a positive environment, this difference was not significant, \( \chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .83, p = 0.36. \)

*Accepting environments.*

Lastly, some women (9.01% of the sample) described particular characteristics of environments rather than naming specific places or people. These characteristics were the same ones that were frequently mentioned in the friend and partner categories: being accepted and understood and being able to be open. These characteristics spanned several different levels of environment: while some women described characteristics of relationships, others mentioned the workplace, campus cultures or more distal cultural norms. When discussing qualities of individual relationships, women referred to feeling positive when they did not have to hide their sexual identities and could be their authentic selves. For example, one bisexual woman (age 30) explains, “I feel most positive when I am with people who know about my sexual identity. I can be myself around them and not have to worry about a slip of the tongue.” Another lesbian woman (age 31) answers more generally, asserting, “I feel most positive about my sexual identity when I am free to be who I am…when I am free to be the total me. All my likes and dislikes, skills and shortcomings, virtues and vices.”
Others they described relationships which were free from judgment or prejudice. One bisexual participant expounds, “I feel most positive about my sexual identity around people who are not homophobic. Around open-minded people” (bisexual, age 37).

At a more distal level, other women explained that they felt positive in environments where they felt equal, “I feel most [positive] about my sexuality in a setting where I feel I am equal to everyone else. Where I am accepted just as a person and not made to feel different than anyone else” (lesbian, age 43). For other women, their responses were political in nature. One woman explains that she feels positive:

Anywhere where it doesn't need to be an issue. Where I work people accept me and my family as "normal." We deserve the same rights as the rest of the country, and the [responsibility] for our decisions and actions just like the rest of the country. (lesbian, age 37).

Accepting environments analyzed by sexual orientation.

The results of a Chi Square analysis did not find significant differences between lesbian (11.67%) and bisexual women’s (5.88%) mention of supportive environments, $\chi^2(1, N = 111) = 1.13, p =0.29.$
Negative Settings

Overall, women’s responses to this question described environments where they were excluded or discriminated against.

Experiences of prejudice.

The most commonly mentioned negative environment involved explicit experiences of prejudice (45.05% of the overall sample). Experiences of Prejudice was comprised of several subthemes including (Fear for Safety, Work Discrimination, Heteronormative Environments, and Public). Women’s responses categorized into this theme spanned multiple levels of environments as prejudice can be enacted by the individual, institutions, and laws.

Fear for Safety.

Several women discussed feeling negative when afraid for their physical and emotional safety in environments characterized by violence or harassment. These women explained they felt, “…perhaps concerned for my safety or well being physically or emotionally, depending on the situation company or circumstance” (lesbian, age 42). Other women worried about prejudice, “I wished I lived in an area that was more culturally diverse for I didn’t have to worry so much about zealots becoming violent or offensive” (bisexual, age 28).

Work Discrimination.

Several women recounted experiences of being uncomfortable at work (8.77% of the sample). One woman explains, “…I feel like I would be judge[d] harsher in a workplace” (lesbian, age 18). Another asserts that she feels uncomfortable, “with bosses, some social situations and places it is definitely not safe to be ‘out’” (lesbian, age 40).
For some women, discrimination at work took the form of not being able to be open about their sexual orientation. One woman explains, “When I had a job it was difficult to speak openly” (bisexual, age 30).

**Heteronormative Environments.**

Women who discussed feeling negative in environments characterized by heterosexuality were coded in this category (9.01% of the sample). Women’s explanations included feeling excluded by environments that make gay and bisexual women the “other” and heterosexual people the norm. One woman explains her feelings of being an outsider and being unable to relate to heterosexual norms:

A place in which I know I’m probably one of the few women in the room who has had homosexual experiences. For example, at a bar that it is quite clear that people are relatively heterosexual…over-masculinized men, extremely feminine women…It makes me feel uncomfortable. (bisexual, age 25)

Other women were more succinct; one 31 year old lesbian commented that she felt uncomfortable “in a heterosexual world.” Similarly, another lesbian woman (age 18) explained feeling out of place around bisexual or heterosexual people, “I never feel negative just out of place when I’m in a bisexual or heterosexual setting.”

**Legalized Homophobia.**

A sub-group of heteronormative environments referred specifically to the exosystem level environments (e.g., laws) that prioritize the heterosexual relationship over the homo/bisexual relationship. Women who discussed being legally prohibited from marrying their same-sex partners or legally excluded from heterosexual partner rights were coded in this category. One young woman explains her feelings about heterosexual
weddings, “…I also recently felt negative about my sexual identity at a wedding…I was crying…in my life, I may not get to have the traditional wedding that my parents want me to have.” (bisexual, age 25).

Public.

A sub-group of women who discussed experiences of prejudice mentioned being in public (5.41% of the sample). This generally referred to experiences of prejudice by strangers or being in places where homosexuality was not accepted. This was explained in terms of fear for safety and feeling abnormal. In some cases, this also involved issues with gender such as “looking” straight or gay or being mistaken for a man. For example, one woman (who was also coded in fear for safety) described her experience of being afraid to show affection in public:

Out in public places where it's not okay to be gay. When I'm at the mall with my girl it's not okay for us to walk around holding hands or any other displays of affection. The fear of physical and emotional hurt is too strong to allow us to engage in those activities. But not being allowed to even hold her hand hurts too.

(lesbian, age 19).

Other women discussed their struggle with appearances; either having their gender or sexuality mistaken or, conversely, too visible. Here, a participant explains being mistaken for a man. She explains that she feels the worst about her identity, “When in a public bathroom a mother shields her child’s eyes and says under her breath, ‘no honey, that's not a boy’” (lesbian, age 31). Another participant describes the painful in/visibility of her sexuality when in “public places like Wal-mart. I don't ‘look’ lesbian (whatever
that is) and pass as straight until I'm accompanied by my partner. She calls herself my gay accessory. The fact she is actually transgendered complicates the situation” (lesbian, 47).

**Experiences of prejudice analyzed by sexual orientation.**

While overall lesbian women reported more experiences of prejudice (50.00%) than bisexual women (39.23%) this difference was not significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.30$, $p = 0.26$. Analysis of sub-groups did not reveal any significant results although lesbian women reported slightly higher instances of prejudice across all groups. See refer to Table 7 for explanations of themes and percent coded by sexual orientation.

**Religion.**

Women (18.92% of the sample) discussed religion as a negative environment at the micro-level (e.g., religious people or family members) as well as more distal community levels (e.g., in a church). Many of the people who talked about religion did so in the context of describing individual people. One woman, with a bit of wit, explains that she feels most negative when “Around extremely religious people with the intelligence of a small rodent” (bisexual, 19). More seriously, another participant gives her answer; “I live in an area filled with religious fundamentalists. . .I am upfront from the start about my sexual status…it's too painful to form friendships with people only to later find out that they are homophobic” (bisexual, age 28).

Some women’s responses were coded into this category for their description of the religious belief that homosexuality is wrong or a “sin” explaining discomfort with “...people [who] feel that my sexuality is something that will damn me for all eternity” (lesbian, age 24).
Other participants referred to the institution of the “church” or “religion” rather than the individual. Women may have been referring to perceived exclusion or judgment by a church community and social mores rather than an individual religious person. For example, one lesbian participant explains, “I always feel good about who I am but I think in church I would have to say I have negative feelings” (lesbian, 34).

*Religion analyzed by sexual orientation.*

The results of a Chi Square Analysis did not find a significant difference between lesbian (20.00%) and bisexual (17.65%) women’s accounts of religion as a negative environment, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .10, p = 0.75$.

*Nowhere.*

The antithesis of the “everywhere” category in the positive themes, 18.02% of women indicated that there were no environments where that they felt negative about their sexual identities. Some women answered this question with a one-word “nowhere” or “never” reply. Similar to the “everywhere” theme, other participants answered this question in a manner that reaffirmed their queer identities as an important, natural and integrated part of their overall identities. This participant indicates that not only does she never feel negative, but that she is proud of her identity:

I don't really ever feel negative, even when people say or do negative things about gays. I am happy and proud of my orientation... nothing anyone says can make me feel negative about my orientation. This is who and what I am. I can no more change my identity than I could change my age. (lesbian, age 37)

Some women asserted that while they personally did not ever feel negative, there were some instances where they encountered the negativity of others or did not feel that they
were able to be open about their identity. In particular, one woman referred to feeling judged although she denied feeling negative about her identity, “[I] just wish that some that judge...[would] get to know a person...before they are quick to judge” (bisexual, age 38). Another explains her reticence about coming out, “I never feel negative about my sexual identity, but I do choose to keep it to myself in certain situations” (lesbian, age 48).

*Nowhere theme analyzed by sexual orientation.*

The results of a Chi Square Analysis did not find a difference between lesbian (18.33%) and bisexual (17.65%) women’s assertions that they never felt negative, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 0.01, p =0.93$.

*Family.*

For 15.32% of the sample, the environment in which women felt most negative about their sexual identities was when they were with their families. For most of the women who explained why they felt negative around their families, they again brought up the idea of not being accepted. Several participants discussed their family's religious background as a way of explaining how or why they were uncomfortable about certain family members. As with the religion theme, most women did not explain exactly why religion was negative, however, women may have been referring to perceived exclusion or judgment by religious ideology which considers homosexuality negative or sinful. One participant explained, “the only time I feel negative about my sexual identity is around my family, who is very religious” (bisexual, 25).

Some women explained feeling like they could not be open around family members; one woman asserted that she felt most negative “around family and people I
don't know I feel as if I need to hide” (lesbian, age 20). Others were more explicit in stating that felt negative around family members because they were afraid of their family's rejection or disapproval. One woman expounds, “I feel most uncomfortable about being a lesbian around family... My family disapproves of all homosexuals and I don't want to be shunned” (lesbian, age 18).

