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WHAT WE GOT WRONG ABOUT SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: UNEXPECTED FINDINGS FROM A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF YOUNG WOMEN

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The process by which individuals with same-sex attractions (here denoted *sexual minorities*) come to conceive and present themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual has received extensive attention by social scientists over the past 30 years. This process, commonly called *sexual identity development*, has been a topic of particular interest with respect to sexual-minority youths. This body of research has given rise to a generalized portrait of sexual-minority development that is widely disseminated not only in social scientific journals but in publications geared toward psychotherapists, social workers, physicians, educators, and parents (e.g., Barber & Mobley, 1999; Fairchild & Hayward, 1979; Hollander, 2000; Meyer & Schwitzer, 1999; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). The stated aim of many of these publications is to raise awareness of the basic developmental process of sexual identity formation so that supportive adults can better facilitate this process among youths wrestling with nascent same-sex attractions.

There is only one problem: Much of this information is incomplete or inaccurate. The generalized models of sexual identity development that are most familiar to social scientists and laypeople alike (reviewed in Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Sophie, 1986) are based on retrospective data from a highly selected subset of the sexual-minority population: typically, openly identified gay men who are exclusively attracted to the same sex. Correspondingly, the information on identity development that eventually trickles down to youths, parents, educators, and media outlets paints a fairly uniform, overly simplistic portrait of this process that does not apply to all youths. To effectively promote the health and well-being of sexual-minority youths and adults, social scientists must collect and disseminate information that more accurately represents how sexual identity development is actually experienced rather than recollected.

Toward this end, I present data from an ongoing longitudinal study of sexual identity development among 89 young sexual-minority women. These women's experiences, tracked in four waves of data collection spanning an 8-year period, highlight several salient "mistakes" we have made in previous conceptualizations of sexual identity development. The first mistake has to do with *characteristics* of sexual minorities themselves; specifically, it concerns the supposition that most sexual minorities are exclusively attracted to the same sex and that individuals with nonexclusive attractions are "special cases." The second mistake has to do with the *process* of identity development; specifically, it involves the supposition that sexual questioning (the private reckoning with same-sex attractions that sets the whole process of sexual identity development in motion) is a one-time-only event that is never revisited once an individual settles on a sexual-minority identity. The third mistake has to do with the *outcome* of identity development; specifically, it concerns the supposition that adopting a lesbian, gay, or bisexual label is the uniform and uniformly healthful outcome of the sexual questioning process.

This is not to say that these suppositions are uniformly wrong—certainly, they provide apt descriptions of some sexual minorities, some of the time. The problem is that they have been vastly overgeneralized, precluding investigation of alternative developmental trajectories. I am certainly not the first to argue for more complex and differentiated conceptualizations of sexual identity development (e.g., see Cass, 1990; Golden, 1987), but in this chapter I bring more data to bear on this argument than has previously been possible. Although these data provide a valuable starting point for revising and expanding current conceptualizations of sexual identity development, they have important limitations that must be noted. Most important, this study focuses only on women, leaving open the possibility that traditional sexual identity models are not fundamentally flawed, but rather gender-specific. Although there is some data in support of this possibility

(Diamond, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000), there is also growing evidence that conventional sexual identity models oversimplify this process for both genders (Savin-Williams, 1998; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994; Whisman, 1996). Future longitudinal research on male sexual-minority youths is needed to resolve this issue. Another limitation of the current study is that the respondents are predominantly White and middle class; longitudinal investigation of a more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of sexual minorities is clearly needed to discern how their unique sociocultural contexts shape their long-term identity development.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Historically, efforts to study sexual identity development have been hampered by a number of methodological shortcomings: the underrepresentation of women, the underrepresentation of bisexual people, the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities, and the complete nonrepresentation of sexual-minority youths who decline to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. An even more important methodological problem is the long-standing reliance on retrospective data, which (by default) defines the outcome of sexual identity development to be whatever identity an individual claims when he or she happens to be surveyed. Thus, the small number of studies that have examined changes in sexual attractions or identity longitudinally have made critical contributions to our understanding of sexual identity development (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Pattatucci & Hamer, 1995; Stokes, Damon, & McKirnan, 1997; Stokes, McKirnan, & Burzette, 1993; Weinberg et al., 1994). For example, Weinberg and colleagues (1994) collected 5-year follow-up data on a small sample of women (n = 27) and men (n = 28) recruited through a San Francisco bisexual organization in the early 1980s, nearly all of whom were over 30 years old. They found that approximately two thirds of their respondents reported changes in their self-reported ratio of same-sex to other-sex attractions over the 5-year assessment period, and 85% reported changes in their ratio of same-sex to other-sex sexual behavior. However, because longitudinal assessments were collected from only bisexual men and women, comparisons cannot be drawn between changes experienced by lesbian and bisexual women.

