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Source: *Gender and Society*, Mar., 1993, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Mar., 1993), pp. 50-77

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

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# **“COMING OUT” IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM: Sexual Identity Formation among Lesbian and Bisexual Women**

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*This article examines sexual identity formation among 346 lesbian-identified and 60 bisexual-identified women. On average, bisexuals come out at later ages and exhibit less “stable” identity histories. However, variations in identity history among lesbians and bisexuals overshadow the differences between them and demonstrate that coming out is not a linear, goal-oriented, developmental process. Sexual identity formation must be reconceptualized as a process of describing one’s social location within a changing social context. Changes in sexual identity are, therefore, expected of mature individuals as they maintain an accurate description of their position vis-à-vis other individuals, groups, and institutions.*

Social sexologists became interested in homosexual identity development in the 1970s. This interest arose as attempts to discover the etiology of homosexuality gave way to efforts to understand the lives of lesbians and gay men, a shift that occurred in response to social and political changes in society at large. Social and political circumstances continued to change, and, during the 1980s, researchers once again shifted their attention toward more contemporary topics such as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Meanwhile, sexological theory progressed as social constructionists carefully exposed and challenged essentialist assumptions. This scrutiny changed scientific understandings of sexuality, sexual identity, sexual politics, and the history of sexuality. But sexologists have not yet fully reexamined the process of sexual identity formation. The result is a disjunction between contemporary concepts of sexual identity and available models for describing sexual

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**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *This research was supported in part by a grant from the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

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GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 7 No. 1, March 1993 50-77  
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identity formation. This disjunction magnifies some of the conceptual problems in the existing literature on sexual identity formation and highlights the need to reconceptualize the process.

One problem is the linearity of most available models. Homosexual identity formation is not orderly and predictable; individuals often skip steps in the process, temporarily return to earlier stages of the process, and sometimes abort the process altogether by returning to a heterosexual identity. Recognizing this shortcoming, earlier theorists modified linear models by introducing feedback loops, alternate routes, and dead ends. These efforts produced linear models with ample room for deviation rather than models that effectively describe the formation of sexual identity. What is needed is a completely new model.

Earlier work on the coming out process also neglects bisexual identity. Despite ample evidence of prevalent bisexual behavior and frequent theoretical admonishments for ignoring this evidence (e.g., MacDonald 1981, 1983; Paul 1985), few researchers in the 1970s and 1980s gave bisexuality more than a passing nod. Because prevailing models of sexuality were either dichotomous (Paul 1985; Ross 1984) or scalar (e.g., Bell and Weinberg 1978; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard 1953; Shively and DeCecco 1977), bisexuality was either considered nonexistent or conceptualized as an intermediate state between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Bisexual identity, therefore, might be adopted as a stepping-stone on the way to homosexual identity (e.g., Chapman and Brannock 1987) but was not considered an end in itself.

Recent constructionist criticism of the dichotomous and scalar models of sexuality has paved the way for the recognition of bisexuality as an authentic form of sexuality. Coincidentally, the AIDS epidemic and the increasing politicization of bisexual people have called attention to the practical and theoretical importance of bisexuality. A few recent studies explicitly and intentionally include bisexuals. Many of these studies explore AIDS-related issues within samples of gay and bisexual men (e.g., Lyter et al. 1987; McCusker et al. 1989; Siegel et al. 1988; Winkelstein et al. 1987). But AIDS researchers are not concerned about bisexuality per se and rarely distinguish between gay and bisexual subjects. Other studies focus on clinical issues raised by heterosexually married bisexual, lesbian, and gay psychotherapy clients or compare bisexuals to heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians on a variety of health, personality, attitudinal, and behavioral variables (e.g., Daniel, Abernethy, and Oliver 1984; Engel and Saracino 1986; LaTorre and Wendenburg 1983; Nurius 1983; Smith, Johnson, and Guenther 1985; Stokes, Kilmann, and Wanlass 1983). Despite the increased interest in bisexuality, research that focuses on bisexuality identity remains scarce.

The present research renews empirical investigation into the coming out process in an effort to develop a nonlinear model of identity formation that

treats bisexual identity and homosexual identity as equally valid alternatives to heterosexual identity. The inquiry begins by recognizing that women who are raised to assume heterosexual identities nevertheless adopt both lesbian and bisexual identities. The identity history patterns of women who currently possess lesbian and bisexual identities are compared to each other, and then individual variations in identity histories are examined. Observations about individual differences serve as a springboard for a constructionist critique of existing models of identity formation and a reconceptualization of the process.

### PREVIOUS LITERATURE

In scientific literature and popular lesbian and gay literature, the term *coming out* refers to processes as well as particular events within these processes. Early researchers typically defined coming out as a single event, usually first identification of oneself as homosexual (e.g., Cronin 1974; Dank 1971; Hooker 1967). More recent theorists conceptualize coming out as a process, and many have proposed developmental models of this process. Working within the developmental paradigm, some researchers document the order and nature of milestone events in individuals' lives (e.g., Coleman 1982; Hencken and O'Dowd 1977; Lee 1977; McDonald 1982; Schäfer 1976; Troiden and Goode 1980), whereas others discuss the psychological changes that occur during and between these events (e.g., Cass 1979, 1990; Fein and Nuehring 1982). Each author chooses a particular point as the beginning of the process and a particular point as its termination. Some discuss the assumptions that underlie these choices (e.g., Cass 1984), but few question the assumptions that underlie the developmental paradigm itself.

These assumptions are numerous. First, a developmental process is linear and unidirectional, with a positive value assigned to later stages in the process. The process has a beginning stage and an end stage, connected to each other by a series of intermediate and sequential steps. Persons are expected to move from each step to the next in the sequence, with progress defined as movement from earlier steps to later steps and maturity defined as achievement of the end stage. Movement in the other direction is defined as regression. The end stage becomes the goal of the process, and all activity taking place prior to achievement of this stage is presumably directed toward this goal. This activity is expected to cease upon achievement of the end stage, and continued activity is taken as a sign of immaturity.

As applied to homosexual identity formation, the developmental model defines progress as the replacement of a heterosexual identity with a homosexual identity. The privileged status given homosexual identity as the goal of this process is justified by the assumption that this identity is an accurate

reflection of the essence of the individual.<sup>1</sup> In other words, coming out is a process of discovery in which the individual sheds a false heterosexual identity and comes to correctly identify and label her own true essence, which is homosexual.

The assumptions of linearity and stage-sequentiality are evident in the writings of early coming out theorists. For example, Troiden and Goode (1980) assert that their 150 gay male respondents "did embrace the components of the gay experience in a specific sequence" (p. 387) and describe this process as a series of five milestone events. The sequence starts when one first suspects that one might be homosexual and ends with one's first homosexual relationship. Coleman (1982) also identified five steps, beginning with childhood feelings of being different and ending with the integration of public and private identity, whereas McDonald (1982) prefers an expanded series of nine milestone events. De Monteflores and Schultz (1978) argue that individuals first recognize their homosexuality and then integrate this knowledge into their lives, implying a stepwise progression toward greater personal integrity.