Notably, a few women discussed mesosystem level conflicts; other people's prejudice interfering with her relationship with her children or grandchildren. One woman explains feeling negative “when other parents won't let their kids be friends with my kids because they have a gay mother” (lesbian, age 34).

*Family analyzed by sexual orientation.*

The results of a Chi Square Analysis did not find a difference between lesbian (13.73%) and bisexual (16.67%) women’s reports of family being a negative environment, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .18, p =.67$.

**History of Sexual Identity Development**

Women were asked to describe the history of their sexual identity in five chapters by naming five chapter titles and explaining what stood out for them in each chapter. Women's answers reveal that sexual identity develops at multiple levels of the environment. For some women, individual and internal processes were the most salient, while for others; relational and community-level environments were the most relevant to identity development.

As described previously, the first step in analysis was to create and name a list of codes that represented distinct ideas, concepts, and themes that emerged from the interviews. A total of 48 themes were initially identified. As a second step, codes were
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combined into three meta-themes): Internal Processes, Proximal Environments and Distal Environments (see Table 8 metathemes and main subthemes analyzed by sexual orientation). See Tables 9-12 for explanations of themes and percent coded by sexual orientation.

**Positive vs. negative chapters.**

Women’s chapters were coded line by line as either positive or negative; chapters that were neutral were excluded from this particular analysis. Overall, it was found that 90.99% of women had at least one positive chapter and 63.96% of women had at least one negative chapter. Significantly more Lesbian women (80.00%) had negative chapters than bisexual women (45.10%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 14.57, p = .00$. Lesbian women (91.97%) were not significantly more or less likely to have a positive chapter than bisexual women (90.20%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .07, p = .79$.

**Internal processes.**

The theme Internal Processes, mentioned by 82.88% of the sample, captures dimensions of identity development that happen at an individual and cognitive level. Internal Processes is comprised of five main sub-themes: Self-judgment and Acceptance of Self, Questioning Identity, Identity Exploration and Embracing an Identity. Self-judgment and Acceptance of Self describe how women are feeling about their identity (e.g., good or bad) while the remainder of the sub-themes describes a process of identity acceptance. See Table 9 for explanations of themes and percent coded by sexual orientation.

**Self judgment.**
This theme captured women who reported negative feelings about their sexual identities (27.03%). These women expressed internalized homophobia; a belief that being gay was bad or undesirable. These beliefs were expressed as a sense of shame, guilt or self-hate. A sub-theme, *Denial*, described women who expressed regret about being gay or possessed a desire to be straight; these women (16.22%) explained that they denied their sexuality to themselves or to others (see Table 11 for example). Women describe feelings amoral and abnormal for their same-sex attractions. For example, one woman explains her chapter, "Confusion 101: Feeling guilty for my thoughts, and trying to make myself "normal"” (Bisexual, age 36). Another expresses feeling "Self-hate: [Confusion] about the feelings I was having and hating myself for having them" (Lesbian, age 18).

**Self-acceptance.**

Conversely, in at least one of their chapters, 43.24% of participants reported feeling positive about their sexuality and were coded into the Acceptance of Self theme. While self-acceptance was always positive, it was explained by women in slightly different ways; some women expressed an acceptance while others expressed a sense of pride in their attractions or sexual identities. One lesbian (age 18) participant explained feeling, "at peace with my sexuality, and fully accepting of it." Another asserts, "I'm proud to be queer" (lesbian, age 21). Others expressed an acceptance of themselves as a whole. The women who adopted a more holistic view of themselves were likely to discuss the importance of “being themselves.” Another participant proclaims positively, "I Love Me for Me! I've accepted myself for who I am, and my friends and loved ones have too" (bisexual, age 32).

**Questioning identity.**
The Questioning Identity theme describes women who were questioning their sexual orientation, attractions or identity. The theme of Questioning Identity contained two sub-themes: confusion and feeling different. Two examples of chapters coded into this theme are as follows; "who am I?: scared of acceptance" (bisexual, age 18) and "Why am I attracted to her? Discovering I like and are sexually attracted to women" (lesbian, age 40).

Gender identity questioning.

The sub-theme of Gender Identity captured women who were questioning or challenging adherence to traditional gender roles and/or femininity, generally in childhood. For some women, this was literal; a questioning of one's sex assignment. For others, this was a rejection of looking traditionally feminine. Yet others explained engaging in childhood play which defied traditional heterosexual norms; women expressed a preference for "male" toys or resisted hetero-normativity through the content of their games. One participant explained her chapter titled "Pretty little princess plays in the mud: My family wanted me to wear dresses, I wanted to be barefoot and play in the mud" (lesbian, 29). Another described her childhood play, "My Barbies are gay: My childhood and my toys always having lesbian relationships" (lesbian, 21).

Confusion & feeling different.

Coding for confusion and feeling different subthemes were coded using "text search" in Nvivo, a function of the software that allows for searching specific words or phrases in the text. All answers coded contained a variation of the words “confused” or different.” Women coded as confused were generally uncertain of the meaning of their attractions or what it meant to adopt a sexual minority identity. Women coded as
different expressed feeling that they did not fit into the heterosexual norm. Refer to Table 11 for example quotations.

**Exploration.**

This sub-theme of internal processes described women's active endeavors to understand their sexual orientation/identities. *Exploration*, mentioned by 18.02% of women, represented an active internal "soul-searching" or external seeking of answers to questions of sexuality (e.g., by asking others, exposure to new ideas, research etc.). One answer coded into this theme read as, “Soul Searching: Finding myself and who I [really] am and what I believe is right despite religion” (lesbian, age 18). Similarly, this theme also captured women’s sexual/relational experimentation. For example, one woman describes a chapter titled "Exploration: Learning that those feelings were okay and beginning to act on them" (lesbian, age 19).

**Embracing an Identity.**

In contrast to *Questioning Identity*, which captured wondering about identity and *Exploration*, which captured the search for identity, *Embracing an Identity* focuses on defining or accepting identity. Overall, 36.04% of women were coded into this theme. For some women, *Embracing an Identity* involved adopting a sexual orientation label (e.g., “I am a lesbian: knowing I like women,” lesbian, age 31) while for others it involved developing a complete understanding their sexuality (e.g., “coming to terms: knowing who you are,” bisexual, age 48).

**Realization.**

In contrast to the process of developing an identity through questioning and experimenting; a subtheme of *Embracing an Identity*, *Realization*, captured women who
described a moment of discovery whereby they realized their attractions or sexual identity. For example, one bisexual woman (age 27) announces, "Discovery: Realizing I was attracted to girls." Interestingly, some women did not adopt a sexual minority identity, but instead “realized” that they were not heterosexual. These women identify what they are not, but do not identify what they might be. For example, one lesbian teen explained a chapter titled, "Self-Realization: Understanding that I was not a heterosexual" (lesbian, age 19).

**Internal processes analyzed by sexual orientation.**

A chi square analysis revealed that overall, lesbian participants (83.33%) were not significantly more likely than bisexual individuals (82.35%) to describe Internal Processes, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .02, p = .89$. However, when analyzed by sub-theme, some differences did emerge. More specifically, lesbian participants (35.00%) were significantly more likely than bisexual individuals (17.65%) to describe *Self-Judgment*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.21, p = .04$.

There were no significant differences between the number of lesbian and bisexual women coded into *Self-Acceptance*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .00, p = .98$; *Exploration*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .81, p = .37$ or *Embracing an Identity*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .41, p = .52$ or its subtheme, *Realization*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .01, p = .92$. No significant differences were observed between the number of lesbian and bisexual women coded into *Questioning*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .09, p = .77$.

Interestingly, for the Questioning sub-theme, *Gender Identity Questioning*, lesbian women (15.00%) were significantly more likely than bisexual women (1.96%) to challenge adherence to traditional gender roles or femininity, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 5.72, p$
An analysis of the other sub-theme; *Confusion* revealed a trend in the data; bisexual women (25.49%) were more likely to report feeling confused about their identity than lesbian women (11.67%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 3.57, p = .06$. The last subscale, *Feeling Different*, revealed no significant differences between the scores of lesbian and bisexual women, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .01, p = .93$.

**Proximal environments: Microsystem relationships.**

Most women described their interpersonal relationships as being an important part of their sexual identity development; indicating that perhaps, their identities were navigated through their contact with others. *Proximal Environments* is comprised of four main sub-themes: Coming Out, Friendships, Family Relationships and Romantic Relationships. These subthemes all characterize either dyadic relationships or transactions between an individual and another person. See Tables 10-11 for explanations of themes and percent coded by sexual orientation.

**Coming Out.**

Coming out is coded as a sub-theme of Microsystems because it is a transaction between an individual and another individual. More specifically, it involves the disclosure of one’s sexual orientation to other people. Over half the sample mentioned this sub-theme (53.15%), however, women’s experiences of coming out varied in quality; some were negative and others were positive.

*Coming out: A positive experience.*

In cases where coming out was a positive experience (11.71% of the sample), women's equated the experience with freedom, self-acceptance and acceptance by others. One participant explains that coming out was, “The Real Light at the End of the Tunnel: How
coming out to the right people helped me find the right place to find love and happiness" (bisexual, 47).

A sub-group of women (13.51% of the sample) described living openly or being out rather than the transactional coming out to another person. These women generally spoke positively of being open and their explanations indicated a sense of freedom, relief and happiness: "out of the closet and beyond -- relief" (Lesbian, 44).

**Coming Out: A Negative Experience.**

For some women (10.81%), coming out was a negative experience; a difficult process fraught with stress, worry and possibly rejection: "Everyone is going to hate me: The fear of what would happen once everyone knew" (lesbian, 28).

