AVOIDING STIGMA BY DOING SEXUALITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF

SELF-IDENTIFIED BISEXUAL MEN AND WOMEN


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by

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**DEDICATION PAGE**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my oldest and dearest friend Blue. You have been with me my whole life and it is without question that I would not have accomplished all that I have without you.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, who went above and beyond in their support for me and this project. Even though they still have no idea what sociology is, why I decided to major in it, and what this thesis is about, they never gave up on me. They were there for me during the times when I wanted to stop, when I felt school was winning and I was losing faith in my ability to make it to the end. I would always hear their voices telling me to continue and push through.

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Bisexual individuals face challenges when disclosing their sexuality to others. Few sociological studies have addressed how, why, and when bisexual individuals "come out" about their sexuality. In particular, little research has explored how bisexual men and women use gender to convey messages of sexual orientation to avoid stigma or questioning of their sexuality. This study adds to the current literature on bisexuality by examining the connection between gender and sexual orientation perception. Drawing primarily on the symbolic interactionist theory of Erving Goffman and the framework by David Orzechowicz, this qualitative project looks at the ways in which bisexual individuals "do sexuality." I interviewed fifteen self-identified bisexual individuals. I

found that participants "do sexuality" not only through the use of gender but also by controlling who they came out to, communication styles, disclosure of sexuality in relationships, handling stereotypes, navigating sexuality borderlands, and paying close attention to how others react to their sexual orientation.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Bisexuality is culturally defined as a physical attraction to both men and women. Despite this definition, it is a sexual orientation that has often been misunderstood in American culture[1] perhaps because of negative stereotypes. Bisexuality is often associated with promiscuity, for example, which can lead to feelings of isolation and separation for bisexual men and women, and concerns about coming out (Bradford 2004; Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer 2005; Eliason 2001; Gammon and Isgro 2006; Knous 2005; Rust 2001; Shokeid 2001; Wilkerson, Ross, and Brooks 2009). This misunderstanding of bisexuality is often attributed to the limited way of expressing bisexual orientation identification. Some bisexuals have claimed that our language (particularly, sexual orientation categories) does now allow them to express and defend their orientation

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[1] In a news article released by *The New York Times*, Tuller (2011) described a study that found that male bisexuality "actually exist." The study measured sexual arousal of bisexual men. Because the men were aroused by images of men and women, the study concluded that bisexuality among males is legitimate. Tuller reported that the study received praise from some members of the bisexual community while angering others because the researchers were testing the idea that bisexual men were just closeted homosexuals. Even though the study confirmed the existence of bisexuality, the researchers defined bisexual attraction as a type of sexual arousal. Tuller quoted Ruthstorm, president of the Bisexual Resource Center in Boston, that defining bisexuality narrowly as arousal was an "insult." Ruthstorm said that bisexuality is expressed in many different ways not just sexual arousal. Her statement is supported by numerous academic literatures on bisexuality.

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(Bereket and Brayton 2008; Sedgwick 1990). In past literature, bisexuality is often conflated with homosexuality, which reinforces the dominant sexual orientation binary ideology of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Bereket and Brayton 2008; Bradford 2004; Eliason 2001; Gammon and Isgro 2006; Knous 2005; McLean 2007; 2008; Wilkerson et al. 2009). Even though there has been an increase in gender and sexuality research over the past 40 years in the social sciences, the bisexual community has yet to become a primary focus of research compared to homosexuality (Gammon and Isgro 2006).

Bisexuality raises interesting questions about gender and sexuality for sociologists. Some academic literature conceptualizes sexuality as a social product of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Orzechowicz 2010). Scholars have also defined sexuality as part of a cultural script aimed at erotic pleasure that produced genital response (Reiss 1986: 234). In fact, academic literature on sexuality has recognized that sexuality is socially and culturally defined and contextualized. Sexuality has multiple meanings that is defined and shaped by various social, political, economic, and cultural forces at hand (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005).

Some bisexual individuals have a difficult time disclosing their sexuality in our society because of the negative stigmas and misunderstandings of their sexual orientation. Misperceptions can affect their ability to find and be open with an intimate partner, coming out to individuals, and explaining their sexuality (Eliason 2001; Knous 2005; McLean 2004; 2007; 2008; Shokeid 2001). This thesis examines how bisexual individuals manage their sexual orientation identity, adopting and claiming a sexual orientation, and how they contend with the challenges to this identity. It sheds light on

how participants negotiate the disclosure of their sexuality to others. Research indicates that bisexual individuals have developed some form of concealing their sexuality yet few studies address how and why bisexual individuals conceal their sexual orientation. This work address how these individuals who have a non-traditional sexuality manage and affirm their sexual orientation identity among monosexual, gay or straight, orientation groups (Layton 2000).

The goal of this study is to address the connection that exists between masculinity and femininity and sexual orientation. I explore the following research questions: 1) Do bisexual individuals use gender to avoid stigma associated with their sexuality?; 2) How do bisexual individuals navigate in the heterosexual and/or homosexual communities, and do they think they are part of a bisexual community?; and, 3) What are the social and personal consequences for coming out as bisexual? I conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen men and women. Some respondents identified as bisexual, while others volunteered for the study who engaged in what we might consider bisexual behaviors but who did not currently have a bisexual identity.

In order to explore these questions, I rely on several theoretical frameworks. I draw from Cooley's (1927) concept of the looking-glass self, and Goffman's (1959, 1963) concepts of stigma and impression management to determine if, how, and why bisexual individuals use gender to avoid stigma associated with their sexual orientation. In addition to these classical sociological theories, I employ frameworks that attempt to understand how people create gender or sexuality in their interactions with others. As members of society, individuals find themselves acting out gender roles to convey messages of masculinity and femininity; we "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Orzechowicz (2010) expanded West and Zimmerman's "doing gender" to "doing sexuality." He explored the connection between gender roles and their meaning attached to sexuality; he argues that people "do sexuality." By acting out a gender role that is associated with sexual orientation, such as males acting feminine to be part of the homosexual community regardless of their sexual orientation is the process of "doing sexuality." Likewise, Hennen (2008) argues that some people "do gayness." None of these interactional theories examine how bisexuals might do sexuality differently than gay men or lesbians.

In addition to these symbolic interactionist theories, I address queer theory. Queer theory permits the analysis of behaviors and identity outside the normative, binary system of gender, sex, and sexuality (Valocchi 2005). It allows for a rethinking the use of gender, sex, and sexuality in sociology by asking new questions and rethinking old concepts (Valocchi 2005: 753). Many queer theorists question the utility of normative sex, gender, and sexuality categories. Interviews with bisexuals highlight how categorization can reinforce inequality.

These theories allow us to understand how people create or perform gender or sexuality. In sociology, gender refers to the socially constructed identity that is often associated with a person's biological sex, or, masculinity and femininity (Epstein 1988). Gender identity refers to the feelings of being a man or a woman and tied to the biological components of being male and female. Although I am not exploring *how* individuals develop their gender identity per se, I analyze how and why individuals use gender characteristics associated with gender identity to convey or associate themselves with a sexual orientation. For example, I found that some bisexual men intentionally act

effeminate when around gay men, or alternatively, masculine when interacting with heterosexual men, to be considered part of that sexual orientation community. Ultimately, this thesis explores the process of coming out for bisexual men and women, and how that process is influenced by gender and sexuality.

# CHAPTER II

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A common understanding of bisexuality is that an individual has a sexual desire to be with both men and women (Bradford 2004; Eliason 2005; Halperin 2009; Knous 2005; McLean 2007; 2008; Pennington 2009; Rust 2001; Wilkerson et al. 2009); yet, scholars maintain that there are many ways to define bisexuality. These definitions can vary based on the individual's subjective perception and experience. Halperin (2009), for example, claims that there are multiple definitions of bisexuality. He describes thirteen definitions of the term and suggests that many of the definitions can be combined and overlapped depending on the individual who identifies as bisexual. Because there are multiple definitions, some researchers do not define the term intentionally, to allow respondents to explain what it means from their own perspectives (McLean 2007; Pennington 2009). This allows researchers to understand the complexity of bisexuality and the subjective meanings of the term. The uncertainty in how to define or categorize bisexuality can lead to many identity issues for members of the community. Because bisexuality is hard to define and can vary from person to person, our culture does not recognize it as a legitimate sexuality (Eliason 2001; Gammon and Isgro 2006; Pennington 2009). This means that many see bisexuality as a transition stage between heterosexuality

and homosexuality, not as a definite sexual orientation like heterosexuality and

homosexuality.

Bisexuality might not be recognized culturally because of dualisms in language.

Bereket and Brayton (2008) state that our language is constructed on dualisms such as

feminine/masculine, right/wrong, left/right, good/bad, gay/straight. Our social world

operates in dualisms based off the language we use. Groups that disrupt the dualism are

marginalized and are ignored by our culture because they do not support the dualism

system but rather challenge the system in place. Due to this dualism of language, bisexual

individuals have a hard time coming up with ways to describe their experiences since

their sexual orientation goes against the major dichotomy of sexualities (Bereket and

Brayton 2008). The inability to describe experiences and not being part of the dichotomy

of sexualities can alienate bisexual individuals from public recognition.

Language can also be heterosexist. Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer (2005) explored

unintentional heterosexism in language and its effects on members of the lesbian, gay,

and bisexual community (LGB). In the United States, some heterosexuals use the word

"gay" to call someone or something "stupid" or "weird," but may not perceive the term

"gay" to be associated with sexual orientation (Burn et al. 2005). Even if heterosexist

language was not meant to be abusive, it contributed to psychological stress and antigay

harassment. The unintentional effect of heterosexist language on LGB individuals caused

fear of prejudice and decreased the individual's likelihood to disclose their sexuality.

Bisexuality has been delegitimized in other ways. Gammon and Isgro (2006)

wrote that the history of bisexuality in academic literature has been absent, under-

recognized, or just coupled with theories and literature related to homosexuality (see also

Bereket and Brayton 2008; Bradford 2004; Eliason 2001; Knous 2005; McLean 2007; McLean 2008; Wilkerson et al. 2009). Bisexuality is not the same as homosexuality. Conflating bisexuality with homosexuality aids in the continuation of the dichotomy of sexualities and places bisexuality as subordinate to heterosexuality. Sedgwick (1990) developed a framework, "the epistemology of the closet," which states that the world operates in a way that mirrors the straight/gay dichotomy. The epistemology of the closet was used to analyze text and shows that the world mirrors that of the sexual dichotomy of gay and straight. By showing how things are viewed in a heterosexual or homosexual sense, limits the understanding or view of the world by someone who does not fit in that dichotomy.