Several theorists acknowledge that the linear processes they describe do not accurately reflect the experiences of some subjects. McDonald (1982) observes that some of his subjects did not "move predictably" (p. 40) through the five steps he outlines, and Coleman (1982) acknowledges that not all individuals follow the stages of coming out in sequential order. Cass (1979, 1990) asserts that each stage of coming out might be followed by "foreclosure," or termination of the process, instead of the next step in the process. Nevertheless, these theorists present linear, stage-sequential models of coming out, revealing their assumption that coming out is fundamentally a linear and orderly process. Normal and expected though they are, complexities like sequential disorder and foreclosure are understood as deviations from the underlying linear process of coming out.

Research conducted under the developmental model provides information about the average ages at which lesbians and gay men experience the stages of coming out. Despite the fact that this research spans a decade during which the relaxation of social attitudes toward homosexuality should have eased the coming out process, different researchers report remarkably similar findings. Most lesbians who have ever experienced homosexual arousal recall having such feelings around the age of 12 or 13, but they typically did not become aware of their sexual feelings toward other women until ages 14 through 19. Women begin suspecting that they are lesbian at an average age of 18, but they do not define themselves as lesbian until a few years later at an average age of 21 to 23, with 77 percent having done so by age 23. Research on gay men indicates that they experience these events at younger ages and more rapidly than lesbians (Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith 1981; Califia 1979; Cronin 1974; de Monteflores and Schultz 1978; Jay and

Young 1979; Kooden et al. 1979; McDonald 1982; Riddle and Morin 1977; Schäfer 1976; Troiden 1988).

Bisexual women experience each milestone at older ages than lesbians. On average, bisexual women become aware of homosexual feelings at age 16 and define themselves as homosexual at age 28 (Kooden et al. 1979). Bisexual women also exhibit more discrepancy between adolescent and adult sexuality than homosexual women, suggesting that the preferences of bisexual women might become established later in life (Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith 1981).

The developmental paradigm has been challenged by symbolic interactionists who view sexual identity formation as a process of creating an identity through social interaction rather than a process of discovering identity through introspection. Interactionists vary in the degree to which they discuss the effect of contextual factors on this interactive process; some describe particular social situations that are conducive to the creation of gay identity (e.g., Dank 1971), whereas others examine the constraints imposed on the process by socially constructed conceptions of sexuality.

Plummer's (1975) description of the process of "becoming homosexual" is one of the earliest interactionist analyses of sexual identity formation. His four-stage model begins with the "sensitization" stage, during which one has experiences that later acquire sexual meaning. These experiences, for example, same-sex childhood fantasies or close friendships, become part of the coming out process only after one comes out and retrospectively reinterprets them as early evidence of homosexuality. Thus the sensitization stage is not a particular prehomosexual state of being, and homosexuality is not an essential characteristic awaiting discovery. Rather, homosexual identity is socially created, and the coming out process itself is retrospectively constructed. Despite these insights, Plummer nevertheless describes coming out as a goal-oriented process that culminates with the acquisition and stabilization of homosexual identity.

In a series of publications on bisexual behavior and identity, Blumstein and Schwartz (1974, 1976, 1977, 1990) emphasize the mutability of human sexuality and sexual identity as well as the normalcy of incongruence between an individual's sexual identity and sexual behavior. They describe subjects who exhibit various combinations of identity and behavior, for example, women who identify themselves as lesbians but engage in bisexual behavior. In so doing, Blumstein and Schwartz treat these combinations as phenomena worthy of explanation in their own right rather than as temporary transitional states or unstable deviations from a hypothetical normal state in which identity accurately reflects essence. They explain these phenomena by asserting that identity formation is a process of creation (1990) that is influenced by social factors such as dichotomous thinking about sexuality, antagonism toward bisexuality (especially among lesbians), political ideol-

ogies, and gender role expectations (1974, 1977). For example, dichotomous thinking about sexuality inhibits bisexual identification by encouraging individuals to emphasize either their homosexual or their heterosexual experience and to produce a consistent account of either homosexual or heterosexual identity by reinterpreting past events (1977). Such assertions extend the interactionist insights of Plummer (1975) into a recognition of the impact of social constructs on self-identity.

Since the publication of Blumstein and Schwartz's work in the late 1970s, several researchers have confirmed the finding that incongruities between sexual identity and sexual experience are commonplace (e.g., Klein, Sepekoff, and Wolf 1985; LaTorre and Wendenburg 1983; Loewenstein 1985; Nichols 1988). The work of Blumstein and Schwartz remains pivotal, however, because the investigation of incongruities between identity and behavior is not the central research question in most of these recent studies, and few of these authors discuss the social and political factors that influence sexual identity.

Richardson and Hart (1981) argue that any sexual identity is the product of an ongoing process of dynamic social interaction. An individual's sexual identity may therefore change at any stage of the life cycle, and the meaning of a given sexual identity may differ among individuals and over time. Moreover, identity stability is no less a dynamic product than identity change. By applying interactionist principles to identity stability as well as identity change, Richardson and Hart finalize the divorce between sexual identity and sexual essence, reconceptualize identity as a process rather than a goal, and produce a fully interactionist account of sexual identity. Richardson and Hart agree with Blumstein and Schwartz that the lack of social validation for bisexual identity makes the maintenance of bisexual identity difficult, and they argue that a woman who has adopted a lesbian identity on the basis of her sexual experiences with other women might not have done so if she lived in a society in which sex of partner was not considered an indication of essential sexual orientation. These ideas have not been fully developed into a social constructionist account of sexual identity formation.

## METHODS AND MEASURES

The difficulties inherent in collecting a sample of an undocumented, invisible, and stigmatized population are well known. The sample-selection and data-collection methods used in the current study were designed to maximize coverage of the target population. In order to reach secretive lesbian-identified and bisexual-identified women, data were collected via self-administered questionnaires and postage-paid return envelopes, thus guaranteeing complete anonymity for respondents. Questionnaires were



distributed by several methods, including booths at lesbian, gay, and women's conferences and through lesbian, gay, and bisexual social and political organizations, friendship networks, and newsletter advertisements.

The cover of the questionnaire presents the survey as a study of "women who consider themselves to be lesbian or bisexual, or who choose not to label their sexual orientation, or who are not sure what their sexual orientation is," thus defining the sample population as all women who have questioned or rejected heterosexual identity. The majority of the respondents are currently self-identified lesbians, dykes, gay, or homosexual women ( $N = 346$  or 81 percent),<sup>2</sup> and a minority are self-identified bisexuals or "straights with bisexual tendencies" ( $N = 60$  or 14 percent). In the interest of brevity, these two groups of respondents will henceforth be called *lesbians* and *bisexuals*, respectively; these terms refer to current self-identity only and imply neither that self-identity reflects essence nor that it is static. The findings will show that many individuals, especially those who currently identify themselves as bisexual, frequently switch back and forth between identities. Bearing this in mind, the current sample is a "snapshot" of respondents' sexual identities at a particular point in time.