In contrast to those women who described their experiences coming out or being out, a sub-group of women (12.61% of women) described not being open or not being out. These women explained hiding or denying their sexualities to others and/or themselves. One woman explains that she was, "Trying to hide: Hiding, trying to be straight" (lesbian, 37).

**Coming out analyzed by sexual orientation.**

A Chi Square analysis revealed that overall, lesbian participants (63.33%) were significantly more likely than bisexual individuals (41.18%) to discuss their experiences of coming out to others, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 5.44, p = 0.02$. No significant differences emerged for any of the subscales: **Living Openly,** $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .06, p = .80$; **Not Open,** $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .06, p = .80$; **Negative Experience Coming Out,** $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.34, p = .25$; **Positive Experience Coming Out,** $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.37, p = .24$.

**Family relationships.**
Overall, 32.43% of the sample named their families as being important in their sexual identity development. In respect to women's families of origin, the dialogue was about the coming out process and evaluations of family support. Women's mentions of starting their own families (e.g., having children or being a mom) were more varied and ranged from fears about explaining sexuality to children to the joy of starting a family with one's partner.

_Coming out to Family._

Across the sample, 15.32% of women mentioned the act of "coming out" or disclosing their sexuality to family as a chapter (or chapters) of their identity development. For some women (8.11%) this coming out process was positive and was included descriptions of family's support and acceptance. One woman (lesbian, age 19) described coming out to her family as characterized by "unquestionable acceptance." Several other participants received support in the form of education about LGBT issues. For example, one participant explained that receiving an honest answer to questions about lesbian sex introduced her to the idea of lesbians, and another recounts an uncle taking her to a gay pride event. Conversely, for others, the coming out process was characterized by a lack of acceptance. One woman explains, "I thought I was gay but everyone told me I should choose to be straight: mom was scared of me" (bisexual, age 34).

One of the issues women dealt with when coming out to their families was navigating a set of external expectations of how their sexuality would change their role in the family. One women explains that coming out involved, "Figuring out how my homosexuality fit in the family: parent's expectations etc" (lesbian, age 18). Some women
expressed a discomfort or sadness with violating their parents’ expectations for them while others were more defiant.

*Motherhood.*

Overall, 9.91% of the sample referred to motherhood as a chapter of identity. As mentioned, women's discussion of themselves as mothers was varied. A few women simply referred to heterosexual relationships or encounters that resulted in children. For others, the tone was joyful, a celebration of love and motherhood. For example, one lesbian participant (age 30) explains her role as a stepmother in a positive chapter; "Future of happiness." "Being with my girlfriend for the rest of my life raising my step son and teaching him that he has options of who he wants to be..."

Other participants referred to a more challenging aspects of being a queer mother; concerns over legal issues (e.g., marriage and adoption rights) or coming out as lesbian or bisexual to her own children. One bisexual woman (age 33) expressed concern, "What do my Children think? Will I confuse my children?"

*Family analysis by sexual orientation.*

The results of a Chi Square analysis reveal that lesbian women (48.33%) were significantly more likely to mention family relationships in their chapters as compared to bisexual women (13.73%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 15.07, p = .00$. Differences also emerged when women were analyzed by sub-theme. Lesbian women (25.00%) were more likely to mention *Coming Out to Family* than bisexual women (3.92%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 9.44, p = .00$. Lesbian women (13.33%) were more likely to mention *Supported and Accepted* by their families than bisexual women (1.96%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.79, p = .03$. Lesbian women (8.33%) were more likely to mention *Navigating Expectations* families
than bisexual women (0%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.54, p = .04$. No significant differences emerged for the theme Motherhood, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.74, p = .19$.

**Friendships.**

Women's relationships with peers were mentioned by 18.92% of the overall sample. Similarly to how women described their families, 6.31% of women mentioned friendship in the context of coming out to friends. There was overlap between coding these two categories as women often mentioned friends and family together.

In addition to friends playing a role in women's stories of coming out, women also explained that friendships played a role in their emotional and sexual development. Especially in childhood and the teenage years, women recalled developing "crushes," attractions or romantic feelings for their friends. Although some women explained their early same-sex romances as confusing, frightening or alienating, for the most part, women did not express angst but were instead, rather matter-of-fact about their attractions. One woman exemplifies this, asserting, "Age-5- I fall in love with [Sara]: I was absolutely certain that I preferred women. Even though I was very little, there was no confusion and no shame either" (bisexual, age 28).

**Friendships Analyzed by Sexual Orientation.**

Overall, no significant differences emerged between lesbian and bisexual women's mention of friendship, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .01, p = .75$. However, some differences emerged when friendships were analyzed by type and content. Lesbian women were more likely to mention Coming Out to friends than bisexual women, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 6.35, p = .01$. Bisexual women (9.80%) were more likely to mention Sexual Exploration with
friends than lesbian women (0%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 6.16, p = .01$. No differences emerged for Emotional Exploration, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = .09, p = .77$.

**Romantic relationships.**

Overall, 71.17% of the sample mentioned romantic relationships in their chapters. For some women, sexual identity was largely developed through experiences of dating, sex and attractions to others. Romantic relationships is comprised of five sub-themes: Lesbian Romance (50.45%), Heterosexual Romance (21.62%), Bisexual Romance (14.41%), Heartbreak (16.22%) and Finding love (13.51%).

Lesbian Romance (50.45%) captures women’s romantic and sexual relationships with other women in five sub-themes (Dating Women, Attraction, Sexual Experiences and Queer Marriage). Heterosexual Romance captures women’s romantic and sexual relationships with other men in five sub-themes (Dating, Lack of Attraction, Sexual Experiences and Opposite-Sex Marriage). Bisexual Romance captures experiences of dating and relationships that are specific to bisexual women. There was one sub-theme called Gender less love. Lastly, Heartbreak describes women’s experiences of breaking up and Finding Love describes women’s experiences of falling in love when the sex of her partner was not mentioned. These themes and their subthemes are explained in more detail in Table 11.

**Romantic Relationships Analyzed by Sexual Orientation.**

Overall, no significant differences emerged between lesbian and bisexual women’s mention of romantic relationships, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.29, p = .26$. However, some differences emerged when romantic relationships were analyzed by type and content.
**Bisexual Romance.**

Bisexual women (27.45%) were more likely than lesbian women to report engaging in Bisexual Romance (3.33%), χ² (1, N = 111) = 13.00, p = .00. This difference was not observed for the sub-theme, genderless love, χ² (1, N = 111) = 2.45, p = .12.

**Heterosexual Romance.**

Significant differences were not observed between the number of lesbian women (18.33%) and bisexual women (25.49%) who reported a history of romantic involvement with men, χ² (1, N = 111) = 0.83, p = 0.36. However, for the subtheme Falling in Love, bisexual women (7.84%) were more likely than lesbian women (0%) to report falling in love with men, χ² (1, N = 111) = 4.88, p = 0.03. For the subtheme, No Attraction to Men, lesbian women (10%) were more likely than bisexual women (1.96%) to report not being attracted to men. However, this was only a trend as it was significant at the .10 alpha level, χ² (1, N = 111) = 3.08, p = .08. No significant differences emerged for the sub-themes, Sexual Experiences, χ² (1, N = 111) = 1.41, p = 0.24, and Heterosexual Marriage, χ² (1, N = 111) = 0.25, p = 0.62.

**Lesbian romance.**

Significant differences were not observed between the number of lesbian women and bisexual women who reported a history of romantic involvement with women, χ² (1, N = 111) = 1.08, p = 0.30. However, significant differences were found for the sub-theme Queer Marriage or Family. Lesbian women (11.67%) were more likely to mention their wives or same-sex marriages than bisexual women (0%), χ² (1, N = 111) = 6.35, p =0.01. There were no observed differences for any of the other subthemes of romantic involvement with women: Attraction (χ² (1, N = 111) = 0.43, p = 0.51), Falling in Love.
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$(\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 0.36, p = 0.55)$, Sexual Experiences $(\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.34, p = 0.25)$, Dating $(\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.38, p = 0.24)$.

Lastly, no differences emerged for Finding Love $(\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 2.60, p = 0.11)$ or Heartbreak $(\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 1.38, p = 0.24)$.

**Distal environments.**

Overall, 21.62% of women mentioned more distal environments as being an important part of their sexual identity development. *Distal Environments* is comprised of two main sub-themes: Activism and Discrimination. See Table 12 for explanations of themes and percent coded by sexual orientation.

**Activism.**

For many women, finding an environment (whether a community or relationship) where their sexuality was accepted or supported was important. For women coded in the Activism theme (13.51%), support was enacted as participation in LGBT activism (e.g., participation in Pride parades) or in LGBT communities. Some women described the sense of belonging that comes with participation in queer communities, "Family, Community, friends: Building lasting bonds within the LGBTQ contribute toward a sense of belonging" (lesbian, age 31). Others explained the belonging that comes from fighting for equal rights, "PRIDE: Getting my entire high school to participate in the National Day of Silence" (bisexual, age 19).

**Discrimination.**

In opposition to the importance of finding supportive or accepting environments; 21.62% women described a lack of queer-friendly environments. Discrimination was characterized by two sub-themes: Religion and Prejudice.
Religion.

Women coded into the theme, Role of Religion represented 12.61% of the sample. Participants' mention of religion was almost uniformly negative. Women linked religious teachings to exposure to or internalization of heterosexist beliefs; namely that being gay was morally wrong and men and women should marry. One participant lamented that growing up she felt, "Confused: I was told by the nuns at my Catholic school that kissing girls was wrong and I was going to hell but it felt right" (Bisexual, 30). Another explained the heteronormativity of catholic teachings, "Religion 101: Taught what to do, who to be, male with female, no sex before marriage etc. etc." (Bisexual, 25).