Pattatucci and Hamer (1995) collected 18-month follow-up data from 175 lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women recruited from lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) organizations. This study had a shorter time frame than that of Weinberg and colleagues (1994) but is distinguished by its larger and more diverse sample. The authors averaged respondents' ratings of sexual attraction, fantasy, behavior, and self-identification at each assessment, thereby precluding investigation into whether changes in different

domains corresponded with one another. Using these averaged ratings, they found fairly little change over the 18-month assessment period, in contrast to the findings of Weinberg and colleagues: Approximately 80% of their sample maintained the same rating, and those that changed ratings did not change them drastically. Stokes and his colleagues (Stokes et al., 1993, 1997) collected 1-year follow-up data from a sample of 216 sexual-minority men recruited through LGB community activities, print advertising, and snowball sampling. This study included significantly more ethnic-minority participants than the other studies—specifically, 50% of their respondents were African American—but like Weinberg and colleagues' study, it included only bisexuals (and only bisexual men, at that). Overall, they found that approximately 50% of their respondents reported some change in their sexual attractions over the 1-year assessment period, with two thirds of these individuals reporting having become more attracted to the same sex.

Clearly, these studies provide important empirical counterpoints to traditional sexual identity models by demonstrating that sexuality continues to evolve even after "coming out." Yet each was conducted with adults who self-identified as sexual minorities in the 1970s and 1980s and who had traversed the critical processes of sexual identity development years or even decades earlier. Thus, they provide little information about how sexual identity development unfolds among contemporary youths who are still in the throes of this process. The data presented here provide some of this missing information. I begin with a brief overview of the methods and procedures of the current study and then combine abbreviated reviews of each "mistake" with corresponding analyses.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

For the first wave of data collection in this study, I interviewed 89 nonheterosexual women between the ages of 16 and 23 (Diamond, 1998). Of these 89 women, 42% identified as lesbian and 30% as bisexual, and 28% declined to adopt a sexual identity label. The mean and median age of the participants was 19, and there were no significant age differences across sexual identity categories. I reinterviewed respondents over the phone three times, approximately every 2 to 3 years. Thus, the T2, T3, and T4 interviews represent 2-year, 5-year, and 8-year follow-ups, respectively. Four lesbians, one bisexual woman, and four *unlabeled* participants could not be relocated at T2. At T3, an additional three lesbians and one bisexual woman could not be located, but the four unlabeled women who had been missing at T2 were successfully recontacted. Two respondents could not be recontacted between T3 and T4 (one had identified as unlabeled and the other as bisexual at T1). One T1 lesbian who had been lost between T2 and T3

was successfully recontacted for T4. Thus, the final T4 sample size was 79, comprising 89% of the original respondents. None of the women who were recontacted declined to be reinterviewed.

Initial sampling took place in two moderately sized cities and a number of smaller urban and rural communities in central New York State. The settings that were sampled included (a) LGB community events (e.g., picnics, parades, social events) and youth groups, (b) classes on gender and sexuality issues taught at a large university with a moderately ethnically diverse—but largely middle-class—student population, and (c) LGB student groups at a large public university with a predominantly White but more socioeconomically diverse population and a small private women's college with a predominantly White and middle-class student population. This recruitment strategy succeeded in sampling sizable numbers of bisexual women as well as nonheterosexual women who declined to label their sexual identity, both groups that are underrepresented in most research on sexual minorities. However, the sample shares a chronic drawback with other samples of sexual minorities in that it comprises predominantly White, highly educated, middle- to upper-class individuals. Nearly all of the college-age participants had enrolled in college at one point, and 75% came from families in which at least one parent had completed college. Sixty-three percent of women came from families in which at least one parent had a professional or technical occupation, and 84% were White.

Detailed information regarding interview procedures and questions can be found in previously published reports on this sample (Diamond, 1998, 2000b, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). Briefly, at each of the three interviews women were asked to describe their current sexual identity, to recall the process by which they first questioned their sexuality, and to recount any changes they had recently undergone regarding their experience or conceptualization of their sexuality. To assess their same-sex attractions, women were asked to report the percentage of their current attractions that were directed toward the same sex on a day-to-day basis; separate estimates were provided for sexual versus romantic–affectional attractions. This yields an estimate of the relative frequency of same-sex versus other-sex attractions, regardless of the intensity of these attractions or the total number of sexual attractions experienced on a day-to-day basis. At T2, T3, and T4, participants also indicated the number of men and women with whom they had engaged in sexual contact (defined as any sexually motivated intimate contact) since the preceding interview, as well as the number of men and women with whom they had had romantic relationships. At T3, women completed questionnaires measuring neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1985), trait levels of positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), and endorsement of positive versus negative schemas about sexuality (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994).