Twenty-one respondents indicated that they do not know their sexual orientation, that they are still wondering, or that they prefer not to label themselves. These women, who might possess sexual self-representations that are not organized into sexual identities, will be called *not sexually identified*. Because an understanding of women who have not created sexual identities is relevant to the larger question of sexual identity formation, some data about the identity histories of these 21 women are presented.

The sample is predominantly young, white, well educated, and employed, but with low income. Respondents range in age from 16 to 78, with the majority in their 20s (45 percent), 30s (38 percent), or 40s (12 percent). Two-thirds are involved in serious or marital relationships with either women or men, and 15 percent have children. Four percent of the sample is African-American, and 2 percent is Arab, Asian, Indian, Native American, or Latina/Hispanic. The remaining 94 percent are white. Thirty-four percent of respondents have 18 or more years of formal education, 25 percent have completed college, and only 7 percent have no schooling beyond high school. Despite this high level of education, the median household income is \$20,000. Eighty-nine percent are employed, one-quarter of whom are also students. An additional 7 percent are nonemployed students, and 4 percent are unemployed or retired. Most (84 percent) currently reside in a single midwestern state, although 24 states are represented in the sample.

Respondents answered a series of questions about their sexual identity histories. These questions asked whether each of several psychological events had taken place in their lives and, if so, at what age. Some of the events are milestones that were reported in previous research on coming out as a



developmental process, whereas others are events that have not been previously studied, such as changes in identity that occur subsequent to initial identification as either lesbian or bisexual. The former include a respondent's first awareness of homosexual attraction, first questioning of heterosexual identity, and first self-identification as lesbian. The latter include first self-identification as bisexual, the last time a self-identified lesbian wondered whether she was bisexual or identified herself as bisexual, the last time a self-identified bisexual wondered whether she was lesbian or identified herself as lesbian, and whether a respondent has switched between lesbian and bisexual self-identifies zero, one, or more times.<sup>3</sup> Respondents who do not currently identify themselves as either lesbian or bisexual were asked whether they had ever wondered if they were lesbian or bisexual or identified themselves as lesbian or bisexual and, if so, at what age they last did so. Whenever the word *lesbian* appeared in a question, it was accompanied by the alternative terms *gay*, *homosexual*, and *dyke*. Respondents were instructed to read the question using the word with which they felt most comfortable.

## FINDINGS

The average lesbian and the average bisexual woman experienced the psychological events in almost identical order, although the average bisexual experienced each event at an older age than did the average lesbian (see Table 1). Lesbians first felt sexually attracted to women at an average age of 15, whereas bisexual women did not experience these feelings until an average age of 18. Slightly less than two years after this experience, respondents in both subsamples began questioning their heterosexual identities. It then took another five years for the average lesbian or bisexual woman to first adopt the identity she now has; the average lesbian was nearly 22 years old at this time, and the average bisexual was age 25. Among those who also at some point adopted the other identity, both lesbian and bisexual respondents did so slightly prior to adopting their current identity. The average lesbian first called herself a bisexual shortly before her 21st birthday, and the average bisexual first called herself a lesbian as she approached her 25th.

Within each subsample, the average respondent continued to wonder about her identity even after adopting her current identity. Those lesbians who ever wondered if they were bisexual did so for an average of almost four years after adopting a lesbian identity, and those who ever thought of themselves as bisexual gave up this bisexual identity for the last time at the average age of 25. Those bisexuals who ever wondered or identified themselves as lesbians continued to do so for a similar period of time following their adoption of bisexual identity, until an average age of almost 30.

TABLE 1: Average Ages at which Events in Respondents' Identity Histories Occurred

Milestone	Average Age		
	Lesbian Identified	Bisexual Identified	Not Sexually Identified
Current age	31.2 (N = 342)	32.5 (N = 60)	29.9 (N = 20)
First homosexual attraction	15.4 (N = 329)	18.1 (N = 56)	20.2*** (N = 21)
First questioning of heterosexual identity	17.0 (N = 339)	20.0 (N = 60)	20.9** (N = 20)
First lesbian identification	21.7 (N = 331)	24.5* (N = 44)	—
First bisexual identification	20.9 (N = 133)	25.0*** (N = 55)	—
First identification as either lesbian or bisexual, whichever came first	20.9 (N = 331)	23.4* (N = 55)	—
Last wondered about bisexual identity	25.4 (N = 208)	—	27.2 (N = 16)
Last bisexual identification	25.1 (N = 125)	—	26.2 (N = 11)
Last wondered about lesbian identity	—	29.6 (N = 45)	27.2 (N = 18)
Last lesbian identification	—	28.8 (N = 33)	25.5 (N = 13)

\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\* $p \leq .005$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

The difference between the ages at which lesbian and bisexual respondents experienced each milestone increases steadily with each successive milestone. The average bisexual was 2.7 years older than the average lesbian when she first felt attracted to a woman, 3.0 years older when she realized that she might not be heterosexual, 3.3 years older when she first adopted the identity she currently possesses, and 4.2 years older when she stopped wondering whether she should have chosen the other identity. Thus the process not only occurred at an older age for the average bisexual than for the average lesbian but also happened more slowly.

But these figures conceal much variation in the coming out process among lesbian and bisexual women. For example, not all lesbians have ever identified themselves as bisexual, not all bisexuals have ever identified themselves as lesbian, and not all individuals experience the events in the same order or

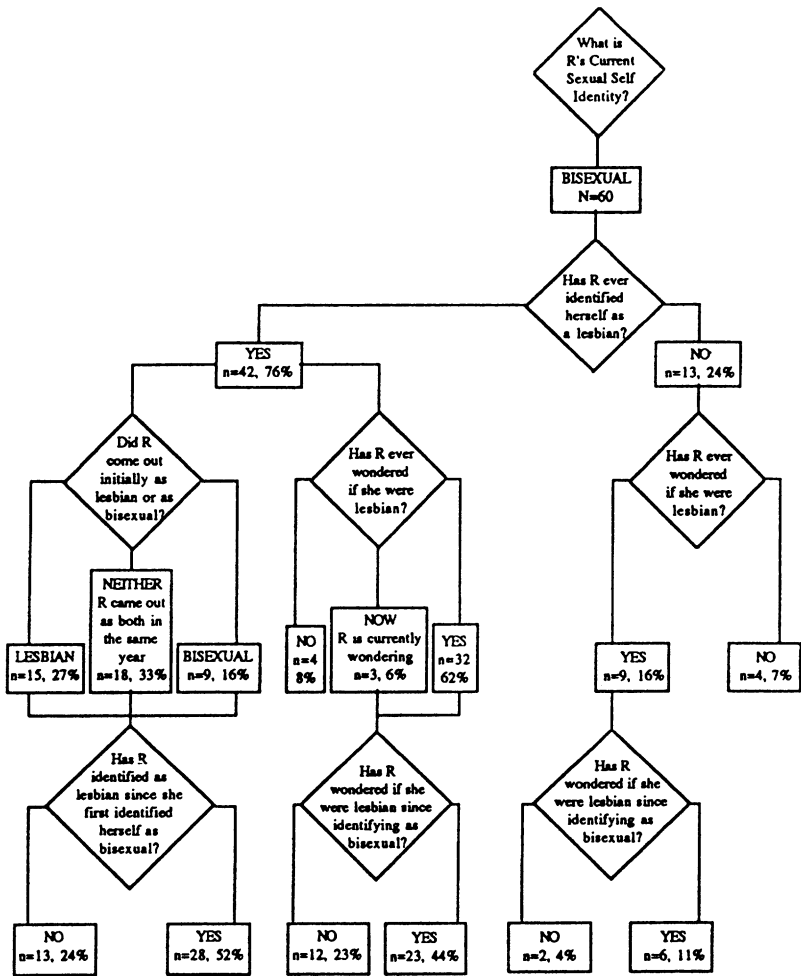
at the same ages. Some respondents change identities frequently, whereas others, after questioning their original heterosexual identity, adopted the identity they now have and maintained it ever since.