Experiences of Prejudice.

Women (9.91%) described experiences of prejudice that were implicit, reflecting heteronormative values; e.g., the invisibility of queer people or queer issues in participants' lives or explicit (in the form of bullying or homophobia). One lesbian women explained her experiences with bullying, "This one time in high school: The torment and torture I went through for being gay in high school" (lesbian, age 29). Conversely, a bisexual participant explained her experiences with heteronormativity and the invisibility of queer people; "Life around me: Primarily heterosexual relationships in my world" (bisexual, age 45).

Distal Environments analyzed by sexual orientation.

The results of a Chi Square analysis did not find a significant difference between lesbian and bisexual descriptions of Activism, $\chi^2$ (1, $N = 111$) = 0.25, $p = 0.62$ or Discrimination, $\chi^2$ (1, $N = 111$) = 0.20, $p = 0.65$. The subscales Experiences of Prejudice
\[ \chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 0.36, \ p = 0.55 \] and \[ \chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 0.11, \ p = 0.75 \] also revealed no significant differences.
Discussion

This section will expound on the quantitative results; examining in particular if hypotheses were supported, it will then explore the meaning of qualitative results, and look for commonalities as well as inconsistencies across both types of measurement. This section ends with a discussion of strengths and limitations, suggestions for future research and a summary of findings.

Hypothesis Testing

Outness.

The hypothesis that bisexual women would be less open about their sexuality than lesbian women was supported by women's scores on the Outness Inventory. Bisexual women were less “out” overall and less out on each of the subscales: out to world (e.g., work supervisors, work colleagues, old heterosexual friends and strangers); out to family (e.g., parents, extended relatives and siblings); and out to religion (e.g., one's religious leaders and people in their congregation). This is consistent with Warner et al.'s (2004) findings that bisexual people are less likely to be open than gay or lesbian people. Moreover, it fits with the research which reveals that it is difficult for bisexual women to be open in the queer and straight communities because of bi-phobia (Hartman, 2005; Hutchins and Kaahumanu, 1991; Rust 1991).

Despite the systematic difference in outness between lesbian and bisexual women, both lesbian and bisexual women answered on the high end of the scales for Overall Outness, Out to Family and Out to World. In other words, women's mean answers revealed that they were fairly open about their sexuality. The one exception to this was seen on women’s religion scores: bisexual and lesbian women's lowest outness subscale
scores were about religion, indicating that this was the area when the sexual minority women in this study felt the least able to be open.

The overall outness distribution, Out to Family distribution and Out to World distributions were not normally distributed. Women were more open about their sexual orientation than they would be in a normal distribution and answers tended to be clustered in the tail of the distribution, rather than around the mean. Conversely, on the Out to Religion subscale women were less open about their sexual orientation and scores were more clustered around the mean than they would be in a normal distribution.

The skewed distribution could be due to social-desirability (e.g., participants wanting to portray themselves in a favorable light) or this could be due to selection bias: women who would fill out a survey about sexual orientation and identity might be more open about their sexuality than women who would choose not to participate.

**Quality of Life.**

The hypothesis that bisexual women would have a lower quality of life as compared to lesbian women was not supported by the data. Both lesbian and bisexual women reported a high quality of life and analyses did not find a systematic difference between the two groups. Overall, the sample of women who answered this question was not normally distributed; there were more negative answers and scores were more clustered around the mean than in a normal distribution.

This finding runs counter to previous research which found that bisexual women had higher levels of psychological distress (Cochran & Mays, 2007) and were at a greater risk for mental illness and risk behaviors and experienced higher levels of stress than lesbian women (Chantala, 2002; Mathy, 2002; Volpp, 2010). One possible explanation is
that the related constructs of mental and physical wellness do not generalize to the construct of quality of life. However, an alternative explanation is offered by Sheets and Mohr’s (2009) finding that general social support positively predicted levels of life satisfaction, a similar construct to quality of life. Consequently, future studies should include a measure of social support, to specifically test if social support mediates quality of life.

When the initial analyses were run, age was not found to be significantly related to quality of life, indicating a lack of support for the idea that quality of life might be an age-graded phenomenon (e.g., as per the "it gets better" campaign). Lastly, it should also be noted that the quality of life scale used was originally intended for use with patients with chronic pain and might not have been an appropriate form of measurement for this population.

**Negative feelings about identity.**

The hypothesis that bisexual women would have more negative feelings about their identity, as measured by scores on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale, was supported. However, in general, both lesbian and bisexual did not feel very negative about their sexual identities; the mean scores for both groups fell on the low end of the scale, indicating that women generally disagreed with the negative identity items.

Although lesbian and bisexual women had low levels of negative feelings about identity, bisexual women were found to have more negative feelings across all subscales, with the exception of the need for acceptance scale (where no differences emerged) and the superiority scale, which was removed from analyses due to its extremely low level of internal reliability. In other words, bisexual women were more likely to espouse the belief
that bisexuality is a negative identity as compared to a heterosexual identity. They were also more likely to be concerned about their sexual identity remaining private. Bisexual women were also more likely to express a belief that their sexual identity development was challenging or difficult. Bisexual women were also more likely to express confusion about their sexual orientation (e.g., an uncertainty about their identity).

While the findings reported above fit with the existing literature, the question that arises is why do bisexual women have a more negative identity? It may be that due to stigmatization of bisexuality in the heterosexual and homosexual communities, bisexuality is more of a "hidden" identity. It is less okay to be open, therefore women are more concerned with privacy and experience more internalized bi-negativity. This idea is supported in the quantitative outness findings which revealed that bisexual women are less out than lesbian women. It is also fitting with previous research which found that openness about sexual orientation was related to increased self-esteem, positive affectivity and decreased anxiety (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). In this case, an inability to disclose is associated more negative beliefs about the self.

Moreover, according to Rust (2001), our society only carves out spaces for homosexual or heterosexual females and bisexual females are rendered with the task of either rejecting existing categories or learning to transverse them. The invalidation of bisexuality as a legitimate orientation might make the process both more difficult and more confusing.

**Outness as a predictor variable: Quality of life and negative identity.**

The last hypotheses, that outness would predict increased quality of life and decreased negative feelings about identity were supported by the data. However, while
higher degrees of outness did predict higher quality of life, the effect was very small; perhaps again due to the inappropriateness of the quality of life scale for the sample. However, outness was moderately and negatively associated with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale, indicating that as outness increased, negative feelings about identity decreased and vice versa. This effect was stronger for bisexual women than lesbian women. This general finding does support the research that being able to disclose one’s identity and be one’s true authentic self is associated with less feelings of stress and anxiety. Moreover, self-disclosure can lead to closer, more intimate relationships which can, in turn, serve to buffer stress and risk factors.

However, it is important to note that the relationship measured here is not casual. Outness may predict quality of life and positive feelings about identity due to a third variable. For example, a person may have more positive feelings about her identity because of increased identity integration or a healthy romantic relationship; consequently, she may be more inclined to be open about her identity.

**Biculturalism.**

The hypothesis that bisexual women would exhibit a higher degree of biculturalism as compared to lesbian women was also supported. The original scoring for this measure indicates that scores over three (e.g., neutral on a scale of 1-7) indicate belonging or affiliation with that culture. Bisexual women had mean scores over three on both the lesbian and bisexual culture scales. This indicates that bisexual women felt part of a lesbian culture community as well as a bisexual culture and community. This is an important finding given the debate about whether a true bisexual community exists (Hartman, 2005; Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991; Rust, 1993). Conversely, while lesbian
women reported being a part of a lesbian culture, they disagreed about belonging to a bisexual culture. An important improvement for future studies would be to include a scale for heterosexual cultures to determine the extent to which bisexual women identify with lesbian and heterosexual cultures.

The second set of culture measures simply asked women to identify the degree to which they felt lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. This question was meant to identify cultural identity, not sexual orientation. Lesbian women reported strong agreement with the statement “I am lesbian” and strong disagreement with the statements “I am bisexual” and “I am heterosexual.” Similarly, bisexual women reported strong agreement with the statement, “I am bisexual,” strong disagreement with the statement, “I am heterosexual” and moderate disagreement with the statement, “I am lesbian.”

Lesbian women consistently answered that they only felt a part of lesbian culture as indicated by scores on the bicultural measures. However, bisexual women were more ambiguous, indicating affiliation with bisexual and lesbian cultures but disagreeing somewhat with a lesbian cultural identity. Possible reasons for this contradiction include women interpreting the second scales as measuring sexual orientation. In that case, it would lend credence to the idea that bisexuality is most definitely a distinct identity apart from lesbianism. In either case, it is clear that bisexual women do feel they have a distinct identity or culture, and lesbian women clearly do not see themselves as belonging to either a bisexual culture or identity.

**Summary.**

The quantitative measures establish that bisexual women do not fare as well as lesbian women in terms of outness and feelings about identity; however, this study offers
some preliminary evidence that a bisexual culture/community exists, that bisexual women affiliate most strongly with this cultural identity (as compared to a lesbian culture) to lesbian and bisexual cultures and they offer evidence that sexual identity disclosure (e.g., outness) can predict positive or negative feelings about one's sexual identity. The qualitative measures offer an additional perspective on these relationships.

**Qualitative Discussion**

**Positive & negative environments.**

We asked women to explain where they felt best and worst about their sexual identities to get a picture of the types of environmental contexts that can impact sexual identity in positive and negative ways. Because this was an open-ended question, women had the freedom to describe any level of environment, proximal or distal. Across different levels of environment ranging from dyadic relationships (e.g., family, friends) to community-level institutions (e.g., LGBT clubs, religious organizations), women engaged with themes of inclusion vs. exclusion and prejudice vs. acceptance.