Mistake 1: Most Sexual-Minority Women Are Exclusively Attracted to Women

Perhaps the most significant failing of existing models of sexual identity development is that they focus exclusively on lesbian and gay male development, ignoring bisexuality altogether. In fact, most publications on sexual identity development do not even mention the word *bisexual* in the title (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Gramick, 1984; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Joseph, Adib, Joseph, & Tal, 1991; Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995; Schneider, 1991; Troiden, 1979, 1988; Wooden, Kawasaki, & Mayeda, 1983; Zera, 1992). To some extent, this is a historical problem. With a few notable exceptions (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Dixon, 1984), it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that bisexuality began to receive significant research attention by social scientists studying sexual orientation (Fox, 1993, 1995; George, 1993; Klein, 1993; Nichols, 1988; Paul, 1985; Rust, 1993; Shuster, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1994).

Yet even now, many studies of sexual minorities continue to exclude bisexual individuals. Sometimes this is done for practical reasons. In many samples, there are too few openly identified bisexual men and women to permit substantive comparisons with openly identified lesbians or gay men, and therefore they are excluded to simplify data analysis and interpretation. In other cases, bisexual men and women are excluded to preserve conceptual clarity (reviewed in Rust, 1993, 2000). After all, some bisexual men and women might be closeted lesbians or gay men who have not yet accepted their sexual orientation, or perhaps confused heterosexual men and women. Either way, the inclusion of such individuals might distort otherwise straightforward comparisons between lesbian or gay and heterosexual men and women. Of course, the possibility that openly identified lesbians and gay men might actually be closeted or confused bisexual individuals is rarely considered, reflecting the widespread assumption that in matters of sexual orientation, exclusive same-sex attractions are the norm and nonexclusive attractions the exception.

We now know that this is not the case: Recent representative studies of American adults (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and adolescents (French, Story, Remafedi, Resnick, & Blum, 1996; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, & Goodman, 1999) have found that individuals with nonexclusive attractions outnumber those with exclusive same-sex attractions, especially among women. This does not mean that most sexual-minority individuals experience same-sex and other-sex attractions with equal frequency or intensity; rather, most appear to gravitate toward one sex or the other (Diamond, 1998; Rust, 1992, 1993; Weinberg et al., 1994). The critical point is that the coexistence of same-sex and other-sex attractions is a normative rather than exceptional feature of the sexual-minority

life course, and sexual identity models that ignore the push and pull between these attractions provide only a partial perspective on this process.

The results of the current study further illustrate this fact. Among the women who identified as lesbian at T1, 70% acknowledged attractions to both sexes at that time, despite their predominant interest in women. By the fourth interview, all of the T1 lesbians acknowledged occasional attractions to men. Thus, consistent with studies cited earlier, nonexclusive attractions were the norm rather than the exception among these young women. A similar pattern emerged for sexual behavior: Nearly two thirds of the T1 lesbians ended up having sexual contact with at least one man in the ensuing 8 years.

Thus, whereas researchers and laypeople have long wondered whether bisexually identified individuals were "really" lesbian or gay, one might rather argue that many lesbian-identified individuals are "really" bisexual. In fact, a number of lesbians in the current study explicitly acknowledged this fact, noting that although they were "technically" bisexual, they maintained a flexible definition of lesbianism that accommodated periodic other-sex attractions and behaviors, especially if they were "just sex." As one woman said, "I've had physical relations with men, but no other types of relationships. Just random, stupid things, no emotional ties. . . . men are just a lot easier to obtain than women are." Another noted that having sexual contact with men "didn't make me think that I wasn't a normal lesbian or anything. . . . At this point in my life, it's not about sexual intimacy as much as it is about being in a committed relationship, and I just don't think that I would want one with a man. And that's a more important criteria for me in terms of identifying as a lesbian, than just having a sexual thing."