Figure 1 is a flowchart of the patterns of identity change reported by lesbian and bisexual respondents. Fewer than one-half of lesbian-identified respondents have ever identified themselves as bisexual, although nearly two-thirds have wondered if they were bisexual. In contrast, most bisexuals have not only wondered if they were lesbian but have identified themselves as lesbians in the past. Bisexuals are no more likely than lesbians to be wondering about their sexual identity at the current time, however. Most respondents who report no current sexual identity (not shown in Figure 1) have identified as both lesbian and bisexual in the past (80 percent and 74 percent, respectively); in fact, most are currently wondering whether or not they are lesbian or bisexual (74 percent and 70 percent, respectively). Bisexual women report switching between lesbian and bisexual identities more frequently than lesbian women; 58 percent of bisexual women and 14 percent of lesbian women report switching identities two or more times.

The order in which respondents adopted lesbian and bisexual identities also varies among both lesbians and bisexual women, although certain patterns are prevalent within each subsample. Bisexuals were much less likely than lesbians to come out initially as lesbians; 27 percent of bisexuals compared to 66 percent of lesbians initially identified themselves as lesbians. The difference is not accounted for by a complementary tendency among bisexuals to come out initially as bisexual; fewer than one-half of the respondents who now consider themselves bisexual adopted this identity in the first place. Twenty-four percent of lesbians came out as bisexual at least one year prior to adopting a lesbian identity, a finding that might account for the role of bisexual identity as a transitional identity in developmental theories of lesbian identity development, as well as the lesbian cultural belief that bisexuality is a phase in the process of coming out as a lesbian.

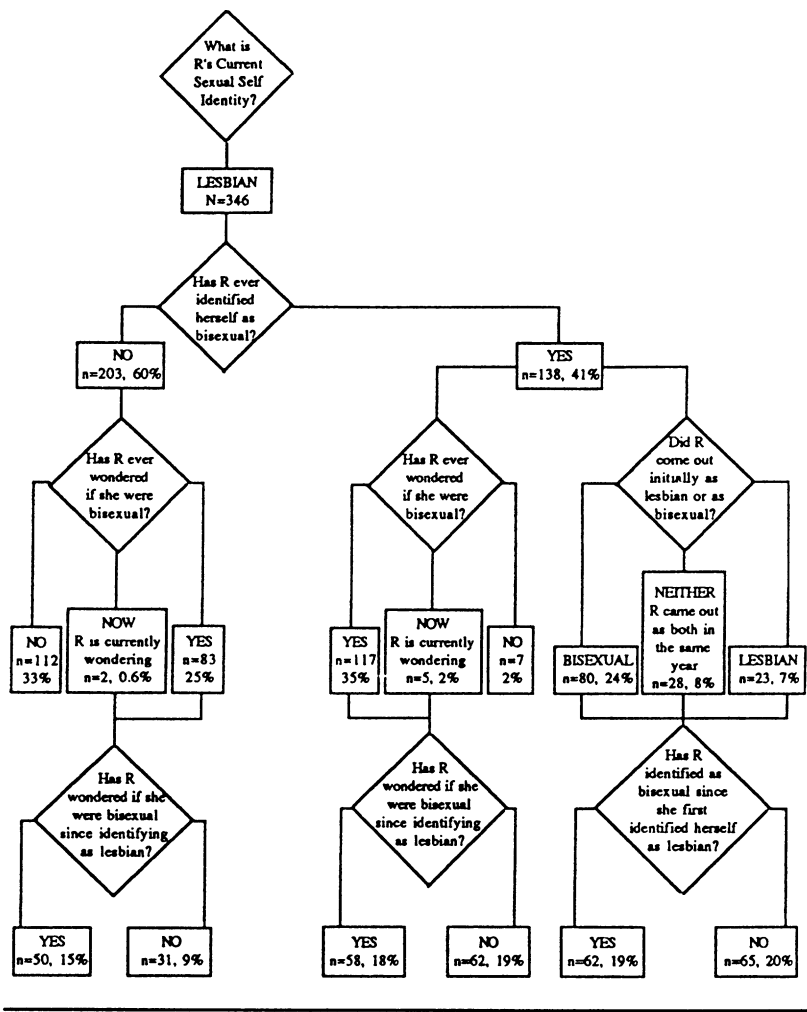
Even after adopting the identities they possess today, many respondents continued to undergo periods of alternative identification or uncertainty about their sexual identities. One of five lesbians has experienced a period of bisexual identification since first adopting a lesbian identity, and one of three has wondered if she were bisexual since identifying herself as a lesbian. In fact, most of the lesbian-identified women who report ever wondering if they were bisexual have done so since adopting a lesbian identity. The figures are higher for bisexual women; one of two has identified herself as a lesbian, and one of two has wondered if she were a lesbian since she first identified herself as a bisexual.

Table 2 presents distributions of the ages at which each event occurred in respondents' lives. The first events in most respondents' lives were becoming



**Figure 1: Flowchart of Lesbian and Bisexual Respondents' Identity Histories**  
a. Cases with missing data are deleted stepwise. Therefore, the total number of respondents at each level of the flowchart may be smaller than the total number of respondents at higher levels.  
b. Percentages given in each cell of the flowchart represent the percentage of the total lesbian or bisexual subsample that falls in that cell. Percentages are calculated based on the total number of respondents for whom relevant data are nonmissing.

aware of homosexual feelings and questioning their heterosexual identities. Two of three women experienced these events during their teenage years or



early 20s, but many other women had these experiences prior to puberty, and several did not have them until their 30s or 40s.