Sociologists, such as David Orzechowicz (2010), have applied the epistemology of the closet to everyday interactions. Orzechowicz observed the work culture of individuals in a parade department for an amusement park. The parade department is a homonormative workplace dominated by gay men. Orzechowicz noted that men who work in the parade department are seen as gay until they can otherwise prove they are straight. This "gay until proven straight" attitude highlights that the world sees sexuality in a monosexual, gay or straight, way (Layton 2000; Orzechowicz 2010: 235). By stating that the world sees sexuality in a straight/gay dichotomy, Orzechowicz challenged the epistemology of the closet by highlighting that in this setting, the straight/gay dichotomy does not place homosexuality in subordination to heterosexuality. Orzechowicz found that men in the parade department were seen as either gay or straight. Rarely did performers acknowledge male bisexuality and saw it as a place of confusion or place of transition (246).

Bisexuals also feel marginalized in everyday activities (Gammon and Isgro 2006; Shokeid 2001). Many bisexual individuals view their community as lacking, small, or part of greater two communities, heterosexual and homosexual, thus not its own community to begin with (Rust 2001). In a study conducted by Rust (2001), bisexual individuals were asked to draw a picture of the bisexual community in relation to other sexual orientation communities. Respondents drew smaller images of the bisexual community, in relation to other lesbian and gay communities as well as the heterosexual community. Rust argues that this indicates a lack of a community specifically for bisexuals. She also suggests that the findings indicate that bisexual individuals see their community as overlapping with that of heterosexual and homosexual communities (Rust 2001).

Anzaldúa (1987) and Sanchez (1993) state a border is an invisible line that is socially constructed to keep unwanted individuals at bay. A border receives its strength and power from the society that creates it and maintains its dominance over outsiders. The result of a border is the creation and existence of a borderland. This borderland is composed of a mixture of norms and values that are constantly transitioning due to the changing nature of the border that it surrounds. Although Anzaldúa and Sanchez are speaking of the Southwestern border of the United States, the concept of the socially created border and the borderland has implications in my study. According to Anzaldúa,

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: The squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." – Anzaldúa 1987: 25

Because bisexuality is often interpreted as confusion or a transition sexuality, it is difficult for bisexual individuals to explain their sexuality to others. McLean stated, "the myriad meanings of bisexuality make it rather difficult to explain what identifying as bisexual means and reinforces the lack of understanding of bisexuality in the social world" (2007:153). This misunderstanding is due to a possible lack of public image (Wilkerson et at. 2009). Wilkerson et al. (2009) analyzed a university campus that was friendly to non-heterosexual individuals and yet still found very little displays of non-heterosexual lifestyles. When imagery of non-heterosexual individuals was found around campus on murals, posters, and campus magazines, these images mainly depicted homosexual individuals. Little support for gay and bisexual men influenced how these men developed their sociosexual identity and belonging to a community. With a small community and lack of bisexual imagery, many bisexuals felt lonely and isolated (Bradford 2009; McLean 2007; Wilkerson et al. 2009).

Misunderstandings about bisexuality can contribute to a more complicated coming out process for bisexual men and women (Knous 2005; McLean 2007). When a bisexual decides to come out (or affirm their sexual orientation), they are stating that they are not only attracted to members of the same sex but that they are also attracted to members of the opposite sex (McLean 2007). Coming out as bisexual is difficult because it means to go against the dichotomy of sexualities; individuals are stating that they are neither gay nor straight. As a result, many bisexual individuals are careful with whom they come out to and choose to come out only when they know they will receive no negative reaction or have a support system (Knous 2005; McLean 2007; 2008).

In order to make the coming out process easier, some bisexuals strategically use gender when interacting with heterosexual and homosexual communities. Sociologists refer to gender as masculinity and femininity. Bisexual individuals are unique in that their sexual orientation is not limited to one sexual community. Their presentation of gender can be changed, depending on who they are involved with, to fit that of both heterosexual and homosexual communities. Bisexual individuals use a common technique known as "passing," which allows them to navigate through mainstream society (Knous 2005). Bisexual individuals alter their image, communication, clothing, and gender mannerisms in order to be seen as members of both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. This technique allows them to interact with the different communities without their sexuality coming in question unless they choose (Knous 2005).

Heterosexuality and homosexuality have their own unique set of culturally defined gender roles that a person needs to perform. Bisexuality is seen as a combination of these sexual orientations; hence, bisexual individuals enact or perform gender depending on the context of their relationship at the time (Pennington 2009). Pennington (2009) noted that the bisexuals in her study were using traditional gender ideologies, often tied to a heterosexual lifestyle, when involved in relationships. Bisexual individuals adopted the ideology that the feminine partner would be more submissive to the masculine partner. Although there were some instances of fluctuation when involved in same-sex relationships, respondents usually defaulted to the traditional gender ideologies. Even though bisexuals can face rejection from both heterosexual and homosexual communities (Shokeid 2001), they are able to find placement once they are involved with a significant other (Pennington 2009).

Gender roles are closely related to sexual orientation. West and Zimmerman state that men and women are "hostages" to the roles of gender and therefore act out these gender roles in society (1987: 126). This process of acting out these gender characteristics is known as "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). By acting masculine or feminine in interactions, an individual is "doing gender." "Doing gender" creates differences between men and women. These differences are socially constructed to create a hierarchical order between the two genders (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender is connected to displays of sexual orientations (Knous 2005; McLean 2007; 2008; Orzechowicz 2010; Pennington 2009). For example, Orzechowicz (2010) found that straight men adopted feminine characteristics of their gay coworkers to be welcomed and accepted in their work environment. This finding is an example of how gender is related to sexual orientation. By acting feminine, often associated with homosexuality especially for men, these workers are "doing gayness" (Hennen 2008). This highlights that individuals are seen as either gay or straight and not bisexual. Through the use of gender to convey sexuality, straight men in Orzechowicz's (2010) study were "doing sexuality" rather than "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987).

**Theoretical Framework**

This thesis relies on multiple theoretical perspectives to understand the process of coming out for bisexual men and women. Symbolic interactionism argues that encounters with other people allow for the learning and following of sexual scripts that vary with social settings (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 2009). Sexuality is best understood as not a thing in and of itself but a category or identity created through discourse and social interaction (Plummer 1982; Stein 1989; Williams et al. 2009). Using

symbolic interaction in sexuality research allows for the careful attention to social

settings and interactions that shape the meanings people assign to their experiences.

These experiences are unique to the individual and allow for different interpretation of

their setting. Most sociological literature on identity management studies its use in

marginalized communities such as nonheterosexual individuals. Goffman (1959) argues

that the presentation of a person is in response to the scene that individuals find

themselves in. This ability to control the social image others place on a person is

impression management. The image placed on a marginalized community or individual

has the potential to create a stigmatized sense of self. Using Goffman's (1963) assertion

that stigmatized individuals take measures to protect themselves from the harmful effects

of stigma is central to my study. Goffman (1963) writes that unnatural passions, such as

homosexuality, are considered to be blemishes of individual character. With bisexuality

closely tied to homosexuality, bisexual individuals have to deal with the issue of stigma

attached to them (Bradford 2004; Eliason 2001; Gammon and Isgro 2006; Knous 2005;

Rust 2001; Shokeid 2001; Wilkerson et al. 2009).

Much like Judith Butler's (1990) theorizing of gender as a performance, gender is

fluid and individuals "do" it and "do" it differently based on social relations within

specific and changing contexts, David Orzechowicz (2010) explored the concept of how

individuals "do sexuality" in the workplace. Gender roles are culturally linked with

sexual orientation so by "doing gender," people are also "doing sexuality." The

connection between gender roles and perception of sexual orientation has been found in

previous literatures on homosexual stereotypes. Gay men are expected to act feminine

and lesbians are expected to masculine. Orzechowicz explored how straight men use

gender in a way to express certain sexuality characteristics at work to be accepted into the work culture of a predominately-gay work setting. By adopting gender roles that are seen as feminine, a male coworker is able to navigate the gay work setting and be accepted among his coworkers. His study found that gender was not only used to express masculinity and femininity, it was being used to express gay or straight tendencies. This study supports the concept that gender roles are used to "do sexuality" as defined by Orzechowicz as well as seek to add to the concept of "doing sexuality" in that it is not limited to just "doing gender."

Queer theory has often been used to analyze bisexuality as well as symbolic interactionism (Green 2007; Marcus 2005; Williams et al. 2009). Queer theory represents a theoretical vanguard (Green 2007) because it assumes that "sexuality can mean affect, kinship, social reproduction, the transmission of property, the division between public and private, and the construction of race and nationality" (Marcus 2005: 205). Queer theory has led some academic and activist circles to believe that it is the solution to fix "the wrongs of old school sociology in the study of sexuality" (Green 2005: 30) by critiquing categorization. Gamson and Moon (2004) state that queer theory pushes scholars to be critical of social categories and how these categories obfuscate the subjects they intended to name. Queer theory has, in essence, reinvigorated the study of sexuality (Green 2005). There appears to be a tension between queer theory and sociology with some academics critiquing queer theory's anti-identity position. Green states that queer theory cannot exist as a framework for finding subjects conceived from a sociological position. Sociological theories, concepts, and questions rely on the very binaries that

queer theory seeks to challenge and deconstruct (Anzaldúa 1987; Green 2005; Williams et al. 2009).

I am interested in how self-identified bisexual men and women manage their identities as bisexual individuals. Goffman's (1959) concept of dramaturgy suggests that life is a type of stage on which we are constantly managing the impressions we make. When we are interacting with other people, we are not giving images of our true self but rather catering to the social environment we are in. We perform to the images we want others to see while trying to minimize any interruptions to those performances. One way that individuals manage information so as to not discredit their social image may be through selective disclosure of information, concealing information by simple omission, and withholding or lying about information. Although Goffman's work is central to my thesis, I am not implying that the sexual orientation of bisexual individuals is false or invalid. The conformation of their sexual orientation as legitimate is not the goal of this study; rather, how bisexual individuals maintain and present their sexual orientation to other so as not to face a stigma.

Building on these frameworks, my study is concerned with how bisexual individuals manage stigma associated with their sexual orientation. How, where, why, and why do bisexuals come out? I focus on the ways self-identified bisexual individuals maintain their identities as bisexuals when faced with different social circles. The need for stigma and impression management arises when the bisexual individual realizes that their identity may be perceived as unfavorable or uncomfortable to the social group the person is engaging in.