Thus, whereas traditional sexual identity models presume that the main "work" of sexual identity development involves acknowledging and accepting same-sex attractions, these findings show that reconciling, reconsidering, or rediscovering other-sex attractions is a common and important part of long-term identity maintenance that may have important developmental implications. For example, Weinberg and colleagues' (1994) longitudinal study of bisexual adults found that nonexclusive attractions prompted many individuals to periodically reconsider the fit between their identity label and their subjective sexual experience as they moved through different environments and relationships over time. This was certainly true of the present sample: Among respondents who experienced at least 95% of their day-to-day attractions to women (averaged across the four assessments), approximately one sixth changed their identity label over the 8 years of the study. In contrast, three fourths of respondents reporting that 50% or fewer of their day-to-day attractions were to women ended up changing their identity labels over time. Clearly, to effectively model the developmental

significance of nonexclusive attractions, we must actively recruit women with such attractions into our research samples and systematically explore what their experiences have to teach us about long-term processes of identity development.

Mistake 2: Sexual Questioning Ends Once You Identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual

Classic stage models of sexual identity development typically posit a clear-cut beginning, middle, and definitive end to this process (Sophie, 1986). It is generally presumed that although delays and perturbations might pockmark the journey, individuals move inexorably from initial confusion about their sexuality toward eventual certainty and consolidation, especially those with supportive friends and family members, frequent contact with other sexual-minority individuals, and successful same-sex intimate relationships (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). Yet this is not always the case. Rather, some individuals (particularly women) revisit the process of sexual questioning many years after first adopting their sexual-minority identity, typically because they find that the identity they initially adopted does not accord with their current attractions or relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Golden, 1996; Rust, 1992; Weinberg et al., 1994).

Overall, this phenomenon has received little substantive attention because it has been viewed the same way that bisexuality has been viewed: as exceptional rather than normative. Furthermore, because individuals are highly motivated to construct coherent and consistent life histories (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Cass, 1990), those who periodically requestion their sexual identities are likely to edit out these experiences from the retrospective identity narratives they tell to researchers, or to dismiss them as artifacts of protracted denial of their true sexual orientation (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977). The longitudinal data presented here therefore provide an indispensable perspective on how frequently individuals requestion their sexual identities and how they experience this process at the time it occurs.

Directly contrary to the notion that sexual questioning wraps up after an individual adopts a sexual-minority identity, 70% of the women in the current sample ended up changing their identity label at least one more time after first coming out (as a basis for comparison, Rust's 1993 retrospective study found that 75% of the bisexual respondents reported having once identified as lesbian, and over 40% of the lesbian respondents reported having once identified as bisexual). Approximately one sixth of these changes took place prior to the first interview, and these pre-T1 transitions typically involved women switching from bisexual to lesbian labels as they achieved greater comfort and awareness regarding the strength and predominance of

their same-sex attractions, just as traditional sexual identity models would predict.

Yet the vast majority of identity changes took place after the T1 interview, and these transitions appeared to be a different type of phenomenon altogether. For example, whereas transitions to lesbian labels were the most common type of identity change undertaken prior to the T1 interview, they were the least common after this point. Of the 73 transitions that occurred (note that some women underwent more than one), 19% involved switching to a lesbian label, 23% involved switching to bisexual, 21% involved switching to heterosexual, and 37% involved switching to unlabeled, an altogether unexpected phenomenon discussed in more detail later in this chapter (as well as in Diamond, 2003a).

As noted earlier, women with more nonexclusive attractions were more likely to undergo post-T1 identity transitions. This makes sense when one considers that women with nonexclusive attractions must resolve a broader and more complex set of questions in selecting an appropriate identity label than do women with more exclusive attractions. Specifically, acknowledging same-sex attractions is only the first step. To settle on a lesbian or bisexual label they must consider exactly how strongly they lean toward women versus men; whether sexual and emotional feelings are equally important; whether behavior trumps fantasy or vice versa. Many women described having become increasingly aware of how arbitrary and subjective such decisions are, and the extent to which any label they chose could provide only a partial representation of their overall sexuality. As one woman noted, "My full life experience and even my daily experience isn't encompassed by any one label anymore."

For some women, reconsideration of the relative strength of their attractions to women versus men prompted them to reevaluate the overall role of sexual attractions in their sexual identity to begin with, in comparison with other factors such as emotional bonds, specific relationships, social networks, and ideological beliefs. As one woman noted regarding her sexual identity,

> In the past couple of years I've become very comfortable with the fact that there are some men that I will be attracted to, but that any long-term emotional, sexual commitment will be to a woman. I felt comfortable saying to myself "I feel like I'm a lesbian intellectually, but it's okay that I'm still attracted to men physically."

Similarly, another respondent reported that although her attractions to women had substantially dissipated over the years, she maintained a bisexual identity partly out of disdain for mainstream heterosexual culture: "I've kind of straightened out! I still call myself bisexual but I'm on the edge of

heterosexual, which I'm not pleased about. I mean, straight culture—yuck, bad!"