For most respondents, awareness of homosexual feelings preceded or coincided with questioning heterosexual identity, but a substantial minority of each subsample reported that they began to question their heterosexuality before experiencing attraction to other women (see Figure 2). This latter pattern is more common among lesbians than among bisexuals; one in four

TABLE 2: Incidence of Milestone Events and the Ages at Which They Occurred (Percentages)

Age	First Homosexual Attraction	First Questioning of Heterosexual Identity	First Self-Identification as Either Lesbian or Bisexual	Last Bisexual Identification (Excludes Bisexual Rs)	Last Lesbian Identification (Excludes Lesbian Rs)	Last Wondered if Bisexual (Excludes Bisexual Rs)	Last Wondered if Lesbian (Excludes Lesbian Rs)
Preschool, 0-4	2.5 (N = 10)	2.6 (N = 11)	0.5 (N = 2)	0.0 (N = 0)	2.2 (N = 1)	0.4 (N = 1)	0.0 (N = 0)
Child, 5-9	9.6 (N = 39)	6.7 (N = 28)	0.3 (N = 1)	0.0 (N = 0)	0.0 (N = 0)	0.0 (N = 0)	0.0 (N = 0)
Preteen, 10-12	15.5 (N = 63)	13.1 (N = 55)	5.2 (N = 20)	0.0 (N = 0)	2.2 (N = 1)	0.4 (N = 1)	1.6 (N = 1)
Young teen, 13-15	23.6 (N = 96)	16.0 (N = 67)	9.6 (N = 37)	2.2 (N = 3)	0.0 (N = 0)	1.3 (N = 3)	0.0 (N = 0)
Old teen, 16-19	28.3 (N = 115)	29.4 (N = 123)	31.3 (N = 121)	14.0 (N = 19)	4.3 (N = 2)	15.2 (N = 34)	4.8 (N = 3)
Young adult 20-24	11.3 (N = 46)	17.7 (N = 74)	28.2 (N = 109)	41.9 (N = 57)	30.4 (N = 14)	37.1 (N = 83)	27.0 (N = 17)
25-29	4.7 (N = 19)	7.4 (N = 31)	13.7 (N = 53)	19.1 (N = 26)	23.9 (N = 11)	20.5 (N = 46)	25.4 (N = 16)





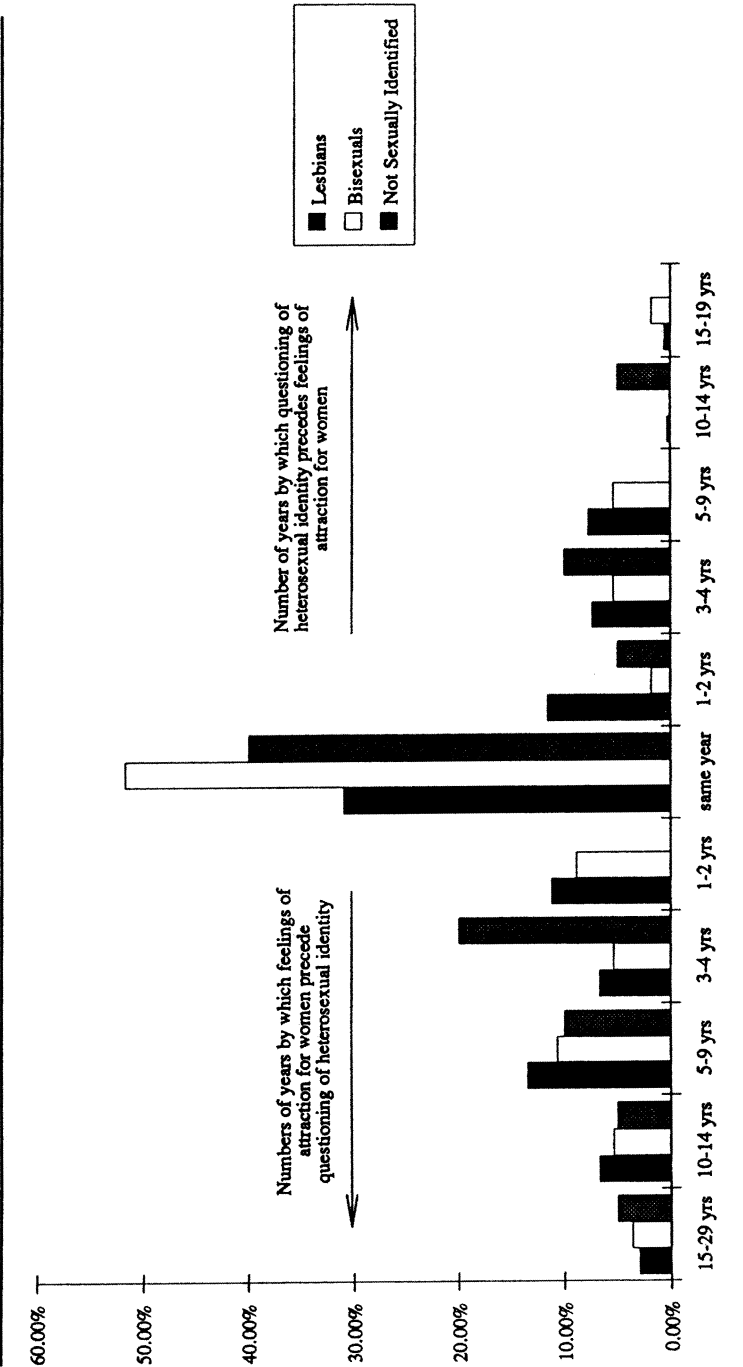


Figure 2: Time Lapse between First Awareness of Attraction to Women and First Realization that One Might Not Be Heterosexual

lesbians began to question her heterosexuality before experiencing homosexual feelings, whereas only one in seven bisexual women did so ( $p < .05$ ). The number of years that passed between these two events also varies considerably among individuals. Some respondents did not question their heterosexual identities until as many as 26 years after first experiencing homosexual feelings, whereas others experienced homosexual feelings as many as 15 years after questioning their heterosexual identity. Such lengthy periods are rare, however, especially among bisexual women; 52 percent of bisexual women, 31 percent of lesbians, and 40 percent of sexually unidentified women reported that these events occurred within a single year of each other. The difference between bisexual women and lesbians is statistically significant ( $p = .03$ ).

These findings contrast sharply with the finding in Table 1 that the average bisexual woman experiences the coming out process more slowly than the average lesbian. Figure 2 shows, on the contrary, that, once bisexual women become aware of their homosexual feelings, they begin to question their heterosexuality more quickly than lesbians. The former finding is an artifact of the fact that bisexual women become aware of their homosexual feelings at older ages than lesbians and the fact that lesbians are more likely than bisexual women to question their heterosexuality prior to experiencing feelings of sexual attraction to other women.

After experiencing feelings of homosexual attraction and questioning their prescribed heterosexual identities, most respondents eventually adopted either a lesbian or a bisexual identity. Approximately one in four women did so immediately, and another one in four did so within 5 years, although others took up to 35 years to do so. There is no significant difference between lesbian and bisexual women in the time lag between these two events. For most respondents, these events occurred in their late teens or early 20s (see Table 2).