Women's descriptions of positive environments focused on two general themes: contexts where being queer was normal rather than exceptional and contexts characterized by support and acceptance. By immersing themselves in a context where homosexuality was the norm, women's own sexuality could become less prominent, and they could allow other parts of their identity to be more salient. On the other hand, with people of similar identities, it was also possible for women to celebrate and take pride in their similarity in a context that was safe and free from homophobia. In particular, a small percentage of women mentioned engaging in activism, an active attempt to change macrosystem values and/or exosystem policies.
LESBIAN & BISEXUAL IDENTITY

The most frequently mentioned positive environment was Queer Communities, a theme characterized by communities of LGBT People, Spaces and Activism. In this exosystem-level environment, lesbian women described spending time with people that had similar identities to themselves. Analysis of women's detailed descriptions of relationships with other LGBT people reveals that lesbian women referred only to relationships with other lesbians (not bisexual women). Bisexual women were, overall, less likely to mention involvement in queer communities. These findings are in agreement with prior research which found a strained relationship between bissexuals and the queer community (Hartman, 2005; Heath & Mulligan, 2008; Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991; Rust, 1993).

Previous research found that bisexual women were able to form close-knit bisexual communities (Hartman, 2005; Rust, 2001) and bisexual social networks away from the gay community. However, in the present study bissexuals did not did not mention a bisexual community or bisexual friendships. On the other hand, bissexuals were more likely to mention their friendships (which were generally characterized by acceptance) as a supportive environment than lesbian women. It is possible bisexual women are better able than lesbian women to find supportive friendships where sexuality simply was not an issue.

Environments that women reported to negatively affect identity were characterized by themes of exclusion, discrimination or judgment. Women's descriptions of negative environments focused on two general themes: contexts where being queer was abnormal (e.g., heteronormativity) and contexts where women could not be open or could not be themselves. At the micro-level, when women's families did not accept their
sexualities, women sometimes had to choose between being open and having their family. At the exosystem level, religion taught that sexual minority orientations were not as good as heterosexual identities and legalized homophobia (e.g., exclusion from marriage) painted homo/bisexuality as deviant.

**Policy changes: An exosystem level analysis.**

By asking women what policy changes they would make related to sexual identity, we were able to understand what exosystem-level conflicts they experienced as sexual-minority women. Women's responses revealed that many were negatively affected by a lack of equal-partner rights, protections from discrimination and a desire for overall equality; an inclusion of sexual identity in anti-discrimination language in the Bill of Rights. These findings support a plethora a research indicating that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are negatively affected by marriage limitations, even if they themselves are not yet ready to marry. Marriage and adoption restrictions create a climate where LGB people are unable to partake in many major life rituals (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Glaad Media Reference Guide, 2010).

Women also asked for specific protection from discrimination: at work, in the army (e.g., Don't Ask Don't Tell) and from of hate-crimes. Women's experiences with discrimination, whether personal or witnessed, contribute to a climate where sexual identity is marginalized and stigmatized. Mentioned by the Prism Research group, states where constitutions prohibit equal rights (e.g., banning “same-sex” marriages) or simply do not promote them (e.g., a lack of anti-discrimination laws) have LGB citizens with higher levels of stress and anxiety about the future (Arm, Horne & Levitt, 2009; Levitt et al., 2009, Risotsky & Riggle, 2009). The dearth of legal protections for LGB people's
physical and emotional well-being and the associated challenges to queer marriages and families, clearly tell lesbian and bisexual individuals that they are, legally and socially, second-class citizens. The desire for equality can then be interpreted as a demand for equal citizenship status.

There were no systematic differences between lesbian and bisexual women's desire for partner rights, equality or protection from discrimination. These similarities speak to an interesting finding: that both groups experience similar marginalized experiences at the policy level. However, part of this effect may also be due to the saliency of the current marriage equality debate. What is not revealed by this question is how bisexual women in relationships with men compare to bisexual women in relationships with other women.

**Chapters of identity development.**

By asking women to describe the history of their sexual identities we were able to gain insight into how women [outside of academia] define their sexual identities; what experiences they found most salient to sexual identity development, and how they made sense of their identities. For most women, sexual identity was defined in a similar capacity to sexual orientation (e.g., to which sex are people attracted to). In only a few cases did women include gender development or ideology in their chapters.

For some women, identity development involved navigating internal processes; for others it involved navigating relationships with family and friends and lovers. Other women discussed experiences of activism, prejudice or discrimination. Moreover, women experienced any number of combinations of these themes.

The emergent themes are similar to certain stages of development posed by stage
theorists Cass (1984) and Fassinger and Miller (1996): women experienced periods of questioning, exploration and identity acceptance as well as self-acceptance and self-judgment and prioritized the coming out process as well as experiences with other LGBT people. However, the similarities end there. Foremost, the current analysis was not testing models of development and did not investigate the trajectory of individual women's sexual identity development, but instead looked for patterns across participants.

Women’s descriptions of their sexual identity development did indicate that, at least for some women, this process is characterized by fluidity. This finding is consistent with Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) assertion that sexual identity is fluid, especially in women. While many women did report struggling with their sexual identity either internally through self-judgment (e.g., internalized homophobia), or externally, through difficulties with coming out and experiences of prejudice (e.g., not being accepted or being discriminated against), not all women described difficult sexual identity pathways.

For some women, sexual identity internal processes were positive, as were external experiences. Similarly, when women were asked to name the environments where they felt most positive and negative about their identities, approximately 20% of women reported that they always felt positive and 18% reported that they never felt negative (no systematic differences emerged between lesbian and bisexual women on these questions). This indicates that a sub-population of women have very strong, resilient and positive identities that are (perhaps) not influenced by external environments. Future research should investigate this particular sub-population of women to see what characteristics or life experiences differentiate them from other lesbian and
For some women, identity development mostly involved navigating romantic and sexual relationships; the role of cognition was not part of their narratives. This suggests that when women are asked to think about their sexual identities, many of them think of the history of their romantic relationships, attractions, and sexual encounters. Foremost, this indicates that for our participants, sexual identity was not readily distinguishable from sexual orientation (e.g., “Whom am I attracted to?”). Future studies measuring sexual identity should take this into account, perhaps asking more pointed questions about gender identity and ideology.

Secondly, these stories of attractions and romance reveal that not all lesbian and bisexual sexual identity development involves conflict and challenge. Inasmuch, we should question the heteronormativity of models of development that assume an internal [difficult] process involving confusion or comparison to a heterosexual identity. Where these internal processes do occur, we should also resist the urge to assume they are normative and developmental without taking into account the larger picture; what are the ecological contexts in which identity development is occurring? Discriminatory legislation and macrosystem values denigrate sexual minority individuals and can lead to internalized homophobia. In a context where a sexual-minority woman is accepted and permitted to be her genuine, authentic self, without fear of rejection, physical or emotional harm, sexual identity integration would most likely be as invisible and seamless as heterosexual identity development.

**Lesbian vs. bisexual women: Chapters of development.**

Some differences did emerge in how lesbian and bisexual women discussed their
chapters of identity. Not surprisingly, romantic-relationship categories were often sexual orientation specific. Inasmuch, lesbian women were more likely to discuss queer marriages or families and bisexual women were more likely to discuss bisexual romance and certain aspects of heterosexual romance (e.g., falling in love with a man). These differences do lend support to the idea that a bisexual identity is categorically different from a lesbian identity.

Lesbian women were also more likely to describe experiences of coming out as compared to bisexuals. This agrees with the quantitative data which found that lesbian women are more "out" about their sexuality than bisexual women and, as mentioned, fits with the literature on outness (Warner et al., 2004).

However, the most surprising finding was the fact that lesbian women were more likely to have negative chapters than bisexual women. In addition, more lesbian women were likely to qualitatively report engaging in internalized homophobia than bisexual women. This contradicts the quantitative findings that bisexual women have worse feelings about their sexual identity, including more feelings of internalized homophobia as compared to lesbian women (e.g., the internalized homophobia subscale on the LGBIS scale).

One possible explanation for the difference involves a sense of time. The LGBIS scale measures how women currently feel about their identity while the chapters question investigates how women have felt over the course of their sexual identity histories. It is possible that lesbian women experienced more early-on internalized homophobia (which could also account for the increase in negative chapters) than bisexual women (e.g., perhaps in childhood or adolescence) but that this was later resolved. This pattern does
not seem to be related to participant’s current age as a post-hoc regression analysis did not find a significant relationship between age and the LGBIS subscales negative identity or internalized homophobia. The increased internalized homophobia in lesbian women’s chapters may reflect a difference in how lesbian and bisexual women construct their narratives of identity. Lesbian women may be more likely to practice *positive marginality*, (Fine and Hall, 2005) turning one’s marginalized status into a virtue and a source of strength through critical evaluation and reframing of marginality. Future research should investigate within-subject identity development trajectories, paying specific attention to how lesbian and bisexual women resolve conflict in their narratives.

**Strengths, Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research**

The current study is a mixed methods study. By using this methodology, we were able to triangulate women’s qualitative answers about their overall wellness with their open-ended answers. This allowed us to increase the external validity of our study by recruiting a large overall sample while also maximizing on the rich, in-depth answers that one gets from qualitative work. Open-ended questions enable women to tell their stories of identity development in their own words. Consequently, we are able to draw conclusions not only about what women report, but how they report it as well. The quantitative measures allow us to draw more general conclusions about lesbian and bisexual women while the qualitative measures inform the relationships between sexual identity, environment and wellbeing.