For many women, the process of requestioning their identities had led them to conclude that their emotional feelings were more important criteria for sexual identification than their sexual attractions. Perhaps for this reason, the small number of T1 lesbians who had full-fledged love affairs with men (n = 10) had greater difficulty reconciling these relationships with their lesbian identities than those who had only casual sexual affairs with men. This was the case for one woman who unexpectedly fell in love with a close male friend.

> Overall, people have been supportive, but I've definitely seen some nastiness because of it. One lesbian I know, she said that it was just a phase, that I was misguided, that she didn't want him in her house. It made me angry, it made me cry, it made me question—I mean, these were the same types of things I heard from straight people when I first came out about having relationships with *women*.

Given such difficulties, it is perhaps not surprising that none of the T1 lesbians who became romantically involved with a man maintained her lesbian identity; six stopped labeling altogether, and four started identifying as bisexual. In contrast, 40% of the lesbians who had engaged in "just sexual" contact with men continued to identify as lesbians.

Thus, whereas researchers have historically described sexual identity development as concluding when individuals come out and claim a sexual-minority identity, these data indicate that for many women—especially those with nonexclusive attractions—coming out may be just the beginning of a longer series of ongoing reevaluations and realignments. Future research is necessary to further investigate the multiple psychological, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors that trigger requestioning and shape its resolution in different contexts and at different stages of life.

Mistake 3: It's Better to Have a Sexual Identity Label Than Not To

Whereas the second mistake concerns the process of resolving one's sexual identity, the third mistake concerns the content of that resolution: a clear-cut lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. All existing sexual identity models posit a final stage involving the synthesis, resolution, integration, or consolidation of a clearly defined lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981/1982; Lee, 1977; Minton & McDonald, 1983; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Troiden, 1979), and this final stage is presumed to be critical for future healthy development. Ambivalence or uncertainty about claiming a lesbian, gay, or bisexual label is typically taken as a sign that the individual continues to experience internalized homophobia and self-stigmatization.

The mental health benefits of adopting a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity have been demonstrated in research showing that stable and well-integrated LGB identities are associated with greater ego strength, self-esteem, general adjustment, and overall well-being (Brady & Busse, 1994; Levine, 1997; Miranda & Storms, 1989; Walters & Simoni, 1983; Wells & Kline, 1987). Yet much of this research has failed to tease out whether such benefits are attributable to the acceptance and integration of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity or to the acceptance and integration of one's same-sex sexuality, labeled or not. For example, one of the items that Mohr and Fassinger (2000) used to measure identity synthesis among lesbians was "I am at the point where I feel a deep contentment about my love for other women." Mohr and Fassinger implicitly suggested that any woman agreeing with this statement would identify as lesbian or bisexual, yet the present research shows that this is not necessarily the case.

Contrary to the notion that increasing certainty and self-acceptance of same-sex attractions lead inexorably to stable and clearly articulated sexual-minority identities, many of the women in the current sample reported that the more comfortable they became with their attractions over the years, the more they doubted the value and appropriateness of adopting a fixed lesbian or bisexual label. Of the women who were unlabeled at T1, over one third continued to resist labeling their identities 8 years later. Furthermore, as noted earlier, 37% of the identity transitions that were observed over the 8 years of the study involved giving up sexual-minority identities in favor of unlabeled identities. Traditional identity models would characterize these transitions as representing stunted, stalled, or retrograde development, perhaps attributable to shame, social pressure, or denial. Yet rather than displaying stunted development, the explanations these women provided for their reluctance to adopt sexual-minority identity labels typically displayed a sophisticated understanding of the inherent limitations of sexual categorization.

> The reason why I haven't labeled myself is because I feel like I'm putting myself in a box. I don't want to close off any possibilities. I'm with a woman now but I'm not sure about what will happen in the future and that's okay. I feel that whatever decisions I make will be fine.
>
> I think these days I'm much more comfortable just allowing myself to feel whatever I feel. Growing up, there was society around me telling me to date boys, or whatever, and then I came out as a lesbian and there was an equal pressure to date women. Now I am mainly going through life and seeing who I meet, and I'm much less panicked about the whole thing. Whatever I feel is all right, you know?

Further evidence for the fact that such women are just as psychologically healthy as openly identified lesbians and bisexual women comes from the fact that T4 unlabeled women were no different from T4 lesbians or

bisexuals with regard to neuroticism, trait levels of positive and negative affect, and endorsement of positive versus negative schemas about sexuality (all of which were measured at T3). Clearly, traditional sexual identity models may have erred in placing so much emphasis on the adoption of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity rather than focusing on the multiple ways in which individuals might manifest a deep acceptance and integration of their same-sex sexuality.