Among those respondents who have changed identities since first adopting a lesbian or bisexual identity, bisexuals typically did so more quickly than lesbians (see Figure 3). Two-fifths of bisexual women changed identities within the first year of coming out, but only one-fifth of lesbians did so. A substantial number of lesbians who came out initially as bisexual took up to 10 years to adopt a lesbian identity.

As reported above, many lesbian and bisexual respondents continued to consider alternative identities even after adopting their current identities. There are no striking differences between lesbians and bisexual women in the length of time that passed before they ceased to question their sexual identities; periods of up to a decade are not uncommon within either subsample. There is a difference in the ages at which lesbian and bisexual women ceased considering alternative identities, however; most lesbians gave up their bisexual identity by age 25, whereas bisexuals last identified themselves as lesbians at older and more varied ages (see Table 2).

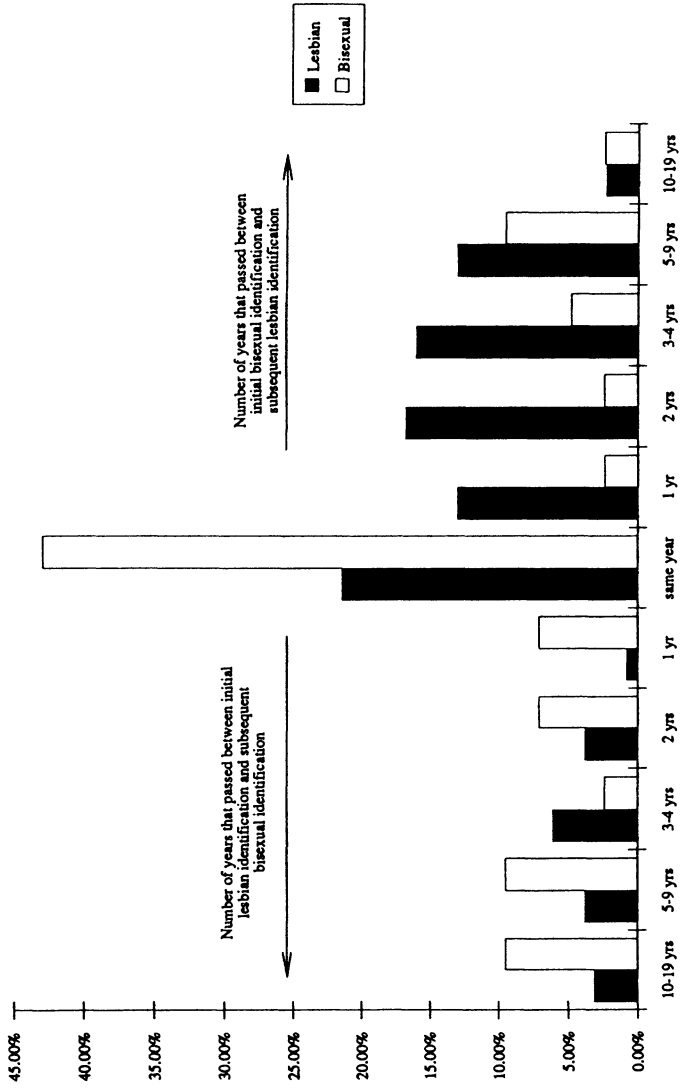


Figure 3: Time Lapse between Initial Lesbian or Bisexual Identification and Subsequent Change in Sexual Identification

The variation in ages at which bisexuals last identified themselves as lesbians is explained by the fact that most (54 percent) bisexuals last identified themselves as lesbians within the past year. Respondents who are not currently sexually identified are even more likely than bisexuals to have recently possessed a different sexual identity; 73 percent have identified as lesbian and 92 percent have identified as bisexual within the past year. In contrast, only 18 percent of lesbians have identified themselves as bisexual within the past year; the modal lesbian has not identified herself as bisexual for over five years.

In summary, there is considerable variation among lesbian-identified, bisexual-identified, and sexually unidentified women, and this variety overshadows the average differences between women with different sexual identities that are presented in Table 1. There is, however, one consistent difference between the patterns found among bisexual women and those found among lesbians; on almost every measure, bisexual women describe less "stable" identity histories than lesbians. Most lesbians initially adopted a lesbian identity and have maintained it ever since. Bisexual women, on the other hand, are more likely to wonder about or change their sexual identities, and they change identities more rapidly and more frequently than lesbians.

## DISCUSSION

Previous authors' descriptions of sexual identity formation as a developmental process were based on the calculated average ages at which various milestone events occurred in subjects' lives. When presented in this form, the current findings also suggest that coming out is an orderly, stage-sequential process. The average ages at which lesbians in the current study first experienced homosexual attraction, first questioned their heterosexual identities, and first identified themselves as lesbians are consistent with the findings of previous research. Also consistent with previous research, bisexuals in the current study apparently came out more slowly and at older ages than lesbians.

But the statistical distributions behind these averages tell a different story. Most individuals do not progress through stages in an orderly sequence. On the contrary, as first noted by Blumstein and Schwartz (1976, 1977), individuals often switch back and forth between sexual identities. Women in the current study also experience periods of ambivalence during which they wonder about their sexual identities and periods during which they have no particular sexual identity. Different individuals experience different events in different orders; in fact, with the exception of questioning heterosexual identity and the near exception of experiencing homosexual feelings, none of the assessed events was experienced by all of the women in the current

study. Although some women do progress from awareness of homosexual feelings to questioning heterosexual identity and then to ultimate and permanent identification as a lesbian, this pattern is by no means universal. Variations on this experience are too common to be considered deviations from the norm. The developmental model must be replaced by a social constructionist model of sexual identity formation in which variation and change are the norm.

Social constructionism teaches that self-identity is the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs. Identity is therefore a reflection of sociopolitical organization rather than a reflection of essential organization, and coming out is the process of describing oneself in terms of social constructs rather than a process of discovering one's essence. By describing oneself in terms provided by one's social context, one locates oneself within this social context and defines one's relations to other individuals, groups, and sociopolitical institutions in this context. For example, a woman may adopt lesbian identity as a representation of her relationship to her woman lover and the differential romantic potential of her relationships with women and men in general, as well as her structural location vis-à-vis sociopolitical institutions such as the lesbian movement, legal marriage, Judeo-Christian religions, and the tax and social welfare structures. Heterosexual identity would imply a very different set of structural relations to these individuals, groups, and institutions.

Unlike individual essences, social contexts are constantly changing. Within the developmental model of coming out, changes in self-identity are considered indicative of immaturity, that is, signs that one is still in the process of development. The achievement of homosexual identity signals the achievement of maturity, and, once achieved, this identity is expected to be permanent. In contrast, within the social constructionist model of identity formation, changes in self-identity may in fact be necessary in order to maintain an accurate description of one's social location within a changing social context; hence changes in self-identity are to be expected of psychologically and socially mature individuals.