# CHAPTER III

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based upon in-depth, semi-structured interviews with men and women. My sample consisted of fifteen self-identified bisexual individuals from Texas. Fourteen interviews were one-on-one and one interview occurred with the participants' husband in the room. This was at the participants' request. All respondents self-identified as bisexual (currently or at some point), or feel closely related to the bisexual community. I chose to use qualitative interviews because my central questions concerned sexuality identity and negotiation of identity. Quantitative methods are "not particularly useful in revealing the meanings people ascribe to particular events or activities; nor is it well suited to understanding complicated social processes in context" (Esterberg 2002: 2). By using qualitative methodology, I was able to identity what participants do, why they do what they do, and the significance of their experiences from their own perspective. I used qualitative methodology because sexuality is a complicated construct "established, formulated, and transformed by, through and within social practice" (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005: 266-267). If I had used quantitative methodology to conduct my study of self-identified bisexual men and women, I would have disregarded the fluid nature of sexuality being a social, cultural construct (Anzaldua 1987; Gagnon 1977; Gagnon and Simon 1973; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Plummer 1995; Seidman 1994; Weeks 1985).

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Interviews allow researchers to move beyond their own experiences and ideas so that they are able to understand what life is like from the perspectives of their respondents (Esterberg 2002: 87). Semi-structured interviews permit the exploration of a topic more openly than structured interviews and allow participants the ability to express their opinions and ideas in their own words. The added flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to carefully alter the interview questions or probe as needed, so as to follow the participant's lead. Finally, semi-structured interviews allow minority groups who have not had their voices heard the opportunity to share their unique experiences in their own words.

I had a difficult time locating individuals to interview. I suspect this difficulty was related to the contested definition of what it means to be bisexual. I had to use multiple recruitment strategies in order to find volunteers. After the Texas State Institutional Review Board approved me to conduct the study, I initially located my participants through Facebook. I sent out recruitment messages to friends who I knew were bisexual or knew people who were bisexual (see appendix A). I did not intend, nor did I, interview friends[2]. I asked friends to notify these individuals to personally contact me via email or phone. This was a successful strategy for a short time. I received numerous messages from friends saying that they knew this person was bisexual but now they are dating a man or woman and that they were not sure anymore. Also, I received messages from friends stating that knew a woman who they *suspected* to be bisexual because they saw her "all over girls" but that they think she was just having fun. After a few weeks, I

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[2] Friends were not recruited for this study because of the close relationship that I already had established with them. I did not want to abuse my status as a friend nor have my results influenced by the friendship.

decided to attend four non-profit and two student organizations that worked with or for the bisexual community. I visited six groups and attended three to four meetings per group to find respondents. Most of the individuals who attend these groups identified as gay men or lesbian women. Only five identified as bisexual, all under the age of 21, and none were interested in volunteering for my research project. I finally turned to an Internet message board to find participants. The message board is used to find men and women who are interested in both men and women in any form or relationship. Even though I received several replies, many individuals decided to not interview because they were not out and feared that they might be discovered. Many expressed interest if they could interview online or take a survey, to protect their identity. The message board existed as a way for men and women to find other men and women for both sexual and committed relationships. Only one message board was used to locate participants and the message clearly stated that I was looking for participants to interview for my graduate thesis on bisexuality. The message closely resembled the Facebook message (Appendix A). Because I was using in-depth, face-to-face interviews this was not an option for me. Several men in heterosexual relationships contacted me but then withdrew from the research project for various reasons. Some feared that their partner might find out or had other concerns about being "outed." All of these recruitment issues appear to be directly related to having a bisexual identity.

I set up meetings via email or phone at a location of their choosing. Most interviews took place at the participant's home. I used a semi-structured interview guide (see appendix B) that was divided into five sections designed to address each of my research questions. I asked questions regarding disclosure of sexuality to individuals;

how their sexuality affects their relationships, if it does; how they perceived certain

sexual orientation groups to perceive them and if their actions differ based on the sexual

orientation group they are with; basic demographic questions; and a small set of

conclusion questions.

Eight respondents identified as bisexual; four identified as either gay, lesbian,

pansexual and questioning but did identify as bisexual at one point; and three identified

as open or no sexual identity but engage in bisexual acts. The participant who identified

as pansexual labeled it as sexuality that is non-limiting by gender or sexual orientation.

The individual who identified as questioning labeled his sexuality to be in a constant state

of change; his sexual orientation changed based on how he felt. Three individuals felt that

by labeling or identifying with a sexuality confines them to rules and their personal view

of sexuality did not agree with any definitions that existed. I did not offer a definition of

bisexuality during the interview because much like Halperin (2009), there are many

different definitions for bisexuality and the complexity of the term varies by the

individual who identifies with it. Even though I offered no definition of bisexuality, I

asked respondents about their own definition of bisexuality.

Eight interviewees were from a mid-size town and seven lived in one of two

major metropolitan cities. Most were located in one geographic location. Most

respondents are young and white however there was some diversity in terms of age and

race/ethnicity (refer to Table 1 for demographic information). All names are pseudonyms.

All identifiable information of participants was changed. Nine identified as being

Caucasian or White, one as Italian, one as mixed race, one as mixed/African American,

two as Hispanic, and one as Asian. All participants were well-educated meaning that all

had attended some college. Six were engaged in a same-gender relationship, six were in a heterosexual relationship, and three were not in a relationship. Interviews ranged from about 45 minutes to 2 hours.

I decided not to pursue one interview with a participant. The reason being, during a brief conversation with the potential interviewee, the participant revealed that they had attempted suicide a few months before the interview. The respondent stated one the main reason for the attempt was because the individual was having a difficult time coming to terms with his/her sexuality. I felt it was in the best interest for the individual, and for me, to seek counseling and not to engage in the interview. This conversation left me with doubt about continuing further with my thesis. I attended a counseling session and took a four-week break from my thesis to gather my emotions[3].

**Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Information**

| Name | Gender Identity | Age | Out | Race/ Ethnicity | Sexual Orientation |
|------|-----------------|-----|-----|-----------------|--------------------|
| Steven | Male | 20 | Close Friends | White | Gay |
| Megan | Female | 21 | No | White | Bisexual |
| Brandon | Male | 21 | Except Family | Mixed/ African American | Bisexual |
| Jennifer | Female | 22 | Friends | White | Bisexual |
| Michael | Male | 25 | Everyone | White | Bisexual |
| Nelly | Female | 20 | Everyone | Hispanic | Lesbian |
| Morgan | FtM* | 31 | Everyone | White | Pansexual |
| Joseph | Male | 24 | Friends | Hispanic/ Mestizo | Questioning |
| Luke | Male | 48 | Except Work | Italian | Bisexual |
| Kevin | Male | 21 | Everyone | Asian/ Thai | Bisexual |
| Ted | Male | 66 | Close Individuals | White | No Sexuality |
| Kolby | Male | 44 | Close Individuals | White | Bisexual |
| Ryan | Male | 53 | No | Mixed | Human |
| Travis | Male | 25 | Close Friends | White | Bisexual |
| Jessica | Female | 22 | No | White | Open |

* FtM is an acronym for female-to-male transgender men

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[3] For sociological studies of managing researcher emotions during research, see Arendell (1997), Irwin (2006), and La Pastina (2006).

I recorded and transcribed the interviews for this analysis. Once interviews were transcribed, I used inductive qualitative data analysis techniques to identify main themes in the transcripts. I used open coding to find common themes throughout the interviews by highlighting relevant quotes and writing possible codes on the transcripts (Esterberg 2002). Open coding allowed for the use to be open to themes that might appear that is unrelated to my topic or might provide evidence that is contradictory to popular belief. Once common themes were discovered, I then used focus coding to narrow my themes and locate quotes from a stigma management perspective.

# CHAPTER IV

## FINDINGS

The men and women interviewed managed their bisexual identity by carefully selecting when and whom they came out to, as well as the way they explained and kept their sexuality a secret to partners, friends, and other individuals in social settings. I identified six primary themes in the data. Respondents managed their sexuality in relation to others by (1) coming out only in certain contexts, (2) managing gender stereotypes while coming out, (3) contending with bisexual stereotypes while coming out, (4) using verbal communication to gauge other's reactions toward bisexuality, (5) using psychological, physical, and cultural borders, and (6) keeping silent about sexuality after coming out. I will argue that by determining how, when, and why to come out to others as bisexual is indicative of "doing sexuality." By "doing sexuality," participants were able to avoid stigma associated with bisexuality.

### Disclosing Sexuality: The Process of Coming Out

Coming out – the process of revealing oneself as gay, lesbian or bisexual to others – is considered to be one of the major events in the development of a integrated and healthy homosexual and bisexual identity (McLean 2007: 151). However, for bisexual men and women, coming out is a complex process that involves revealing that one is neither heterosexual, attached to the opposite sex, nor homosexual, attracted to the same

sex, or both (McLean 2007). Plummer (1995) stated that coming out can be considered to be a positive step in the process of being gay, lesbian or bisexual and a momentous act. Coming out not only has psychological significance in the development of the self for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals but also has social implications for these individuals. Coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual is not an event that occurs just once in the individual's life; it is an ongoing process (Ward and Winstanley 2005).

All participants described instances where they came out multiple times depending on the particular situation and the environment. With the exception of Morgan, who was outed against his will in high school, and Travis, who was outed to his girlfriend because she found gay and bisexual porn on his computer, respondents stated that they had some sort of selection process for disclosing their sexuality to others. Even though Morgan and Travis were outed against their will, both men engaged in the careful selection process like the other men and women interviewed about disclosing their sexuality.

One reason why respondents had a careful selection process for coming out was the fear of being labeled and defined as "only" bisexual. Participants expressed that they are not ashamed of who they are. They are willing to disclose their sexuality to those who asked but they want to make sure the person knew them for who they are first. Although not always considered a negative stigma, respondents did not want a label to define them. This label is what my respondents tried to control by careful selection. They wanted to be known for who they are rather than their sexual orientation. According to Steven:

> *Steven*: People just don't know how to accept it, how to deal with it so they just made fun of it than anything else.

> *Interviewer*: Can you give me an example?

*Steven:* They would point it out when it wasn't necessary. "Oh that's probably because he's bi or because he was gay." That person never became their name or anything, they were known as "that" person or gay.

*Interviewer:* Do you feel that people see bisexual people as gay?