One might go even further to suggest that given the prevalence of fluid and nonexclusive attractions among women, rejection or skepticism of categorical identity labels is a sign of psychological health and self-confidence rather than maladjustment and denial. In a recent (and rare) discussion of the increasing numbers of sexual-minority youths who describe themselves as "questioning" rather than lesbian, gay, or bisexual, Hollander (2000) noted that many of these youths are not, in fact, engaged in a protracted process of sexual questioning at all. Rather, they openly reject the classification of sexuality into heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual categories, and call themselves "questioning" to acknowledge the vast possibilities they perceive for their sexual attractions and behaviors.

The same phenomenon was detected in the current sample. Numerous respondents—even those who maintained a lesbian or bisexual identity—denounced the implicit restrictions entailed by identity labels. As one woman noted, "I hate boxes. Hate them, hate them. And I hate this whole dichotomy paradigm that our society tends to revolve around. It's black, it's white, it's male, it's female, it's straight, it's gay, whatever. None of those fits." Another woman remarked as follows:

> I don't know, I personally don't like the whole label thing. I guess because I feel that you just never know how someone will affect you, and I just never know who my soul mate is going to be. I feel like for a great majority of people, sexuality is very fluid. There are definitely people who are just one way, like either lesbian or straight, but most people flow in the middle.

Many respondents indicated that they had trouble labeling their sexuality because their sexual desires did not consistently revolve around one gender versus the other but, rather, depended on the specific personalities and attributes of specific individuals. As one woman noted, "Labels don't really matter because when I'm falling in love or whatever, I'm falling in love with the person's soul, and packaging is incidental." Another woman claimed, "I don't label because I'm not attracted to either sex until I get to know the person, and there's no label that reflects that." Similar claims were made by many respondents in Weinberg and colleagues' (1994)

study, and they described these respondents as possessing "open gender schemas" when it came to sexuality. In other words, these individuals (most of whom, notably, were women) appeared to have cognitively disconnected *gender* from *sexual desire*. The cues to which they responded sexually were fairly broad, and highly responsive to environmental and interpersonal contexts.

Along the same lines, one pattern that proved distinctive among women who relinquished their identity labels between T1 and T4, or who had never adopted a label to begin with, concerned gaps between their emotional and physical attractions. Of course, most traditional conceptualizations of sexual orientation presume that emotional and physical attractions are always concordant, such that individuals always fall in love with whatever gender they find sexually attractive. Yet not only is there little scientific data to suggest whether and why this might be so (Diamond, 2003b) but this notion directly contradicts the experiences of many women in this sample. One woman who was unlabeled at all three interviews indicated that the gap between her emotional and physical feelings left her questioning all of her attractions.

> I guess the reason that I don't want to label is that I don't necessarily know why I'm sexually attracted to *anyone* anymore. I no longer believe what I used to think. I used to think that you fell in love with the person, and then you would be sexually attracted. I kind of always thought that I could be with women because I did find women attractive, and it seems like I love some of my female friends so much, but now I realize there's something there that I don't understand that makes it so that the friends I become sexually attracted to happen to be men, and I don't know why that is, and why it's not true with my best female friends.

Exploratory analyses were conducted to test whether women who gave up their identity labels between T1 and T4, or who had been unlabeled at all four interviews, experienced disproportionately large discrepancies between their day-to-day physical and emotional same-sex attractions (recall that these attractions were assessed as ratios of same-sex to other-sex attractions). Absolute differences between each woman's 8-year average for each type of attraction were calculated, and these difference scores served as an index of whether women found themselves falling in love with women to the same degree that they found themselves sexually attracted to women. Compared with respondents who identified as lesbian or bisexual at T4, the unlabeled women reported significantly greater absolute gaps between their percentage of physical versus emotional same-sex attractions ($M_{labeled}$ = 11.5, SD = 9.7 vs. $M_{unlabeled}$ = 18.0, SD = 7.5), $t(78) = 3.4$, $p = .001$.

This finding demonstrates that the overall fit between a woman's physical and emotional feelings for women and men is a key piece of evidence she might use to assess her sexual identity. As one woman said, quite straightforwardly, during her second interview,

> Sometimes I worry that I will never settle down with anyone, because the way I feel about guys is mainly sexual, and the way I feel about women is mainly emotional. So I'm always going between the two, and I don't know *what* to call that, you know?