There are many types of changes in social context that may lead to changes in one's sexual self-identity. First, the social constructs that provide a language for the description of social location change over time. Historical changes in the conceptualization of sexuality change the meaning of existing constructs and generate new constructs. As an example of the former, although the homosexual construct has existed since the late 1800s, it has changed from a descriptive clinical category to a pejorative psychoanalytic category to a category imbued with myriad positive social and political meanings. Such changes in meaning are often symbolized by changes in terminology. For example, Ulrichs's urnings became yesterday's homophiles

and today's gay men, and yesterday's gay girls are today's lesbian feminists. Changes in meaning are not always symbolized by changes in terminology, however; for example, a lesbian feminist identity represented a very different relationship to the feminist movement in 1972 than it did in the late 1970s. In response to changes in the meanings of constructs and the terminology used to represent them, individuals must sometimes update the language they use to describe their own social locations or risk misrepresenting themselves to others.

As an example of the latter, contemporary academic and political discourse on sexuality is constructing bisexuality. As this discourse continues, the bisexual construct will take shape and become increasingly available as a category for the description of social location. As it does, the homosexual and heterosexual constructs must also change to accommodate it, and some individuals will modify their language of self-description. For example, a woman who was heterosexually married prior to her current union with another woman could comfortably call herself a lesbian during the late 1970s and 1980s, when the lesbian construct did not imply the absence of previous heterosexual relations. During the 1990s, however, it will become increasingly difficult for her to maintain this lesbian identity as the bisexual construct becomes the accepted descriptor for a mix of homosexual and heterosexual relations. At some point, she might find that the term *lesbian* no longer accurately describes her social location because it denies the fact that she has an ex-husband.

Second, social constructs vary cross-(sub)culturally. Some of this variation reflects the fact that historical changes occur more quickly in some cultural pockets than others, and some reflects racial-ethnic, class, generational, geographic, and political differences in the social construction of sexuality. An individual might use different constructs to accurately describe her social location within different cultural contexts. For example, a woman who occupies a progressive position vis-à-vis lesbian and gay political institutions might call herself a lesbian when speaking to her parents but call herself a queer when she attends a planning meeting for a Lesbian and Gay Pride March. Her parents have never heard of Queer Nation and would not understand the reference to this branch of sexual politics, whereas her co-planners would underestimate her affinity for other sexual and gender minorities if she identified herself as a lesbian to them. Even though this woman presents herself differently within these different contexts, she probably does not feel that she is misrepresenting herself to either audience. On the contrary, she is merely using the language that most accurately describes herself within each context.

Third, the sociopolitical landscape upon which one locates oneself can change. As new political movements emerge, develop, and change, new

social and political institutions are built, and new social and political positions are created. In other words, old landmarks disappear and new ones appear. Language that locates oneself in relation to old landmarks becomes meaningless as these landmarks fade; eventually, such language locates one within a historical context but cannot accurately describe one's location within the contemporary sociopolitical context.

Finally, one's own location within a sociopolitical context can change. As one develops new relationships with other individuals, groups, and sociopolitical institutions, new self-descriptions become necessary. For example, when a woman who identified herself as a homosexual because she read the word *homosexual* in a book from the HQ section of her local library discovers and joins the lesbian community, she may begin to call herself lesbian instead of homosexual. Her new lesbian identity represents her membership in this community. Then, when she falls in love with a man, she may begin to call herself a bisexual in order to acknowledge this relationship. When she is told by other lesbians that it is OK for her to sleep with a man, but that she should still call herself a lesbian in order to protest heterosexism, she may begin to call herself a lesbian again. Her renewed lesbian identity represents a commitment to the lesbian political movement.

But individuals themselves generally do not experience their sexual identities as socially constructed and variable descriptions of their social locations. They experience their own sexuality as stable (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Richardson and Hart 1981) and essential (Hart 1984; Ponce 1978, 1980; Richardson 1981; Warren 1974, 1980), and they retrospectively perceive changes in their sexual identities as part of a goal-oriented process of discovering and accepting this essential sexuality. Popular essentialism is an integral part of the social context within which individuals seek to locate themselves. If a social constructionist model of sexual identity formation is to be useful, it must account for the fact that the process is understood as a goal-oriented process of essential discovery by those who experience it (cf. Epstein 1987). This is accomplished by recognizing that goals themselves are constructed. In short, the social constructionist must avoid incorporating essentialist goals into theories of sexual identity formation but allow for the possibility that individuals who are creating their own identities will introduce their own goals.

Individuals choose their goals from the options they perceive, and these options are defined by the available social constructs. As a result, most individuals who are searching for sexual identity perceive heterosexual identity and homosexual identity as the two possible options. Because bisexuality is still not considered an authentic form of sexuality in popular discourse, few perceive bisexual identity as a valid, permanent option. The goal introduced into the coming out process by the identity-seeking individ-



ual, then, is to discover whether her essence is really heterosexual or homosexual. This determination is made through the observation of evidence that is believed to reflect essence—her own sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The catch is that, for many individuals, this evidence is neither consistently heterosexual nor consistently homosexual. The result is that people whose experience of sexuality is highly varied try to fit themselves into a dichotomous model of sexuality.

Heterosexual and homosexual constructs are not equally matched players in this game, however. Because individuals are raised to assume heterosexual identities, the development of nonheterosexual identity requires the perception of a contradiction between one's initial heterosexual identity and one's own psychosexual experience. Much experience goes unacknowledged and uncoded, particularly experience that does not fit into an existing perceptual schema or that is socially disapproved (Plummer 1984). Heterosexual identity serves as a perceptual schema that filters and guides the interpretation of experience; experiences are given meanings that are consistent with heterosexual identity. Same-sex attractions and intimate relationships that might otherwise be viewed as homosexual can be interpreted as platonic or transitory or attributed to nonessential causes, such as drunkenness or situational constraints, whereas comparable other sex attractions and relationships are interpreted as reflections of heterosexual essence.

It follows that the likelihood that one will perceive a contradiction depends on the capacity of the heterosexual construct to provide credible meanings for same-sex experiences, the degree to which one's same-sex experiences challenge this capacity, and the availability of nonheterosexual constructs. Generally speaking, the heterosexual construct provides meanings for a wide range of psychosocial experiences and owes its persistence to this ability to "co-opt" potentially challenging experiences. There is, however, no monolithic heterosexual construct; the construct varies in breadth and rigidity across social contexts. A heterosexual identity that is grounded in a rigid and narrow concept of heterosexuality is more easily broken than one that is more flexible. Because male heterosexuality is more rigidly defined and more exclusive of intimate same-sex interaction than female heterosexuality, men tend to come out at earlier ages and more rapidly than women.