*Steven:* I think for the most part yeah. People focus on the fact that they date the same gender rather than the opposite. The bi guy is seen as someone who focuses on guys and not so much on girls. A girl who's bi, I think people would focus more on her female partner than her male partners.

When asked how he controls the label people place on him, he expressed that it is by choosing whom to come out to:

*Interviewer:* Are you more willing to tell people you never met or people you were close with about your sexuality?

*Steven:* I was more willing to tell people I was close with because I didn't want my sexuality to be my defining feature when I meet people. I want people to notice me as Steven then just that bi guy.

Morgan expressed similar challenges with the label of being bisexual. Once Morgan was "outed" by an individual he trusted, he said that he did not care who knew about his sexuality but hated being singled out due to his sexuality. The constant questioning of his sexuality is what bothered him the most. He stated:

I didn't care that people knew but once people knew I was no longer me. People associated me with my sexual orientation. The label is something I dealt with and still do. Being trans doesn't help either. My sexual orientation is no one's business. Not everyone needs to know. I just don't like being labeled and defined by my sexuality.

Respondents' careful selection can be interpreted as a way to manage stigma associated with having a bisexual identity. Goffman states that a person who is received easily in ordinary social intercourse can posses a trait, the cause of the stigma, which may turn *"normals"* against the individual (1963: 5). The stigma then over shadows other contributions to society and the individual is then defined by that trait. The way that

*normals* come to posses such knowledge of the stigma is through visibility. Although individuals normally use sight to label stigma to person, mechanisms such as "perceptibility" and "evidentness" are also used (Goffman 1963: 49). According to Goffman, homosexuality is considered to be a blemish of individual character, which is one of three stigmas address in his work. With bisexuality being associated with homosexuality, bisexual individuals are then perceived as others by *normals*. Therefore the label bisexual overshadows these individuals' contributions to our society. However, this stigma depends on the audience's perception of it being a stigma. By careful selection of individuals whom they come out to, they are able to control the stigma associated with bisexuality. This careful selection of individuals led for participants to be out with friends and a close few individuals.

When I asked Jessica if she was out to anyone she replied with a laugh, "not here." When questioned further about what she meant Jessica said, "not being straight in Texas, and being open about it, is begging for discrimination. I'm from a very liberal area in Boston. I'm out there but not here. Also I'm in an open marriage so not only do I have the bi thing going against me, I have this notion of being promiscuous going against me too. I just keep my private life a secret here." She explained that none of her friends know about her sexuality or her open marriage, just her husband and boyfriend. "I just want to be seen as Jessica, get my degree and get out..."

Careful selection of whom to come out to allowed respondents to control their image as a means of avoiding stigma associated with their sexuality. The label bisexual overshadows a person's identity so by careful selection, participants are able to avoid being defined and labeled by a sexuality that distinguishes them from the rest of society.

The ability to come out to others is indicative of "doing" sexuality. Careful selection not only allowed the men and women interviewed to avoid stigma but also allowed them to have control over who saw them as bisexual and who saw them as not.

**Coming Out as Bisexual: Dealing with Gender Stereotypes and Norms**

Some respondents described how they embraced or rejected gender norms when they came out. Acting according to gender norms was a common theme among the respondents. They expressed that it was just what "guys did" or "girl's don't do." Masculine identity is centered on the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). Men are expected to be unemotional, aggressive, and dominant whereas women are expected to be, emotional, passive and helpless (Anderson 2008; Bianchi et al. 2007; Glick, Gangl, and Gibb 2007; Steinhouse 2001). To deviate from this norm was to bring attention to the individual, usually attention to their sexual orientation, especially among men (Anderson 2007; Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Eliason 2001; Filiault and Drummond 2009; Fingerhut and Peplau 2006; Glick et al. 2007; Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers 2003). Men, who are effeminate or exhibit feminine characteristics on occasion, were often associated with homosexuality (see Anderson 2007; Eliason 2001).

Stereotypes, when coupled with sexual orientation, are to be described by using physical and audio characteristics such as clothing, voice fluctuations, and language (Anderson 2007; Blashill and Powlishta; Eliason 2001; Filiault and Drummond 2009; Fingerhut and Peplau 2006; Glick et al. 2007; Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers 2003). Stereotypes associated with homosexuality are often based on the way a person acts and communicates (Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Fingerhutt and Peplau 2006). Men I interviewed said that to be perceived as a homosexual male, they would have to act

feminine or talk about female issues, such as clothes, hair, and feelings. For some women

I interviewed, acting masculine, such as talking about sports, baggy clothes, getting dirty,

associated her with being a lesbian. According to Morgan, for example:

> *Interviewer:* Can you think of times when you might have acted more feminine or
> masculine than you usually do to gain acceptance among the individuals you are
> with?
>
> *Morgan·* I wouldn't say that I acted more masculine or feminine to gain
> acceptance but rather that I just didn't act or do something if it meant going
> against a gender norm.
>
> *Interviewer:* Can you give me an example?
>
> *Morgan:* Like when I change my tire or my oil. I remember one time when I had a
> flat tire, I know how to change a tire but a guy stopped and he did it for me. Mind
> you, this is when I was visually a female. I didn't want to tell him that I could do
> it. I just let him do it because, you know, women don't change their tire…that's
> what guys do.

Likewise, Travis stated that when he interacts with the homosexual community

that he follows stereotypes that are associated with homosexuality. When asked how he

does this, Travis said, "when I go out to a gay club I'll tend to iron my shirt [laughs] and

look "nice." [laughs] I follow the rules you know." Filiault and Drummond (2009) find

that clothing can be used to help the individual pass, move unnoticed among different

sexual orientation communities. Clothing not only aids in sexual orientation perception

but also indicates ones socioeconomic status. Muted clothing, styles considered to be

dull, cheap, was associated with heterosexuality and masculinity. Clothing seen to be

stylish and colorful was interpreted to be feminine and attributed to being homosexual

(Sears 2005).

Brandon stated that there are certain issues he does not talk about when he dates

women because it might cause his female partner to question whether there was

something "wrong" with him. He stated that issues such as music, television shows, and celebrity gossip were limited or just not brought out: "I don't talk about Lagy Gaga's new song, nor do I sing to Britney or Madonna when I'm around her. Straight guys are not supposed to like those singers." These female pop artists highlight femininity and female empowerment in our culture and are often favorable among women, gay, and bisexual men (Capulet 2010; Walters 2001). Ryan also expressed times in which he was careful with what he said: "Since I am not out about my sexuality, I have to be careful with what I say and do. If there is topic that I don't know that much about, like football or sports, geez I hate football, I just don't say anything." By not acting on certain characteristics for fear of being seen as homosexual, respondents were able to avoid stigma associated with homosexuality.

Several male participants stated that acting on gender stereotypes was not limited to when they were around other males but also females. Ryan, who is not out to anyone about his sexuality, stated that he is not given the privilege to act masculine or feminine with others. When he was around females and males, he said he acted more masculine (see Connell 1987).

Female participants were also expected to act "their gender role," as Nelly put it. All of the females described similar experiences in how they were expected to act. Because they considered themselves to be feminine, or perceived as feminine, they felt as if they were expected to take on the submissive, passive role:

> *Jennifer* Even though I consider myself to be aggressive and assertive, if I am interested in a guy I can't just go up to him and make a move…that's not what girls are expected to do. It's so frustrating.
>
> *Interviewer* What do you do then?

*Jennifer:* I make little glances at him and bat my eyes so to speak. I have to be coy about it. If I go up to a guy and make the first move, he gets intimidated.

Although females are given more fluidity when it comes to displaying their gender without fear of being labeled as lesbian (Orzechowicz 2010), many felt that by acting on these gender role stereotypes allowed for non-confusion among others, especially males with whom they were in a relationship. This finding was similar to the experiences of bisexual individuals in Pennington's (2009) study on gender roles and romantic relationships. Relationships played a significant role in participant's decision to come out to their partners. When asked if his partner knew of his bisexuality, Michael said "of course. It was one of the first things that came up in our date. He asked me what my sexual orientation was and I told him." Brandon, Tim, and Nelly expressed the same process of immediate disclosure with their partner but only because the relationships were same-sex.

This finding supported that of McLean's (2007) that bisexual individuals are more likely to disclose their sexuality to gay men and women. Although participants were not asked about their partner's sexual orientation, they were willing to disclose their sexuality early on to those who have similar non-heterosexual sexualities as them. This is not to say that those who were in opposite sex relationships did not tell their partners of their sexuality but rather that coming out to their partner was not as easy.

Kolby and Luke stated that they were out to their female partners; however, they did not come out immediately. Both replied that their partners knew of their sexuality but it was only after their partner said that they were bisexual or were okay with bisexuality, which occurred later on in their relationship. Other studies find that bisexuals are more likely to disclose their sexuality to other non-heterosexual individuals or people who are

comfortable with bisexuality (McLean 2004; 2007). Kolby said that when his girlfriend told him about her sexuality, he felt comfortable to tell her about his: "when my girlfriend, who is my ex-wife by-the-way, told me she was bisexual I told her cool...I am too. I felt comfortable to tell her because she understood bisexuality." For Luke, he told his girlfriend that he was bisexual after she expressed that she had no problem with bisexuality.

Not all male respondents had supportive female partners. Travis and Steven stated that their relationships with female partners did not last long because their partners were confused and did not understand their bisexuality:

> *Interviewer*: Were you ever out to a romantic partner?

> *Travis*: Yeah, my ex-girlfriend knew.

> *Interviewer*: How and when did you tell her?

> *Travis*: Well funny thing, I actually didn't tell her at first. She was going through my computer and found gay and bisexual porn. When she asked me what this was doing in m computer and if I was gay I told her no that I was bisexual. This was after like a year of being together. We talked about it and stayed in our relationship but [my bisexuality] was slowly eating away at her because she just didn't get it. She was always asking how this was possible and how could I have these feelings. Anyway we both moved apart for school and work stuff and tried the long distance thing. After a couple of months she told me she couldn't do it anymore. She felt like she wasn't a woman because I had these feelings for men. She took it personally and told me that she has issues with it.

Steven told a similar story about how his girlfriend was confused about his sexuality and how a person can like both genders equally. This confusion was not just limited to female partners but also male partners of participants. For male respondents, confusion about their bisexuality came from their female partners. For female respondents, confusion about their bisexuality came from both male and female partners. The confusion was about how they could be bisexual.