Yet traditional sexual identity models make no accommodation for this sort of quandary. According to the traditional paradigm, women claiming discrepancies between their emotional and physical attractions are either confused heterosexuals or repressed lesbians.

This interpretation does not do justice to the complexity of such experiences. In fact, what is particularly compelling about the current sample's descriptions of change in attractions and identities is how infrequently they disavow previous feelings, relationships, or identities as false or misguided. Rather, women who underwent major shifts in how they conceptualized their sexuality generally acknowledged that feelings and experiences that were authentic, compelling, and transformative in one context might not be so in another. As one woman noted, "Your core sexuality probably stays the same, but if the moment that you're living in is strong enough for you, then that's your sexuality at that moment." An important implication of this perspective is that although early coming-out experiences can be ably documented with single-shot retrospective assessments, longitudinal observation is indispensable for investigating how individuals' sexual identities undergo ongoing development and elaboration as they move through different moments, contexts, and relationships at different stages of life. In other words, perhaps it is not so much that we have been wrong about sexual identity development for the past 20 years, but that we were never really observing it to begin with.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Now that we have identified our previous missteps, the task of fixing them remains. Toward this end, some of the most straightforward goals for future research involve (a) paying greater attention to nonexclusive attractions, (b) assessing sexual identity development over longer periods of time, and (c) acknowledging the legitimacy of unlabeled identities. Yet although such changes will surely foster a more thorough and nuanced understanding of sexual identity development, they may not be enough.

Rather, a more substantive overhaul of theory and research on sexual identity and same-sex sexuality is in order, one that supplants the traditional emphasis on sexual categories with an emphasis on investigating how specific person–context interactions shape diverse manifestations of same-sex sexuality over the life course.

This is by no means a novel proposal (see Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990; Cass, 1990; DeCecco & Shively, 1984; Gagnon, 1990; Golden, 1987; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Kitzinger, 1987; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985; Laumann et al., 1994; Rich, 1980; Weinberg et al., 1994), but so far, such recommendations have not generally trickled down to influence mainstream research practice. Consequently, although powerful critiques of rigid sexual classifications regularly appear in the social scientific literature (most recently in Blackwood, 2000; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Rothblum, 2000; Rust, 2000), it is still the case that the first piece of information reported in most empirical studies of same-sex sexuality is how many "gays" and "straights" there were in the sample. Furthermore, as Rothblum (2000) noted, although Kinsey's famous 0 to 6 scale (Kinsey et al., 1948; Kirby et al., 1994) provides for continuous rather than categorical representations of sexual desire, identity, and behavior, many researchers turn these continua right back into categories by designating certain scale ranges (0–1 = *heterosexual*; 2–4 = *bisexual*; 5–6 = *lesbian/gay*).

I therefore conclude with several specific recommendations for how researchers might change the way we investigate sexual identity and same-sex sexuality. First (and most obvious), we must make concerted efforts to sample individuals with nonexclusive attractions and behaviors—especially those who decline to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual—and all research materials should be carefully edited to avoid presumptions of sexual-minority identification. Second, when describing sexual minorities, we should only use the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* to denote individuals' self-ascribed sexual identities, and not to denote categories of sexual orientation.

Third, sexual identity researchers should consider setting aside discussions of sexual orientation altogether in favor of describing *same-sex sexuality*, a broader phenomenon including everything from fleeting sexual fantasies, enduring sexual attractions, temporary sexual experimentation, and "romantic" friendships to full-fledged sexual and romantic affairs. When we wish to distinguish between individuals with exclusive versus nonexclusive same-sex attractions, or those who have had same-sex sexual contact once versus many times, or those with strong versus weak other-sex attractions, or those whose sexual feelings are concordant or discordant with their romantic feelings, then these are precisely the types of specific and circumscribed descriptions we should use. In this manner, researchers can avoid erroneously

suggesting that same-sex sexual attractions, romantic feelings, fantasies, sexual behavior, and romantic relationships always cluster together in convenient homosexual and heterosexual packages.

Furthermore, focusing on specific aspects and instances of same-sex sexuality frees us from the futile (and perhaps impossible) task of differentiating between individuals who are "really" gay and those who are supposedly "confused," "experimenting," and so forth. Although some would argue that investigations of same-sex sexuality should focus on only the former group, I maintain that we cannot fully understand the nature and development of same-sex sexuality unless we understand all of its origins and manifestations. It is important to note that this does not imply that there is no such thing as sexual orientation or that it is not a worthy topic of study in its own right. To the contrary, extant research (ranging from the seminal work of Kinsey and his colleagues to more recent and methodologically sophisticated studies, such as Gangestad, Bailey, & Martin, 2000; Laumann et al., 1994) suggests that it is meaningful to distinguish between individuals who are generally more sexually attracted to the same sex, the other sex, or both sexes. Yet until we know more about the nature, origins, and stability of these distinctions, we should avoid implicitly reifying them with our terminology. After all, these distinctions might not be the most important ones: Weinberg and colleagues (1994) suggested, for example, that "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" may actually have far more in common with each other than either group shares with individuals whose sexuality revolves around the person and not the gender. Until we have substantively investigated such possibilities, we should reserve sexual identity labels for just that: sexual identities.