Even female heterosexuality is incapable of providing meanings for all same-sex experience, however. Although much same-sex hugging and kissing and even sexual contact can be reconciled with heterosexual identity under the rubric of "practice for the real thing," ongoing homosexual relationships and postadolescent experiences present a greater challenge. Women whose experiences are more challenging to the heterosexual construct are more likely to search for alternative sources of meaning for these

experiences, and to do so with less delay than women whose experiences are readily interpretable within the heterosexual construct. Moreover, because constructs capable of accounting for both heterosexual and homosexual experience are largely unavailable, experiences cannot be given homosexual meaning without calling into question the heterosexual meanings that have already been given to other experiences. Thus women whose histories are heavily invested with heterosexual meaning or whose other sexual experiences have no credible interpretation within the homosexual construct are less likely to attribute homosexual meanings to same-sex experiences. Furthermore, if and when these women begin to reinterpret these experiences, they will do so more gradually if only because of the sheer volume of heterosexual meaning that must be reexamined. Some of these women may eventually hit on the bisexual construct as a suitable framework for the interpretation of their experience, but this process will also be delayed by the relative unavailability of the bisexual construct.

Therefore, women with more heterosexual and less homosexual experience are expected to retain heterosexual identity more effectively and for longer periods of time than women with less heterosexual and more homosexual experience. The finding that bisexual-identified women became aware of their homosexual feelings and questioned their heterosexual identities at older ages than lesbian-identified women supports this argument; if those who now call themselves bisexual experience higher ratios of heterosexual:homosexual experience,<sup>4</sup> then they were able to maintain heterosexual identities for longer periods of time.

One might expect that individuals who come out at older ages would continue to exhibit greater "inertia" once they did come out. In fact, however, the current findings indicate that, once bisexual-identified women begin to come out, they do so more quickly than lesbians and subsequently exhibit less, not more, identity stability than lesbian-identified women. Social interactionists have argued that the greater instability of bisexual identity is attributable to dichotomous thinking about sexuality and the lack of social support for bisexual identity—the same factors that delay the coming out process among bisexuals. They suggest that bisexuals change identities and wonder if they have adopted the right identity frequently because they are trying to fit themselves into a typology that does not describe their experience of themselves. Lesbians, on the other hand, exhibit more stable identity histories because the dichotomous typology provides a more adequate fit for their experience.

But this argument rests on the questionable assumption that the bisexual construct remains unavailable to an individual even after she has adopted a bisexual identity and implies that bisexual women are engaged in a constant search for a satisfying sexual identity. It is quite possible that, at any given

moment, women who switch back and forth between different sexual identities feel that the identity they currently possess is entirely satisfactory. Although the bisexual women in the current study are more likely than lesbians to have ever wondered about their identities and very likely to have done so within the past year, they are no more likely than lesbians to be wondering about their sexual identity at the current time. Presumably, therefore, they are momentarily satisfied with the bisexual identity they currently possess. What changes cause these women to become dissatisfied with a previously satisfactory identity more frequently than currently lesbian-identified women do?

One's self-identity is a description of one's social location. Changes in identity are to be expected of mature individuals and reflect changes in these individuals' social locations or in the language used to describe social location. But change is as socially constructed as the constructs that are being exchanged. One cannot cross a fence that has not been built no matter how many times one walks across the field; similarly, one cannot "change" if categories of meaning have not been constructed on the experiential space one traverses. Conversely, the construction of categories creates the possibility of change. In particular, the construction of sexual categories based on partner gender creates a boundary that bifurcates sexual experiential space. A woman who repeatedly crosses this boundary as she accumulates psychosexual experience, that is, a "bisexual," gives the appearance of sexual mutability and inconsistency. In contrast, a woman whose sexual experience consistently lies on one side of this boundary gives the appearance of greater sexual constancy—unless and until she, too, crosses the boundary. The former woman may adopt bisexual, lesbian, or heterosexual identities at different points in time, depending on the particular constellations of relationships represented by her sexual identity at these different times, whereas the latter woman will probably maintain a consistent lesbian or a consistent heterosexual identity.

Both lay and scientific authors frequently confuse the concepts of bisexuality and sexual mutability because of a failure to recognize the constructed nature of change. Bisexuality is perceived as sexual mutability only because the observer perceives sexuality in terms of the dichotomous constructs, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Perceived without benefit of this dichotomous framework, the bisexual is a person who is consistently open to having lovers of either gender, or to whom gender is as irrelevant as eye color. The bisexual is not more essentially or socially mutable than is the lesbian or the heterosexual; the appearance of greater change is a product of the socially constructed context within which the bisexual is beheld.

Descriptions of bisexuality as sexual mutability are often associated with an idealized conception of bisexuality as the most open form of sexuality. In

this view, bisexuals are seen as individuals who have overcome repressive sexual scripts to enable themselves to experience the whole range of their human sexual emotions or as individuals who are uniquely nondiscriminatory in their lovemaking. These appealing images of bisexuality are merely euphemistic variations on earlier stereotypes of bisexuals as indecisive, promiscuous, and fickle. Both conceptions of bisexuality ultimately rest on an outdated dichotomous conception of sexuality that reifies the importance of gender as a criterion in the choice of sexual partners.

Changes in the conceptualization of sexuality must be accompanied by parallel changes in models of sexual identity formation. Outdated developmental models can be replaced by an understanding of sexual identity formation as an ongoing dynamic process of describing one's social location within a changing social context. Identity change should no longer be understood as a sign of immaturity but as a normal outcome of the dynamic process of identity formation that occurs as mature individuals respond to changes in the available social constructs, the sociopolitical landscape, and their own positions on that landscape.

## NOTES

1. The positive value assigned to homosexual identity by developmental theorists was at least in part a reaction to the negative value assigned to homosexuality by the illness model of homosexuality (Coleman 1982). Whereas the illness model presented heterosexual identity as the desirable goal of a process of treatment for homosexuality, developmental theorists presented homosexual identity as the desirable goal of a process of essential self-discovery.

Ironically, the assumption of homosexual essence is based on the privileged status accorded heterosexuality in society. Because homosexuality is suppressed in a heterosexually dominated society, an individual who displays any evidence of homosexuality is suspected of being homosexual despite concurrent evidence of heterosexuality. Evidence of heterosexuality is easily dismissed as an attempt to conceal one's homosexuality, whereas evidence of homosexuality can only be explained as a reflection of the essence of the individual (Zinik 1985, 10).

2. Sexual self-identity was assessed with the question, "When you think about your sexual orientation, what word to you use most often to describe yourself?" a question designed to elicit expressions of self-identity rather than presented or perceived identity. Respondents chose from among the following responses: lesbian, gay, dyke, homosexual, bisexual, mainly straight or heterosexual but with some bisexual tendencies, unsure (don't know, undecided, or still wondering), and "I prefer not to label myself."

3. Respondents were not asked whether they had ever returned to a heterosexual identity. Future research in this area should include this question as well as other more detailed questions about the sequence and circumstances surrounding identity changes.

4. The psychosocial experiences of the lesbian-identified and bisexual-identified women in this study have been described elsewhere (Rust-Rodríguez 1989; Rust 1992) and are consistent with this argument. Bisexual respondents have higher ratios of heterosexual:homosexual feelings of sexual attraction and report having more recent and more serious heterosexual relationships than do lesbian respondents. Some of this difference may be due to differential interpre-

tation of experience in retrospect. The fact of marriage, however, is not subject to interpretation; bisexual respondents are more likely to have been married than lesbian respondents.

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