There was a common theme of partners feeling inadequate to the participants because they felt they were not good enough. This inadequate feeling led respondents to get frustrated or feel ashamed about their sexuality. Jennifer stated her frustration with men and women who had difficulty understanding her sexuality. Steven expressed that when he was in a relationship with a female that did not know he was bisexual, he would feel pressure not to disclose certain things that he liked. When asked what issues or topics he felt he was unable to talk openly about, he replied,

> ...for instance, I like to garden and watch t.v. shows about gardening and cooking. When I am with a girl, I can't watch such shows because she looks at me strange and asks why I am looking at that. Gardening and cooking, shows like that are not meant to for men to watch. It just raises an eyebrow.

I asked how are things different when he is out about his sexuality to his partners, Steven responded, "I can watch my gardening shows and cooking and what have you. It's like, I can act a little more feminine, say certain things and not have to worry about it." Although few expressed negative and frustrating emotions when their partner was unable to comprehend the nature of their sexuality, many felt that the ability to be open with their romantic partners allowed for them to express certain gendered characteristics without fear of being labeled in a negative way.

Steven's experience resembles the findings from Pennington (2009). Bisexual men and women in same-sex relationships expressed their ability to like traditionally gendered material, much like gardening and cooking, regardless of the person's sex. Research indicates that same-sex relationships are not as rigid and based around gender roles (Pennington 2009; Pfeffer 2010). However, research only accounts for same-sex relationships and does not account for bisexual individuals who are out about their sexuality in heterosexual relationships. Steven's experience was not solely limited to his

same-sex relationships but in heterosexual relationships in which he was open about his sexuality. Kolby, Luke, and Steven expressed similar stories of not being bound to traditional gender ideologies when in romantic relationships with men and women who knew about their sexuality. When involved in heterosexual relationships, these three felt like there was no difference than that of their same-sex relationships.

Female respondents had different experiences with heterosexual relationships. Most female participants expressed that they were able to be open about their sexuality with men early on without having any ramifications. Jennifer said that when she told her boyfriend about her sexuality he got excited:

> He was ecstatic and started making jokes about bringing in other girls. None of the guys I've been with had an issue with me being bisexual. For some reason, men just love it. I guess it's that whole girl-on-girl fantasy crap [laughs] like its actually gonna happen [laughs].

Megan and Nelly were the only two females that said that they dated men who did not agree with homosexuality. Because bisexuality is associated culturally with homosexuality, the females felt it best not to come out. They felt pressure to resort to traditional gender ideologies found in heterosexual relationships to make their male partners feel comfortable and to support the perception that they were heterosexual themselves. Although these instances did exist, they were rare and only limited to these two individuals in this one relationship. Megan and Nelly said that the negative reactions to non-heterosexuality were because of their boyfriends being "very religious" and "conservative." Although my study is about bisexual behaviors, this finding supported Herek's (2002) research on heterosexuals' attitudes toward bisexual men and women in the United States. Herek found that heterosexual individuals in the Southern part of the

United States with high religiosity and political conservatism were more likely to have negative reactions to bisexual men and women.

Actions were another way in which respondents came out as bisexual or not. It is important to note that the responses given so far were based on experiences in committed romantic relationships and not relationships centered on sexual gratification. Sexual relationships usually were centered on hookups and casual sex. According to Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) hookups are sexual encounters in which sexual intercourse may or may not have taken place, usually between two individuals who are strangers or brief acquaintances. Lambert, Kahn, and Apple (2003) define hookups as two people engaging in sexual behavior in which there are no future commitments. According to participants, hooking up is a combination of the two conceptualizations. Hooking up occurs when two or more individuals, usually strangers or brief acquaintances, engage in sexual encounters with no intent of future commitments. Casual sex, although not explicitly defined in academic research, is similar to hookups with the addition of engaging in sexual encounters with the same person more than once with no emotional involvement (Paul et al. 2000).

Although female respondents were less likely to engage in purely sexual relationships than male respondents, their responses were similar. The style in which the male and female participants approached people they were interested in was similar. When approaching individuals for sexual encounters, Michael's responses were similar to the rest of the interviewees, with the exception of Luke, who engaged in sexual relations:

> *Interviewer*: Are you out with your sexuality to people you having sexual relations with?

> *Michael*: No. I don't see it as their place to know.

*Interviewer*: What do you mean?

*Michael*: I mean, if all I'm looking for is sex then the other person doesn't need to know my personal stuff [laughs]. I just let them assume my sexuality. Obviously if I'm after a guy he knows that I'm not straight. If he asks, then sure, I'll tell him, but usually when I go up and say, "wanna fuck?" they don't care about my sexual orientation and I don't care about theirs [laughs].

*Interviewer*: So you just let them assume your sexual orientation?

*Michael*: Yeah. I don't act any different or anything. They assume that I'm gay or whatever because I'm going up to them wanting to have sex [laughs]. I let my actions speak for me. At that point it doesn't matter how masculine or feminine I act.

*Interviewer*: Is your approach different when you go after women?

*Michael*: Oh yeah. With women I can't just go up and say, "wanna fuck?" like I do with men [laughs]. She might get her feelings hurt [laughs]. I have to be nice and ease in my intention. I have to be more like a gentleman [giggles].

*Interviewer*: Do you disclose your sexuality to her?

*Michael*: Hell no [laughs]. That will for sure deny me some. When I approach a woman, she just assumes that I'm straight. I don't correct her. Like I said if it's just sex, the other person doesn't need to know. Based off your questions, I don't let my "gender" influence how others see me...I let my actions do that.

Although Michael's actions mirror that of a traditional gender ideology when approaching females, "I have to be more like a gentleman," he let his actions define his sexuality and made no attempt to correct people's assumptions. By having others assume their sexual orientation, the men and women in my study were controlling perceptions of their bisexuality through heterosexual and homosexual actions. By not correcting other people's assumptions of their sexuality, participants engaged in "doing sexuality." This is an example of behaviors being used a way of "doing sexuality." Respondents appear to see themselves as being able to control their sexual orientation they shared with others.

Participants saw no gain or loss in the individual and therefore did not feel the need to be open and honest with others.

Unlike hookups, Luke, who is in a heterosexual relationship, engages in homosexual casual sex with the approval of his girlfriend. Luke and his girlfriend established a rule early on that he is to be honest about his sexual encounters with men. Because of this understanding, Luke engages in what he calls a "fuck buddy" relationship with three men. Luke discloses his sexuality to these men early on because these relationships are considered to be more than hookups. These men, according to Luke, are just there for sexual gratification and therefore there is no loss or gain if they were to know his sexuality. He also lets them know that he is in a relationship and has them meet his girlfriend so that they understand that their relationship is purely sexual.

Although Pennington (2009) did not specifically state that "doing gender" in committed romantic relationships is "doing sexuality," the men and women I interviewed supported the notion that acting on traditional gender ideologies meant to display heterosexuality and homosexuality is "doing sexuality." Disclosing one's bisexuality in relationships resulted in positive and negative outcomes. The men and women interviewed did not correct individuals or state their sexuality to people when they felt it was irrelevant. The respondents were "doing" sexuality by not correcting or having others assume their sexual orientation by their actions. Acting on gender stereotypes in various settings allowed the men and women in my study to come out accordingly, a process of "doing sexuality" (Orzechowicz 2010).

**Coming Out: Contending with Stereotypes about Bisexuality**

Bisexual individuals face their own unique stereotypes to their sexuality that

challenges the "us-them," heterosexual and homosexual, sexual division (Eliason 2001: 149). Common stereotypes associated with sexuality are often visible stereotypes such as masculinity and femininity. Eliason (2001) writes that bisexuality creates a fear among heterosexual individuals because there is no accurate way to assess a bisexual persons' sexuality. When I asked Joseph about stereotypes about bisexuality, he said:

> *Joseph:* [laughs] What?! Where do I start… You hear the most common ones such as promiscuous, fence sitting, um, can't make up our mind, we're really just gay just that we're scared to admit it, um, get the best of both worlds, scared to be ourselves, um…

> *Interviewer:* What do you mean by that?

> *Joseph·* Scared to be ourselves? Um, scared to admit we're gay. Um, also that we're cheaters and can never be happy [laughs along with husband].

Common stereotypes that participants expressed were that bisexual individuals are really homosexual and bisexuals are in-between heterosexuality and homosexuality unable to decide which sexuality to choose. All of my respondents felt like they were at constant struggle with these stereotypes and depending on the situation they were in – relationship, friendships, family, and sexual relations – that they either had to support the stereotype or try their best to dispel it.

Homosexuality stereotypes are often affiliated and exist in conjunction with visible traits such as gender performance; there are no similar stereotypes for bisexual individuals (Eliason 2001). This lack of visible stereotypes represents a hidden danger and direct challenge to the sexual dichotomy that exists. After Joseph explained the stereotypes associated with bisexuality, I asked him whether any of these stereotypes can be made visible and if there are any stereotypes that he feels are visible stereotypes associated with bisexuality. Joseph responded, "no. Not that I can think of…no. When

you act feminine as a guy, you're gay. When you act straight, well you're straight."

Unlike stereotypes associated with heterosexuality and homosexuality, bisexual

stereotypes are not associated with visible characteristics such as acting a gendered way

via clothing, voice, or other actions.

According to participants, the stereotypes affiliated with bisexuality are often due

to a misunderstanding of the sexuality. Bereket and Brayton (2008) associate this

misunderstanding to language; however, Jennifer states that the issue is due to a person's

inability to comprehend that people can like more than one sex:

> I just don't get it! It's so annoying that there are people who just can't get it
> through their heads that there are people out there in the world that like more than
> one gender. Why can't people just accept and understand that I like dick and
> pussy equally the same! [laughs] What's also frustrating is that it's not just
> limited to straight people. The gay community is just as hating as the straight
> community! LGBT...ha...it should just be LGT. There's no room for bisexuals. I
> told you how I always hear "well you're really gay and don't know it" or "oh
> you're just a fence sitter. You should make up your mind." Well guess what? I get
> it from both straights and gays.

Most respondents said that homosexuals often have negative stereotypes about

bisexuality. The only stereotype that most respondents felt was positive was that bisexual

individuals are able to have relations with both men and women. When asked if they

knew any positive stereotypes of bisexuality, respondents usually answered with one of

the following: "I get the best of both worlds" or "I get a wider pool to choose from...it's

nice." Joseph was the only participant to challenge this positive stereotype by saying "I

heard others say that we get the best of both worlds, but to me it just supports the idea

that we are promiscuous and can never have a stable relationship."