The application of Bronfenbrenner’s model has been critical for framing women's qualitative responses to questions about which environments impact identity in a positive and negative manner. While prior research has focused largely on microsystem-level...
relationships such as the relationship between wellness and support (Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Ryan et al., 2010), the current study also allowed women to describe more distal-level environments. What is critically important about the systems model is its ability to allow us to look at multiple environments simultaneously and examine how different levels of environment can impact the other.

Another strength of this study was its recruitment method. By purchasing an “advertisement” on Facebook, we were able to reach a much broader sample than simply recruiting on a college campus or through LGBT groups (which results in a selection bias sample as the type of person might differ from the LB population at large). For example, we had at least one participant from every US state and while ethnic and age diversity was not reflective of the US as a whole, it was more representative than if we had simply recruited on our college campus. Moreover, as we have seen in this study, bisexual women are less likely to belong to LGBT groups as a whole. Future research should take this into account while recruiting.

Although the current study allowed women to rank themselves on a five-point scale ranging from homosexual- mostly homosexual-bisexual-mostly heterosexual- and heterosexual, there is still an issue with treating lesbian and bisexual labels as categorical variables. Rust (2001) asserts that bisexual scholars should resist “adding” bisexual as a discrete orientation category because that is the very system they are trying to undermine. In other words, forcing the bisexual label would simply “perpetuate sexual oppression in a slightly altered form” (Rust, 2001, p. 67).

Rust (2001) called into question the accuracy of using bisexual as an umbrella label by examining the multifaceted ways in which women defined their identities. She
found that, given the choice, only 38% of bisexual women would use the term bisexual to describe themselves; most participants used a combination of terms (e.g., lesbian-bisexual, gay bisexual), or compound identities (e.g., pansexual, ambi-sexual).

Moreover, Rust (2001) found that participants defined sexual orientation in a variety of ways: as a capacity for attraction to both sexes, in terms of current or past behavior or in terms of potential (e.g., the possibility of future involvement in a sexual or romantic relationship). In many cases there was not an “even” split in attractions toward women and men. As one participant explained, “I feel a greater physical attraction to men but a greater spiritual/ emotional attraction to women” (Rust, 2001, p. 49). Future research should consider the limitations of using bisexual and lesbian as categorical labels and should include other markers of sexual orientation such as behavior and attractions in addition to self-reported labels.

Future studies should explore some of the findings from this study that point out unique experiences of lesbian and bisexual women: bisexual women's experiences with early sexual exploration in the context of friendships, the 20% of lesbian and bisexual women who always felt positive about their identity (e.g., what are the protective factors in their lives or personalities?) and lesbian women's experiences with gender-questioning. Moreover, subsequent analyses of women's chapters of identity should focus on patterns within participants and not only across participants in order to examine trajectories of development rather than discrete stages or characteristics.

Summary: Strengths & Challenges of Women Living in Multiple Contexts

At a macrosystem level, lesbian and bisexual women seem to experience many of the same threats to identity: both identities are marginalized by a heterosexist
sociopolitical climate. These macrosystem values inform exosystem laws and institutions.

At the legal level, lesbian and bisexual women again face similar challenges to identity: a lack of protection from discrimination and legalized discrimination: barriers to marrying the partner of one's choosing.

At the exosystem level, both lesbian and bisexual women were negatively affected by religion. They associated churches and religious people with heteronormative and homophobic beliefs. Some women described religious settings as the place where they felt most negative about their sexual identities. This discomfort with religion is also reflected in women’s scores on the Outness Inventory subscale, out to religion. It had the lowest scores of any outness subscale, indicating that women were the least likely to be open with their religious communities. However, some women were able to turn their negative experiences with religion into a source of strength. In their chapters of identity, a sub-group of women who mentioned religion explained that they were able to overcome its prejudicial teachings through critical evaluation and reframing. This finding fits with Harris et al.'s (2008) study which found that critical evaluation of religious beliefs was negatively correlated with internalized homophobia and positively associated with sexual identity development as well as Rostosky et al.'s (2008) finding that critical thinking was an important process in resisting stigma.

At the community-level, some differences emerged between lesbian and bisexual women. Both lesbian and bisexual women admitted to belonging to a lesbian culture (lesbian women somewhat more); however, only bisexual women identified with belonging to a bisexual culture. Similarly, queer-communities were a much more frequently mentioned protective environment for lesbian women than for bisexual women.
and bisexual-women did not identify a clear bisexual community or support-group. Bisexual women faced the challenge of being marginalized by the heterosexual majority, the homosexual minority and were faced with the absence of a clear bisexual community.

However, at the micro-level, negotiating others' expectations was evident in women's stories of (not) coming out. Overall, bisexual women reported that they were less likely to be open about their sexual identity than lesbian women. Conversely, coming out was a more salient part of sexual-identity development for lesbian women than for bisexual women. On an individual level, while bisexual women reported currently having more negative feelings about their sexual identities than lesbian women, over the course of their sexual identity development, lesbian women were more likely to have negative chapters and experience feelings feeling confused about their identity. Conversely, lesbian women were more likely to express confusion or concerns about their gender identities.

A strength demonstrated by many women was recognition of the need for acceptance and belonging, be they with partners, friends, family or other LGB people, nearly all women were able to explain where they felt positive. The majority of women had at least one positive chapter in their stories of sexual-identity development and many expressed a sense of pride in their identities. Overall, women reported high scores on the LGBIS scale, indicating that they did not have strong negative feelings about identity.

This study is a first step in trying to parse apart the experiences and identities of lesbian and bisexual women. Future studies should delve deeper into the meaning of these identities and continue to investigate both the protective and detrimental impact of multiple environments on identity.
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LESBIAN & BISEXUAL IDENTITY


identity, social support and CD4 cell count among HIV-seropositive gay men, 


Table 1

**Final Sample Demographics by Sexual Orientation (N =862)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>Lesbian (n =367)</th>
<th>Bisexual (n=495)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>192</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annual Income</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>African-American</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
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<td>Some High school</td>
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<td>HS diploma/ GED</td>
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<td>Bachelors Degree</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>Dating casually</td>
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<tr>
<td>In a relationship</td>
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<td>Married/Civil Union</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>Gender of Partner(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women &amp; men</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>181</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
<td>186</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>367</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* SD is the standard deviation. Numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number and percents may not sum to 100.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Lesbian (n=60)</th>
<th>Bisexual (n=51)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Income</td>
<td>34,897</td>
<td>34,838</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some High school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS diploma/ GED</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate school</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating casually</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/Civil Union</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Partner</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single (N/A)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other gender</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women &amp; men</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* SD is the standard deviation. Numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number and percents may not sum to 100.
Table 4.
Descriptive Statistics for Quantitative Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Possible Range</th>
<th>Lesbian N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Biomedical N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Life</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outness Scale***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out to Family***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out to World***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out to Religion***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Identity***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult Process**</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Acceptance</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalized Homonegativity***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Privacy***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Confusion***</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Identity Scales</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian Culture Scale**</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual Culture Scale**</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian Cultural Identity**</td>
<td>1-6^</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual Cultural Identity**</td>
<td>1-6^</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hetero. Cultural Identity**</td>
<td>1-6^</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ^ For these measures, low scores indicate agreement; for all others, low scores indicate the negative option (e.g. a lower quality of life, not being open, less negative feelings about identity, etc.).
** Group differences are significant at the .01 alpha level.
Table 5.

*Policy Changes meta-themes defined with percent coded by sexual orientation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
<th>Percent Lesbian</th>
<th>Percent Bisexual</th>
<th>Percent Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equal Partner Rights</td>
<td>The right to marry person of choosing and all the associate rights that come with marriage (includes adoption &amp; healthcare rights)</td>
<td>“Legalizing gay marriage. All people were created equal and need to be treated equally. Love is love, not gender.”</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection from Discrimination</td>
<td>Protection from discrimination and harsher punishment for hate crimes (includes ending DADT and work discrimination)</td>
<td>“A blanket wide ban on discriminating against sexual identity for any reason.”</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Want equality: sexual orientation should be included in language of human rights</td>
<td>“I would ensure that equal opportunity was enforced and that homosexuals and bisexuals were treated as equals to heterosexuals.”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percents here are rounded to the nearest whole number and participants may be captured in multiple themes. Consequently, percents may not sum to zero.
Table 6.  
**Positive Environment Themes Explained and analyzed by sexual orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queer Communities *</td>
<td>Places where being LGBT is “normal” Includes LGBT groups, lesbians events and gay</td>
<td>“…I do receive positive energy from places/events that are gay or lesbian. For example, Pride parades &amp; festivals; LBGT film festivals, the lesbian films; Melissa Etheridge concerts.”</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places and spaces</td>
<td>Places frequented by a LGBT cliental or gay communities</td>
<td>“when im at gay clubs or pride festivals”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Activism</td>
<td>Feels positive when engaging in LGBT activism</td>
<td>“Gay activist rallies, and volunteering events. Mostly at large gatherings of openly gay people celebrating their identity and fighting for equal rights.”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT people</td>
<td>Around other members of the LGBT community</td>
<td>“I feel most positive about my sexual identity when I am surrounded by others who share that identity. Other lesbians or bisexuals help reaffirm this.”</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bisexual</td>
<td>Mentioned feeling good around bisexuals</td>
<td>I feel most positive about my sexual identity when I am surrounded by others who share that identity. Other lesbians or bisexuals help reaffirm this.”</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lesbian</td>
<td>Mentioned feeling good around lesbians</td>
<td>“i do feel more positive when around more lesbians.”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Microsystem-level Environments**

| With Friends *                | When she is with her friends                                                | “Whenever I am with my friends. They accept me for who I am.”                     | 17   | 33 | 24 |
| Everywhere                   | When she can be open with others about her identity/her identity is accepted and supported by others | “I feel most positive about my sexuality in a setting where I feel I am equal to everyone else. Where I am accepted just as a person and not made to feel different than anyone else.” | 27   | 20 | 23 |
| With Partner                 | When she is with her significant other                                       | “With those who love me and support me, particularly my girlfriend.”              | 13   | 18 | 15 |
| Family & Home                | With her family or at home                                                    | “When spending time with close friends and family I feel most positive and accepted.” | 8    | 12 | 10 |
| Accepting Environments       | When she is accepted and supported by others and she can be open with others about her identity | “I feel most positive about my sexuality in a setting where I feel I am equal to everyone else. Where I am accepted just as a person and not made to feel different than anyone else.” | 12   | 6  | 9  |

**Note.** Participants may be coded into multiple categories and percents may not sum to 100. Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number. Italics reflect sub-codes which are also captured in the percent of their parent code.