Finally, we must revise our conceptualization and operationalization of sexual identity itself. Traditionally, sexual identity has been defined as a personal understanding and social presentation of the "truth" of one's sexual orientation. According to this framework, sexual identity development amounts to simply matching one's identity to one's orientation, and subsequent changes in identification are interpretable only as movements toward or away from this idealized, one-to-one match. Clearly, many of the identity changes observed in the current study do not fit this conceptualization. Rather, women's reidentifications typically reflected careful consideration of the personal meaning of specific identities in specific interpersonal and social contexts (for other excellent discussions and examples of such processes, see Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rust, 1992, 1993, 2000).

Thus, a more appropriate operational definition of sexual identity is that proposed by Weinberg and colleagues (1994): "the choice of a particular perspective from which to make sense of one's sexual feelings and behaviors" (p. 292). This definition makes no presumption about "authentic" identities or "true" orientations but allows for multiple, culture-bound, context-specific

solutions to the ever-present "problem" posed by nonnormative attractions and behaviors. One of the strengths of this notion of sexual identity is its implicit acknowledgment that the same solution might not be equally healthful or adaptive for all individuals. Thus, one person might avoid labeling his or her sexual identity solely to avoid social rejection; another might do so as an affirmation of sexual fluidity; yet another might do so because Western sexual identity labels have little meaning in his or her own cultural tradition.

This operationalization of sexual identity necessitates a far different approach to studying sexual identity development than has characterized most prior research. Instead of snapshot assessments of the degree to which sexual minorities acknowledge, accept, and disclose their same-sex attractions, we require in-depth, longitudinal, qualitative analyses of how different individuals experience and interpret different manifestations of same-sex sexuality over the life course. Even the most elemental, taken-for-granted aspect of sexual-minority experience—same-sex attractions—is due for substantive reexamination, as qualitative research suggests that individuals use vastly different criteria in classifying various thoughts, urges, desires, fantasies, and affections as attractions (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000). The complicated role of sexually and emotionally intimate relationships in long-term identity development also requires more intensive investigation. For many women, changes in their participation in same-sex or other-sex romantic and sexual relationships played a notable role in their emerging sexual self-concepts. This is perhaps most evident among the lesbians who pursued casual sexual contact with men, yet who did not think these experiences contradicted their lesbian identities as long as they remained devoid of emotional intensity. Clearly, such issues require rigorous study if we are to develop more accurate and flexible models of sexual identity development over the life course.

CONCLUSION

> For those of us who question, your whole life becomes a question. Do you then reach some level of understanding, and then it's static? I don't think so. When I'm with a woman, I'm not really a lesbian, and when I'm with a man I'm not really straight. Maybe if I spent ten years with a woman it would change the way I thought, and I would call myself a lesbian. I think your definition changes based on your experiences. I can't really say. I still feel young, I still feel that I have a lot left to learn.

So do we. Although research on sexual identity development has proliferated dramatically over the past 20 years, there is much that we still do not understand about this process. The results of this study demonstrate

that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the years after coming out involve far more than simple identity consolidation. Rather, they may involve full-fledged replays of the sexual questioning process as different experiences and environments render different attractions, behaviors, affections, and self-concepts more or less salient. To fully understand these processes, researchers must systematically assess the long-term developmental trajectories of as broad and diverse a range of sexual minorities as possible.

One of the most important reasons to undertake such investigations is to provide sexual minorities themselves with more accurate information about these issues. Notably, many of the women in this study expressed embarrassment when explaining changes in their sexual feelings, relationships, or identities, having internalized the prevailing cultural message that such experiences were highly atypical. At this point, it is impossible to say just how typical or atypical they are, but the findings of the present study demonstrate the critical importance of investigating this question. Psychologists, clinicians, and policymakers are increasingly designing educational programming for schools and social service agencies aimed at dispelling myths about sexual orientation and providing support to sexual-minority youths as they embark on the identity development process. For youths to benefit from these efforts, the scientific knowledge behind them should speak to the full range of diverse experiences that characterize the sexual-minority life course.

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