Drawing from Michel Foucault (1980), many queer theorists are interested in

power and inequality. By constant monitoring of themselves and others through

normalizing practices and discourse, categorizing themselves in binary terms, people create power (Williams et al. 2009: 32). Respondents saw themselves as acting gay or straight and not bisexual. The binary categorization that exists gives dominance to heterosexuality and homosexuality and limits the legitimacy or power given to bisexuality. By using queer theory, the inequality that results from binary categorization is exposed and highlights that those who are not members of either side, with regards to sexuality. Participants in this study appear to struggle with trying to come out as bisexual but feel trapped by the dominance of having to be gay or straight.

**Coming Out: Testing the Waters to Avoid Negative Reactions**

Communication played a major role for respondents when interacting with members of the heterosexual and homosexual community. Many participants expressed having to watch and pay careful attention to topics they addressed, how they talked about such topics, stating their sexuality, and how verbal communication techniques aided in locating other bisexual individuals.

Verbal communication was the main way in which these men and women "tested the waters," a technique to gauge other's reactions to their bisexuality, among participants (McLean 2007). McLean found that her participants engaged in "testing the waters" by making suggestive hints of same-sex attraction without specific reference to bisexuality.

Nelly shared her experience on testing the water when coming out to her family and when approaching women:

*Interviewer*: When did you come out to your family?

*Nelly*: I actually came out when I was 17 but it was only because my brother had come out as bisexual two years before me.

*Interviewer*: So your brother's coming out influenced your coming out? How so?

*Nelly*: Oh yeah. When he came out my mom was happy and excited. The family welcomed him with open arms. When I saw that his experiences was positive and talking to him about it, I decided to come out too. I guess I used him to test the waters, so to say, about how the family would respond.

Nelly's comments on gauging her family's reaction to her brother's coming out

proved to be the significant factor for her to disclose her sexuality to her family. She said:

"Even though he was a little feminine, he was still a guy. In Mexican culture, guys are

not allowed to be gay. When I saw it was fine for him, I finally decided to do it." Nelly's

brothers' experience is different from literature on ethnic sexuality. Ethnic groups,

especially Mexican American culture, place strong emphasis on heterosexuality (Bianchi

et al. 2007).

Trying to test the waters or anticipate other's reactions did not always work out.

Nelly expressed that she came out because her brother had a positive coming out reaction

from his mother. She interpreted his positive acceptance to mean that her mother was

accepting of bisexuality. However, when she came out, the reaction was not what she had

expected:

> When my brother came out, my mom was so excited. She was happy and gave him hugs and never made a big deal out it. After talking to my brother about my sexuality and coming out, he said that if things were good with him, so I should be fine. I remembered his positive experience so I came out. My mother was furious. She started to beat me and yell at me. She was just angry. I immediately just took it back and tried to laugh it off. The pressure and abuse got so bad that I got a boyfriend lived a heterosexual lifestyle. I don't know why there was such a difference between us. I guess because my brother was kinda feminine so my mother might have guessed, whereas I'm feminine and feminine girls are supposed to be straight. I don't know. The reaction just wasn't what I wanted. I was so happy to get of there when I went to college.

Nelly experienced a consequence of stereotypes that lesbians are masculine and not feminine. Because of her perceived femininity, Nelly's mother was unable to comprehend the fact that Nelly was not heterosexual. Because of her mother's reaction, Nelly decided to live her life as a heterosexual; she described unhappy, meaningless relationships when men until she left for college. Anzaldúa (1987) writes that the ultimate rebellion a lesbian of color can make is through her sexual behavior. This rebellion in a culture that supports female passivity and conformity could result in negative reactions for non-heterosexual females (see also Bianchi et al. 2007; for contradictory findings see Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, and Saltzburg 2009).

Morgan also used the reactions of a family member to determine whether he would disclose his sexuality. At the time that he came out as bisexual, Morgan was living as a female. His sister came out as bisexual and was living happily with a female partner. Receiving positive support from his sister, his sister's girlfriend, and seeing that she was living a happy life, Morgan then came out to his family.

Participants "tested the waters" in other ways besides coming out. Nelly explained how when she notices a girl she was interested in, she would mention gay or bisexual movies, literature, or shows. She said:

> Trying to figure out if a girl is gay or bisexual is really difficult. I know, I'm not supposed to do it [laughs] but at work, when I see a pretty girl, I will purposely approach her with a shirt or something and start talking to her. To see if she is gay or bi, I will mention a gay movie or t.v. show like "The L Word," or something. If she reacts positive, I proceed. If she was no idea what I'm talking about or gives a bad look, I just laugh it off and say my friend or someone told me about it

Travis also tested the waters by using material such as gay or bisexual cinema, television shows, and music to find friends and determine if a guy he was interested in was bisexual or gay. When asked if he was more likely to engage in this technique in

heterosexual communities or homosexual communities, Travis said that he only made

hints of his sexuality when he was around heterosexual individuals or people he

perceived to be heterosexual:

> *Travis*: If I go to a gay club or a place that's predominantly gay, I don't need to
> hide that I like guys. When I'm usually in those areas, I'm not looking for a girl.
> The guy knows that I'm hitting on him and he just assumes that I'm gay or bi. If
> I'm in a heterosexual place, I'm going after her and that's all that matters.

> *Interviewer*: So do you only give hints when you go after members of the same-
> sex?

> *Travis*: I only give hints if I am going after a guy in a heterosexual area. If I'm
> going to a gay area, I'm not looking for a girl so I don't need to drop hints.

Most participants, with the exception of Kevin and Jessica (who stated they lived

in politically liberal and accepting places), said they tested the waters to see if they would

be accepted in the heterosexual environment. The technique of testing the waters was

limited to heterosexual social settings. Respondents indicated that this technique did not

occur in homosexual environments. With bisexuality often associated with

homosexuality, participants were more careful in heterosexual environments.

Although Nelly experienced a negative reaction from her mother after she tested

the waters, most stated that the positive reaction they got from others matched what they

gauged from this technique. Much like McLean (2007), participants only engage in

testing the waters when in a heterosexual environment. In addition, many not only used

this technique of gauging other's responses simple to coming out but also to find other bi

and gay people in a heterosexual environment. By "testing the waters," the men and

women in my study were determining if coming out was best suited for them. This helped

determine if the environment they were in was accepting of a non-heterosexual identity

thus managing their stigmatized identity.

**Coming Out: Time, Place, and Borderlands**

Participants referred to how geographic areas affected their ability to display and disclose their bisexuality. Respondents also describe how culture played a significant influence in their decision to come out. Although not selected based on a definition of bisexuality, respondents were asked how they would define the term. Most referred to bisexuality as a sexuality in which one is attracted emotionally and physically, to two genders, usually men and women and in association between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Most felt that bisexuality was a hybrid sexuality composing of parts from heterosexuality and homosexuality (McLean 2007). They saw bisexuality as a sexuality between heterosexuality and homosexuality, straddling the line that separates the two dominant sexual orientations, much like how a borderland is composed of ideologies of the two sides that surround it.

During the recruitment of bisexual individuals for this study, Ryan responded via email that even though he does not personally identity with any sexuality, he *did bisexuality*. During the interview, Ryan was asked what he meant when he said that he *did bisexuality*. He responded:

> I cannot have an emotional connection with men…just a sexual one. The emotion is just…not there. In fact, I only engage with sexual encounters with men as punishment for my attraction to them. I have a girlfriend and I care for her deeply. The fact that I engage in this homosexual act with men and maintain a heterosexual lifestyle with a hetero sex life is what I mean by doing bisexuality. It's this going back and forth between the gay and straight world.

To Ryan, doing bisexuality was the process of switching between the heterosexual and homosexual community. Ryan gives an example of who those who "behave bisexually"

do not necessarily identity as bisexual or have a bisexual identity. This highlights the complexity of bisexuality.

Ted also saw bisexuality as this process of passing between the heterosexual and homosexual community. Ted said, "there is no way to live in a bisexual world. People either see us as gay or straight." Ted's notion of others viewing the world as gay and straight was common among all participants. Most said that there is no way to show bisexuality.

Kevin said "even if you put a girl holding hands with a girl and guy, all that is being shown is that bisexual people are promiscuous." This might be a visible portrayal of bisexuality; however, it aids in the stereotype that participants were trying to avoid: a stereotype that bisexuals are promiscuous. Later in the interview Kevin said, "The one thing I've come to realize after taking a human sexuality course and my own experience is that bisexuality relies on the existence and separation of heterosexuality and homosexuality."

Most viewed bisexuality as a sexual borderland that exists between heterosexuality and homosexuality and, much like the borderland of the American Southwest, depends on the actual and cultural existence of two communities. The men and women interviewed were moving across the border of heterosexuality and homosexuality and found themselves to fall into an area that is a mixing of the two sexualities. This process of navigating sexualities is another form of "doing sexuality." By navigating sexualities, participants were able to display a sexuality that was in accordance to the environment they were in. This strategy resembles the method of passing (Ward and Winstanley 2005).

Geographic location also affected my participants' perception of environments being accepting of different sexualities. With the exception of Jessica, who moved from a liberal environment to a conservative one, all felt that their current living environment was accepting of non-heterosexuals. Bianchi et al. (2007) stated that metropolitan areas are places in which gay men and women can live openly and without fear of the high level of discrimination they faced back in their hometowns. This is an example of how people migrate to areas of tolerance and acceptance in relation to sexual orientation. Nelly, who lived in a conservative location before moving, felt like she could not express who she was. "I had to live a life that I was unhappy with because that was what was expected of me." Joseph, who is married to a man, expressed the same relief that Nelly experienced when he moved from his conservative home location to the city.

The city was not the only geographic area that many felt safe in. When asked if they felt the location they lived was accepting of their sexual orientation, many asked if I meant college or outside of college. According to Brandon:

> *Brandon*: I think college environments are extremely welcoming and accepting of people with different sexual orientations. I mean, there's the gay group out in the quad promoting the drag event that occurs every year and people are excited. Now outside of campus, that's another story.

> *Interviewer*: What do you mean?

> *Brandon*: Well, my boyfriend and I can hold hands on campus but once we cross the street, we don't do it anymore. We know who we are and the community outside of campus is not that accepting. For example: [Boyfriend] and I went dancing the other day at that country dance hall they opened up. He grabbed my hand and took me on the dance floor. I was so nervous. When the song was over and asked him if he noticed all the people staring at us and giving ugly looks. He nodded and we didn't dance another song.