* Chi square tests reveal a significant differences at the .05 alpha level for Queer Communities, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 3.91$, $p = .05$ and With Friends, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.16$, $p = .04$
Table 7.

Negative environment themes explained and analyzed by sexual orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of prejudice</td>
<td>Not being liked because she is LGBT, being discriminated against, includes fear for safety and legalized discrimination</td>
<td>“The setting in which I feel most negative about my sexual identity is a setting where people cannot accept me for who I am sexually.”</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At work</td>
<td>Cannot be open or is not accepted at work</td>
<td>“When I had a job, at work it was difficult to speak openly.”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hetero-normative Environment</td>
<td>Environment where being LGBT is deviant and heterosexuality is the norm</td>
<td>“A place in which I know I’m probably one of the few people in the room who has had homosexual experiences.”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In public</td>
<td>Around people she doesn’t know well who do not accept her sexuality</td>
<td>“The way people look at me when I am out in public. Like they have never seen a lesbian before in [their] life.”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear for Safety</td>
<td>Fear about being the target of violence because of her sexual orientation.</td>
<td>&quot;I feel most negative about my sexual identity when I fear for my physical safety.&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legalized Discrimination</td>
<td>Women refer to laws and policies that discriminate against sexual orientation</td>
<td>“In a mainstream church setting, usually at a wedding. Knowing that I can’t be married even in a civil ceremony.” (lesbian, age 36)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Feels negative around people who are religious/ when at church</td>
<td>“Around extremely religious people that have the intelligence of a small rodent”</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowhere</td>
<td>Participant never feels negative.</td>
<td>“I dont feel negative about it...like i said i am who i am...”</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With family</td>
<td>When sexuality is not accepted by one's family</td>
<td>“I also feel negative regarding my oldest son, who refuses to let me see my grandchildren, because I am with Hannah.”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number. Participants may be coded into multiple categories and percents may not sum to 100. Codes in italics are sub-codes and are also captured in the percentage of their parent code.
Table 8.  
*History of Sexual Identity: Metathemes and main sub-themes analyzed by sexual orientation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Percent Lesbian</th>
<th>Percent Bisexual</th>
<th>Overall Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Processes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Embracing an Identity</em></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Exploration</em></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Questioning</em></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Self-judgment</em> *</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Acceptance of self</em></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proximal Environments</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Family Relationships</em> **</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Friendships</em></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Romantic Relationships</em></td>
<td>67</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coming Out</strong> **</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distal Environments</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Activism &amp; LGBT Communities</em></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Discriminatory Environments</em></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative Chapter</strong></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Chapter</strong></td>
<td>92</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number. Participants may be coded into multiple categories and percents may not sum to 100.  
*Chi square analyses reveal a significant difference at the .05 alpha level for Self-judgment, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.21$, $p = .04$.  
**Chi square tests reveal a significant difference at the .01 alpha level for Family Relationships, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 15.07$, $p = .00$ and for Coming Out, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 5.44$, $p = 0.02$.
### Table 9.
**Internal Processes with Subthemes: Explanations and analysis by sexual orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal Processes</td>
<td>defining or accepting one’s sexual identity</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing an Identity</td>
<td>A moment of discovery whereby they realize that they are attracted to women and/or are lesbian or bisexual</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realization</td>
<td>&quot;Realization: Coming to realize one's sexual identity&quot;</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Active searching for answers to questions of sexuality: characterized by soul-searching or sexual experimentation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>Women who were questioning their sexual orientation, attractions or identity</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>&quot;questioning my sexuality: Having a crush on a girl and being confused and not having anyone to talk to&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Different</td>
<td>Feeling different or abnormal</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Issues*</td>
<td>Identity questioned or challenged adherence to traditional gender roles and/or femininity</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-judgment*</td>
<td>Women expressed a belief that being gay was bad or undesirable</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>&quot;Denial: dated guys, tried to be normal&quot;</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
<td>feeling positive about their sexuality: acceptance or pride in their attractions or sexual identities</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chi square analyses reveal a significant difference at the .05 alpha level for *Self-judgment*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.21, p = .04$ and *Questioning*, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 5.72, p = .02$.

*Chi square analyses reveal marginally significant difference for Confusion, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 3.57, p = .06$.

**Note.** Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number. Women may be coded in multiple categories and percents may not sum to 100.
Table 10. Microsystem Environments: Friendships, Family Relationships and Outness explained and analyzed by sexual orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
<th>% Lesbian</th>
<th>% Bi.</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Relationships**</td>
<td>Discussion of themselves as queer mothers. For some there was a concern about over legal issues (e.g., adoption rights) or coming out to children</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a mom</td>
<td>“Life is good but where are my rights? I love my wife and my kid, just wish they were legally mine in the state I live in not just California.”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming out to Family**</td>
<td>Coming out or disclosing their sexuality to their family</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality supported and accepted*</td>
<td>The coming out process was positive and was included descriptions of family's support and acceptance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Expectations*</td>
<td>Women discuss navigating the relationship between their own identity and their families expectations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming out to friends**</td>
<td>Coming out or disclosing their sexuality to their friends</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crushes on friends</td>
<td>Friends played a role in emotional development: women developed attractions or romantic feelings for their friends</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual exploration**</td>
<td>Friends played a role in sexual development: Women described engaging in sexual behaviors (ranging from kissing to sex)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming Out**</td>
<td>Women discuss disclosing their sexual orientation to others</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>I realized I was supposed to be with woman (my bisexual days) allowing myself to come out and embracing myself without fear!</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Openly</td>
<td>living openly or being out rather than the transactional coming out to another person</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Coming out was a difficult process fraught with stress, worry and possibly rejection</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding or denying their sexualities to others and/or themselves:</td>
<td>&quot;Lies: hiding everything from my family&quot;</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not sum to 100. Women may be coded in multiple
categories. **Chi square tests reveal a significant difference at the .01 alpha level for Family Relationships, \( \chi^2(1, N = 111) = 15.07, p = .00; \) Coming Out to Family, \( \chi^2(1, N = 111) = 9.44, p = .00; \) Coming Out to Friends, \( \chi^2(1, N = 111) = 6.35, p = .01 \) and Sexual Exploration, \( \chi^2(1, N = 111) = 6.16, p = .01. \)

*Chi square tests reveal a significant difference at the .05 alpha level for Coming Out, \( \chi^2(1, N = 111) = 5.44, p = 0.02; \) Supported and Accepted, \( \chi^2(1, N = 111) = 4.79, p = .03 \) and Navigating Expectations, \( \chi^2(1, N = 111) = 4.54, p = .04. \)
Table 11. Functional systems: Romantic relationship subthemes explained and analyzed by sexual orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Participant's example</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>% Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romantic Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian Romance</td>
<td>Participants romantic and sexual relationships with women</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attraction &amp; crushes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's descriptions of having crushes on women. For a number of women, this was a recount of their first female crushes</td>
<td>&quot;Discovering my bisexual tendencies: Accepting my attraction to the same sex&quot;</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dating</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women wrote about same-sex relationships/dating in a variety of ways; some were descriptive and factual, naming partners, while others focused their descriptions on partners.</td>
<td>&quot;She changed my world: finding the girl who changed my life for the better&quot;</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Falling in love</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual experiences (ranging from kissing to sex) with women. Some referred to &quot;first&quot; experiences; recounting stories of first kisses or sexual experiences</td>
<td>&quot;Age 7-My Best Friend, Amy, and I Conspire to Kiss: I remember thinking Amy was just the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen face-to-face&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This category referred to women's committed relationships or marriages.</td>
<td>&quot;family: I have been with my partner for 3 years and have known her for 11 years...&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heterosexual Romance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants' romantic and sexual relationships with men</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dating</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was variability in how women discussed their opposite-sex relationships. For some women, the tone of these experiences was positive while for others the tone was neutral or negative.</td>
<td>&quot;Who Really Cares? Being in a series of unhappy heterosexual relationships&quot;</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*<em>Falling in love <em>&quot;</em></em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of falling in love with men</td>
<td>&quot;My interesting condition-falling in love with a man: Huge, life-shaping event&quot;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opposite-sex Marriage</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's marriages to men: most women in this category described heterosexual marriages that occurred before they realized their sexuality.</td>
<td>&quot;Denial: Marrying and having a child because I was sure all I needed was a good man and motherhood to &quot;cure&quot; me.&quot;</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical experiences (ranging from kissing to sex) with men</td>
<td>&quot;I Had Sex With A Boy The first time I had sex was with a man. It was enjoyable&quot;</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No attraction to men ^&quot;</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women explained not feeling attracted to men or not enjoying sex with men</td>
<td>&quot;I am so not into him: that I never felt any satisfaction having sex with men.&quot;</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Participants’ bisexual romantic and sexual relationships. This category also encompasses conflict and experiences specific to bisexual dating.</td>
<td>“Experimentation: dating both sexes and experiencing the differences in those relationships”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual Romance **</td>
<td>People love based on the individual, not based on their gender</td>
<td>“Blind Love: Needing to see love and romance for what it was, instead of whether it was male or female.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderless Love</td>
<td>Women’s stories of breaking up with significant others (men, women, and no sex specified) or being on the receiving end of heartbreak.</td>
<td>“ok so she wasn't the one: even though she broke my heart she gave me the strength to become me again”</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartbreak</td>
<td>Finding love or &quot;the one.&quot; Women did not mention the specific sex of their love.</td>
<td>“the love of my life taking all i have learned and applying it to my life now - amazing”</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All percents are rounded to the nearest whole number. Women may be coded in multiple categories and percents may not sum to 100.