Being consciously aware of the different communities and their acceptance of different sexualities was common. Most participants described clear locations, which represented a border that separated two communities. For examples, they referred to "the railroad tracks," "campus," "the gay district," and "state lines." These places highlight locators that separated accepting communities and not accepting communities.

Nelly and Joseph described how their Hispanic culture posed significant barriers for them to live their lives as non-heterosexuals. It was not until both left their home and moved away from the rigid structures that supported masculine, Latino male heterosexuality that they were able to live a life without ridicule and negativity (Bianchi et al. 2007; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Kendall et al. 2007).

Joseph stated that his family was not supportive of his lifestyle and that he "had to change." With family being a primary focus in Mexican American culture, Joseph stated that he felt this internal pressure to try to live his life as a heterosexual male. For both Nelly and Joseph, family meant a lot and was a primary reason why they lived a heterosexual life for as long as they did. The pressure the family had on these two individuals and the need to respect the values of family is similar to Gonzalez-Lopez (2005) who stated that the family had the greatest influence on sexuality than all other social structures (20).

Military versus civilian culture also played a role in how two participants lived their lives. Morgan and Luke gave examples of how military culture prevented them from living their lives as open bisexual individuals. Before the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT), a controversial bill signed by President Clinton that allowed homosexual individuals to serve in the in the United States military without being asked about their

sexual orientation as long as they did not tell anyone their sexual orientation or act on

their sexual orientation (Servicemembers Legal Defense Network 2011), Morgan and

Luke had to live their lives in secrecy. They were only out to other members that they

knew to be homosexual or bisexual since both parties were subject to discharge. Military

culture has caused several non-heterosexual service members to live in secrecy to protect

themselves from discharge in and some occasions from criminal prosecution and

imprisonment (Sinclair 2009), before the implementation of the repeal of DADT.

When asked how military culture differed from civilian life, both Luke and

Morgan simply laughed. Luke and Morgan stressed the importance of how secrecy was

important and that made it a point to stress how different the military was before the

repeal. I asked Luke whether anyone knew about his sexual orientation when he was in

the military. He said:

> *Luke*: My wife, now my ex-wife, knew but it was because we played with other couples together.
>
> *Interviewer*: Did anyone else know?
>
> *Luke*: You need to understand Jimmy; times back then were different than what they are now. Now there is talk about [DADT] going away and gay and bi people can start serving openly. Back then, if someone even suspected that you were gay or bi, hell your life was over. There were only two people that knew and it was because we played together and they were in the military as well. We all had a lot to lose. [laughing] I don't expect you to understand. You're young.
>
> *Interviewer*: How did you find each other?
>
> *Luke*: Call it…gaydar I guess. I don't know. We just knew…you know? There's that look that you give and if you're gay or bi…you just know. No one ever talked about it.

Military culture did not allow Luke and Morgan to live their life openly as bisexual individuals causing them to serve in silence, not being able to disclose their sexual orientation, and refrain from engaging in homosexual behavior (Sinclair 2009).

Military culture allowed these two to be seen as heterosexual against their will. They were required to live their lives as heterosexual individuals or risk being discharged and forfeiting all benefits that the military provided to discharged members (Sinclair 2009). In this case, culture dictated and controlled sexuality which disallowed sexual agency. This was the only time in which respondents risked losing their economic and social support because of their sexuality. Morgan and Luke were forced to live their lives as heterosexual individuals or they would have been ostracized.

**After Coming Out: Engaging in Silent Sexuality**

Once respondents came out to friends, family, or partners most never acknowledged their sexual orientation again, or refused to bring up events or issues related to their sexuality even when asked by those whom they came out to. It did not matter whether the respondent received positive feedback about their sexuality from others.

When asked if they talked about their sexuality or dating partners with those who knew about their sexuality, every respondent stated that they tried to not bring it up or share certain information because they felt the person asking would be uncomfortable with their response. Just because someone knew about their sexuality did not mean that my participant needed to disclose information about their dating or sexual life. Travis responded:

> Besides my ex-girlfriend, my roommates are the only other people that know about my sexuality. In fact, the only reason they know is because I brought home

a guy once and they saw me sneaking him in. They're cool with it and on occasion ask if I was dating a guy or girl or if I hooked up with any guys lately. I know they're cool with it and won't judge me but I just can't bring myself to talk about it. I just laugh and move on.

When asked why he chose to not talk about his sexuality and if it had anything to do with the possibility of his friends seeing him differently than he wanted, Travis just said "no…I just don't…don't really know why."

Travis was not alone in choosing not to talk about his sexuality to those who knew. Kolby also described examples of not talking about his sexuality with his friends:

> *Interviewer*: You mentioned that some of your close friends know about your sexuality.
>
> *Kolby*: Mhmm…
>
> *Interviewer*: Do y'all ever talk about it?
>
> *Kolby*: [laughs] No. I try not to bring it up. I mean they know and they're cool with it, that's why I came out to them, but I try to not mention it…especially when it comes to guys I've been with or guys I think are cute.
>
> *Interviewer*: Why not? Do you think they will see you differently?
>
> *Kolby*: No. We're part of the hotrod community. I mean, we have long hair, tattoos, I mean, society already sees us as…as…um…deviant so we're very welcoming of all outcasts 'cause we know what it's like to be outcasts. Someone's sexuality doesn't matter to us; we see them as no different. I just don't mention it because I don't want to make them uncomfortable. I know they're cool but I know that if I bring up some hot piece of ass I got last night or how some guy has a nice dick…I know they will feel strange and uncomfortable.
>
> *Interviewer*: Have they expressed this to you?
>
> *Kolby*: They don't have to…I just know.

Though Kolby's reasons for telling his friends about his sexuality centered more on the sexual acts that he engages in, Travis and Kolby's decision echoed the same

reasons why all participants decided to not talk about their sexuality after coming out, they wanted to make others as comfortable as they can. What is significant is that respondents still choose to not address their sexuality with certain individuals even when there is no issue with their sexuality.

This finding appears to contrast studies of openly gay men. Anderson (2002) found that openly gay athletes in his study had "a segmented identity." They felt like they were accepted on their team as gay, and that the team treated them no differently regarding their sexuality. In contrast, participants in this study were asked by friends if they thought a member of the same-sex was attractive and their sexuality was openly talked about. The men and women in this study willingly choose not to discuss their sexuality with others for some reason other than being stigmatized.

Luke decided to not to acknowledge or talk about his sexuality with his son. When asked if his son had an idea that he was bisexual, Luke said yes. He then proceeded to tell how one night when he had a man over; they started to have "fun." The next morning Luke's son ran into his dad and the male visitor in the kitchen and simply said, jokingly, "next time can you all keep it down, it was hard to sleep," grabbed a glass of milk and went back to his room. Luke said his son was seventeen at the time and clearly knew what had happened.

When asked how he felt about his son's comment, Luke said that he was embarrassed, not about the fact that his son knew what occurred the night before but that his son knew about his sexuality. After the incident, Luke said he talked to his son about it. The son did not express any anger or negative attitude; however, Luke still felt

uncomfortable and did not want his son to "see" him any different, even though his son did not care about his sexuality.

Respondents felt the need to cover by not disclosing information about their sexuality (Ward and Winstanley 2005), even in supportive environments. Because bisexuality is not easily understood, it could be difficult for bisexuals to come out (McLean 2007), let alone talk about their sexuality, dating, and sexual encounters. However, the process of keeping quiet about their sexual orientation, even in supportive environments regardless of sexuality, is unique. The men and women in this study seemed to be engaging in what I refer to as silent sexuality. It is important to note that this was not due to a result of oppression but of personal choice among respondents.

# CHAPTER V


# CONCLUSION


In this study, I sought to explain how self-identified bisexual individuals managed their sexual orientation by utilizing various methods and techniques when navigating the dominant heterosexual and homosexual communities. In particular, I examined how bisexual men and women decided how to come out to others. Theoretically, the study adds to our understanding of doing sexuality. In this study, men and women in my study used a careful selection process when coming out to individuals, emphasized stereotypes to convey sexual orientation, used gender roles and perception in relationships, gauged reactions to non-heterosexuality, navigated between heterosexual and homosexual committees, and developed a silent sexuality for the comfort of others as a means of either passing, covering, or doing sexuality (Ward and Winstanley 2005). Coming out is a different process for bisexuals, compared to homosexuals, primarily because bisexuals are stating they are neither straight nor gay meaning they are attracted to more than just one sex (McLean 2007), this reflects the marginalization of bisexual individuals.

Building off the work of David Orzechowicz's concept of "doing sexuality," I utilized the work of symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman to determine if self-identified bisexual individuals do sexuality to avoid stigma. Orzechowicz found that heterosexual males engaged in gender roles that are centered on homosexual stereotypes,

such as men acting feminine (Anderson 2007; Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Fingerhutt and Peplau 2006), to be included into the homonormative work culture of the parade department in an amusement park. In addition to doing gender, Cooley's (1927) looking-glass self deals with how we perceive others to see and evaluate us, regardless whether or not our perception is accurate. Utilizing Cooley's concept with the process of coming out and stigma management, participants were able to control the sexual orientation perception that *normals* (Goffman 1963) had of them. This allowed respondents to manage the stigma of blemishes of individual character, which Goffman (1963) associated with homosexuality and bisexuality is often associated with homosexuality. Those I interviewed were not using gender roles to pass as heterosexual (McLean 2007; Ward and Winstanley 2005) but consciously choosing to not confirm their sexuality; they appear to see themselves as controlling other's perception of their sexual orientation. This strategy is an additional form of "doing sexuality" because it allows for individuals to affect other's perception of their sexuality by not disclosing their sexual orientation.

Gender stereotypes are often associated with the way people display certain characteristics and with sexuality (Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Fingerhutt and Peplau 2006). Men who engage in feminine behavior and women who engaged in masculine behaviors are often perceived as homosexual in our culture. These dominant beliefs about gender can make coming out for bisexuals a challenging process. One way of using stereotypes to be included into a sexual orientation community, a group of individuals whose environment is shaped, influenced, and dictated by a sexual orientation, is through the use of gender roles to control the perception of sexual orientation to others. Because their stereotypes were often associated with either homosexuality or heterosexuality,

participants were unable to display bisexual stereotypes. They were limited to "doing gayness" (Hennen 2008) or doing heterosexuality. Respondents even stated that there was no true way to display bisexuality.