** Chi Square analyses reveal a significant difference at the .01 alpha level for Queer Marriage $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 6.35, p = .01$ and Bisexual Romance, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 13.00, p = .00$.

* Chi Square analyses reveal a significant difference at the .05 alpha level for Falling in Love, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 4.88, p = 0.03$.

^ Chi Square analyses reveal a trend at the .10 alpha level for No Attraction to Men, $\chi^2 (1, N = 111) = 3.08, p =0.08$. 
Table 12.

Distal Environments: theme explanations and analysis by sexual orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
<th>Percent Lesbian</th>
<th>Percent Bisexual</th>
<th>Percent Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activism</td>
<td>Support or belonging as a result of participation in LGBT activism (e.g., participation in Pride parades) or in LGBT communities.</td>
<td>&quot;Self-Assured Activist on the Road to Recovery: The incredible improvement I’ve seen in myself now that I am openly part of the gay community. My new self-acceptance and my still continuing route to recovery.&quot;</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Explicit (e.g., bullying) and implicit (e.g., the invisibility of queer people or issues)</td>
<td>&quot;Fear: How a lack of acceptance lead to threats, violence and terror.&quot;</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudice</td>
<td>Religious teachings were equated with heterosexist beliefs. Some women described how this leads them to reject their gay identities and enter heterosexual marriages or relationships.</td>
<td>&quot;Growing up religious. Always being told it was wrong and I would go to hell for it&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number. Participants may be coded into multiple categories and percents may not sum to 100. Codes in italics are sub-codes and are also captured in the percentage of their parent code.
Figure 1. Image of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model
Appendix A

Sexual Orientation Survey

Please identify which of the following best describes you:

☐ Homosexual

☐ Mostly homosexual

☐ Bisexual

☐ Mostly heterosexual

☐ Heterosexual

Why or why not do you think this adequately describes your orientation?

_________________________________
Appendix B

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS)

For each of the following statements, mark the response that best indicates your experience as a lesbian or bisexual (LB) woman. Please be as honest as possible in your responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I prefer to keep my same-sex romantic relationships rather private.
2. I will never be able to accept my sexual orientation until all of the people in my life have accepted me.
3. I would rather be straight if I could.
4. Coming out to my friends and family has been a very lengthy process.
5. I'm not totally sure what my sexual orientation is.
6. I keep careful control over who knows about my same-sex romantic relationships.
7. I often wonder whether others judge me for my sexual orientation.
8. I am glad to be an LGB person.
9. I look down on heterosexuals.
10. I keep changing my mind about my sexual orientation.
11. My private sexual behavior is nobody's business.
12. I can't feel comfortable knowing that others judge me negatively for my sexual orientation.
13. Homosexual lifestyles are not as fulfilling as heterosexual lifestyles.
14. Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very painful process.
15. If you are not careful about whom you come out to, you can get very hurt.
16. Being an LGB person makes me feel insecure around straight people.
17. I'm proud to be part of the LGB community.
18. Developing as an LGB person has been a fairly natural process for me.
19. I can't decide whether I am bisexual or homosexual.
20. I think very carefully before coming out to someone.
21. I think a lot about how my sexual orientation affects the way people see me.
22. Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very slow process.
23. Straight people have boring lives compared with LGB people.
24. My sexual orientation is a very personal and private matter.
25. I wish I were heterosexual.
26. I get very confused when I try to figure out my sexual orientation.
27. I have felt comfortable with my sexual identity just about from the start.
Appendix C

Outness Inventory

Use the following rating scale to indicate how open you are about your sexual orientation to the people listed below. Try to respond to all of the items, but leave items blank if they do not apply to you.

1 = person definitely does NOT know about your sexual orientation status
2 = person might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is NEVER talked about
3 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is NEVER talked about
4 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is RARELY talked about
5 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is RARELY talked about
6 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is SOMETIMES talked about
7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is OPENLY talked about
N/A = not applicable to your situation; there is no such person or group of people in your life

1. Mother
2. Father
3. Siblings (sisters/ brothers)
4. Extended family (relatives)
5. My New straight friends
6. My Work peers
7. My Work supervisor
8. Members of my religious community (e.g. church, temple)
9. Leaders of my religious community (e.g. church, temple)
10. Strangers, new acquaintances
11. My old heterosexual friends
Appendix D

Quality Of Life Scale (QOL)

Please read each item and indicate how satisfied you are at this time on a scale of 1(Terrible)--7 (Delighted). Please answer each item even if you do not currently participate in an activity or have a relationship. You can be satisfied or dissatisfied with not doing the activity or having the relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrible</th>
<th>Mostly unhappy</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Mostly pleased</th>
<th>Delighted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Material comforts home, food, conveniences, financial security
2. Health - being physically fit and vigorous
3. Relationships with parents, siblings & other relatives- communicating, visiting, helping
4. Having and rearing children
5. Close relationships with spouse or significant other
6. Close friends
7. Helping and encouraging others, volunteering, giving advice
8. Participating in organizations and public affairs
9. Learning- attending school, improving understanding, getting additional knowledge.
10. Understanding yourself - knowing your assets and limitations - knowing what life is about
11. Work - job or in home
12. Expressing yourself creatively
13. Socializing - meeting other people, doing things, parties, etc.
14. Reading, listening to music, or observing entertainment
15. Participating in active recreation
16. Independence, doing for yourself
Appendix E

Lesbian Culture Scale

Please use the following scale to indicate how much you agree with the following statements. Circle your response.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly
Disagree Agree

1. When I was growing up, I was exposed to lesbian culture.
2. Now, I am exposed to lesbian culture.
3. Compared to how much I negatively criticize other cultures, I criticize lesbian culture less.
4. I am embarrassed/ashamed of lesbian culture.
5. I am proud of lesbian culture.
6. Lesbian culture has had a positive impact on my life.
7. I go to places where people are lesbian.
8. I am familiar with lesbian cultural practices and customs.
9. I relate to my partner or spouse in a way that is lesbian.
10. I admire people who are lesbian.
11. I would prefer to live in a lesbian community.
12. I listen to lesbian music.
13. I engage in lesbian activism.
15. When I was a child, my friends were lesbian.
16. Now, my friends are lesbian.
17. I wish to be accepted by lesbians.
18. The people I date are lesbian.
19. Overall, I am lesbian.
Appendix F

Bisexual Culture Scale

Please use the following scale to indicate how much you agree with the following statements. Circle your response.

1-------------2---------------3-----------------4--------------5

Strongly ------Disagree -----Neutral -----Agree ------ Strongly

Disagree Agree

1. When I was growing up, I was exposed to bisexual culture.
2. Now, I am exposed to bisexual culture.
3. Compared to how much I negatively criticize other cultures,
4. I criticize bisexual culture less.
5. I am embarrassed/ ashamed of bisexual culture.
6. I am proud of bisexual culture.
7. Bisexual culture has had a positive impact on my life.
8. I go to places where people are bisexual.
9. I am familiar with bisexual cultural practices and customs.
10. I relate to my partner or spouse in a way that is bisexual.
11. I admire people who are bisexual.
12. I would prefer to live in a bisexual community.
13. I listen to bisexual music.
15. I celebrate bisexual holidays.
16. When I was a child, my friends were bisexual.
17. Now, my friends are bisexual.
18. I wish to be accepted by bissexuals.
19. The people I date are bisexual.
20. Overall, I am bisexual.
Appendix G

Cultural Identity Scale

We would like to ask you about your cultural identity, that is, the culture(s) you feel you belong to, the culture(s) you share your beliefs and values with. Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the statements below by indicating the appropriate number. Please rate ALL statements!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I feel Lesbian
2. I feel Heterosexual
3. I feel Bisexual
Appendix H

Demographics Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your sex? (Circle one) male/female/other
2. Are you transgender (circle one) yes/no
3. What is your current relationship status? (please check one)
   4. Single
   5. Dating Casually
   6. (Indicate one) women/ men/ both
   7. Dating only one person
   8. (Indicate one) woman/ man
   9. Married/ domestic partnership/ civil union
   10. (Indicate one) woman/ man
11. If dating one person or married, how long have you been together?_______ months/years
12. How old are you? _______ Years old
13. Are you a US citizen/ permanent resident? (circle one) yes/no
14. Which US state are you from? [drop down menu]
15. What is the total annual income of your family (or parents’ income if dependent)? $________
16. What is the highest level of education you have obtained? (Circle one)
   i. Some High School  High School Diploma/GED  Bachelor’s Degree
   Graduate School
17. Are you currently employed? Yes /No
   a. 7a. If you answered “Yes,” what field are you employed in?

18. Are you currently in school at least part time? (Circle one) Yes  No
19. If you answered “Yes” what are you studying? ___________________