Relationships, romantic or sexual, pose a challenge for bisexual individuals. Not only did these men and women have to determine whether and how to disclose their sexuality to their partners, but they also follow gender roles that are embedded in relationship dynamics (Pennington 2009). Men involved in heterosexual relationships are determined to act as "men" and strive to meet the hegemonic masculine image (Anderson 2008; Bianchi et al. 2007; Connell 1987; Glick et al. 2007; Steinhouse 2001). Women were also expected to act according to the traditional gender roles assigned to them in heterosexual relationships. Although participants did express more egalitarian gender role division, many resorted back to traditional gender ideologies as found in previous research (Pennington 2009; Pfeffer 2010). By adapting to gender roles in relationships, the men and women of this study were able to avoid stigma from their partners.

Participants also distinguished how they came out in romantic or sexual relationships. In committed romantic relationships, they used gender to avoid stigma whereas in sexual relationships, they used gender to do sexuality. Males, when seeking out female partners, expressed characteristics associated with masculinity, such as being a gentleman, to be seen as heterosexual. Females also exhibited traditional gender characteristics when approaching men. It was only in same-sex situations that participants did not actively "do" sexuality by employing the use of gender roles to covey sexual orientation. By not coming out, respondents were able to influence how others viewed their sexuality. In this case, they used their actions in a homosexual or heterosexual

setting as a means to control other's perception of their sexual orientation. Respondents allowed others to assume that they were either heterosexual or homosexual and not bisexual.

By utilizing a technique to gauge others reactions to a non-heterosexuality, participants "tested the water" (McLean 2007). Individuals with a non-heterosexuality often test the waters to determine if the situation is beneficial to them. If not, individuals are not as likely to come out which is considered to be a block to living a healthy life as a bisexual person (Plummer 1995). This technique of gauging reactions appears to be a form of stigma management.

Economic, political and social institutions socially construct the concept of a border and borderland; borders imply a separation of *us* from *them* (Anzaldúa 1987; Sanchez 1993). The existence of heterosexuality is dependent on the dominance of homosexuality and the existence of homosexuality is dependent on the subordination to heterosexuality. Anzaldúa (1987) and Sanchez (1993) write that along a border exists an area composed of the mixing of the two sides. Because bisexuality is culturally constructed as a hybrid sexuality of heterosexuality and homosexuality (McLean 2007), participants navigated and defined themselves as both heterosexual and homosexual. The navigation between these two sexualities is the process of "doing" bisexuality and "doing" bisexuality is influenced and regulated by physical and cultural borders.

Even in supportive and welcoming environments of bisexuality, some participants remained cautious or silent about their sexual orientation after they came out. They were not covering, passing, or denying (Ward and Winstanley 2005) their sexual orientation but rather acting what I refer to as *silent sexuality*. Respondents chose not to address or

alternatively chose not to deter conversations about their sexual orientation. Weinberg et al. (1994) speculated that continued uncertainty of one's sexuality could be a reason why some bisexual individuals did not come out or address their sexuality in social settings. The men and women interviewed were comfortable with their sexuality as self-identified bisexual individuals and made no indication of uncertainty about their sexuality.

My findings supported the work done by Orzechowicz (2010) in that gender and sexuality are closely intertwined for individuals. Participants used gender to control the perception of their sexual orientation to others. The findings indicate that "doing" sexuality is more than "doing" gender but also includes the process of disclosing and/or not disclosing one's sexuality.

Locations, both geographical and cultural, also play a factor in the process of doing sexuality to avoid stigma. Respondents were aware of the environment they were in and navigated sexuality to best fit the environment and better suit their individual needs. Participants "did" sexuality, use of clothing, language, coming out, and gender, to navigate between and within the heterosexual and homosexual community. They saw their sexuality in relation to heterosexuality and homosexuality but also felt that the bisexual community needs to be integrated more with the homosexual community (see Rust 2001).

Finally this study contributes to understanding the complexity of coming out as bisexual. Since coming out as bisexual meant to deviate from the principle sexualities of heterosexual and homosexual nature (McLean 2007), queer theory addresses the nature of power dynamics of sexualities, which focuses on exposing the inaccuracies that exists in binaries (Williams et al. 2009). Respondents described a hierarchy between

heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. All suggested that bisexuality is subordinated to the two sexualities. This was expressed through the stereotypes of bisexuality and the need to pick one of the two dominant sexual orientations. Participants were subject to abuse, neglect, harassment, and frustration from those who did not comprehend their sexuality. Many felt that the consequences of disclosing their sexuality were not worth it and kept it hidden until a time in which it was meant with positivity and would benefit them.

The findings of this study have implications for people interested in researching bisexuality in the southern United States. This study has linked together the complexity of sexuality by how one labels and defines their sexual orientation. Based on actions and definition of bisexuality, there can be overlap, combination, and contradictory views for individuals when affirming their sexual orientation. People who wish to address the relationship of gender and sexuality would find the symbiotic relationship addressed between actions and perception of sexuality to be helpful.

This study also contributes to understanding how bisexual men and women navigate the straight and gay worlds. Queer theory challenges dominant dichotomies, and sexual categories (Williams et al. 2009). It allows us to understand that categories are complicated in people's lived realities and that categories themselves can contribute to inequalities. Sociology and queer theory can be seen as contradictions to each other (Williams et al. 2009). Sociology requires the use of categories to make sense of the social world whereas queer theory strives to eliminate the use of categories. Sociologists who use queer theory use it as a way to expose the inaccuracies and inequalities that exist due to binaries (Valocchi 2005).

There are several features of this study that I consider to be strengths that aid research done on bisexuality. First, social media can be a useful recruitment tool to find potential interviewees. Social media, such as Facebook, has increased over the past four years, is widely used by students, and is slowly making its way to older generations (West, Lewis and Currie 2009). By using Facebook, I was able to make information about my education, pictures, age, and any other information I wanted potential interviewers to access so as to legitimize my status as a graduate student. Because of my youthful outward appearance, Facebook was a way in which respondents told me, before the interview, that they felt I was credible and was not a stranger prying into their lives.

Secondly, the diversity of my sample played a significant role. Even though most participants identified as White or Caucasian, my sample also included mixed raced and Hispanic individuals. All respondents did have some college experience but only a few had managed to graduate from college at the time of the interviews. Finally, conducting research using in-depth, qualitative interviews allowed for greater understanding of the processes involved with sexuality and meaning. While quantitative methods would have allowed the possibility of gathering data from a wider pool of individuals, the meaning and fluidly of sexuality would have been lost or less detailed given the rigid, forced-choice responses in most survey questionnaires. Talking with participants using an interview guide allowed for structure while still allowing the interview to be treated much like a fluid and flexible conversation.

There are several weaknesses to my study. First, the sample size is small and not representative of all bisexual men and women. Although qualitative studies are meant to be used for interpretation, not generalization, the findings here can only be generalized to

the small number of self-identified bisexual individuals who volunteered for the study. The findings cannot and should not be used to make generalizations of all bisexual individuals. Participants did live in a conservative, Southwestern state, although considered to be a liberal pocket; their geographic area could affect their experiences as bisexual individuals. In addition, all involved in my study were college educated, had access to a computer, and were Internet savvy. The experiences of individuals who did not have these three qualities could have offered a unique insight into their lives as bisexual individuals.

The findings of this study suggest that bisexual individuals engage in stigma management to avoid negativity from both heterosexual and homosexual communities. Participants in this study avoided stigma through the use of gender and actions to manage other's perceptions of their sexuality. This process of using various techniques to convey sexual orientation is called "doing sexuality." The data suggest that bisexual individuals face constant challenges to others' understanding sexual orientation. One unexpected finding of this study was how respondents conceptualized bisexuality. Many felt that navigating between heterosexuality and homosexuality was a process of doing bisexuality. This navigation through sexuality suggests existence of sexuality borders and borderlands. The process of keeping silent about their sexuality highlighted the complex social nature that is associated with sexuality.

Future research on bisexuality is essential to understand the unique experiences of this population. Research should explore the concept of sexual borders. Sociological research should also explore how location and culture can influence how individuals "do" sexuality and how these can influence a person's reason for choosing to or not to disclose

their sexuality, even in positive environments. In addition, research should be done to see how personality is influenced and constructed by gender. This study showcased the complexity of bisexuality and the difficulties bisexual individuals face when interacting with members of the homosexual and heterosexual communities.

This brings up the notion if it is possible to undo sexuality. The findings of this study indicate that such a process is not possible at this time. Sexuality is not something that exists in and of itself but exist and influences other components of social life such as interaction, gender, and relationships. Since sexuality influences so many other social components, to undo sexuality would mean to undo social structures, a process that is complicated and not do able at this time.

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# APPENDIX A:

## Facebook Message

Hi [name],

How are you doing?

Well hey; the reason why I am contacting you today is that I am doing a research study for my graduate thesis. I am interested in learning more about the bisexual community. I am contacting you because I think you will be able to help me find some people to be part of my research project. My goal is to interview about 15-20 people. The interviews will be audio-recorded and in-person.

As you know, I am a graduate student in the sociology department at Texas State where I am interested in doing research related to gender and sexuality. My thesis chair and the Institution Review Board (IRB) of Texas State University-San Marcos approved my proposal, consent form, and interview guide. I have worked with members of the bisexual community and I can assure you that confidentiality and protecting your identity are extremely important to me.

The only criterion that I have is that the person has to identity or once identified as bisexual and that they are at least 18 years old. If you think you can help me out, please forward this message to someone you know and have them contact me. My information is listed below. They can also contact me over Facebook. I promise that all information will be held confidential and once I get their information, I will delete this facebook message to help ensure their confidentiality. No one will know if their identity and their participation in this study. I have taken extreme measures to make sure that their identity remains confidential.

If know of someone that might be able to help me out, either by participating or contacting bisexual individuals, please forward on my message.

Thanks,

Email: Researcher Email
Phone#: Researcher Contact Number

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## Interview Guide

1. **Coming Out**
   a. Are you out about your sexuality?
   b. Who are you out with?
   c. Do you have criteria with you come out to?
   d. Do you act differently with those you are out to versus those you are not out to?
   e. When did you first tell another person about your sexuality?
   f. Can you describe to me how you came to terms with your sexuality?
   g. What are some of the stereotypes you have heard or know about the bisexual community?

2. **Relationships**
   a. Are you/Have you been open about your sexuality with the people you have had relations with?
   b. Do you change how you act based on your partners gender/sex?
   c. Do you feel like society pressures to have relations with one sex over another?
   d. Do you find it easier to have relations with one sex over another?
   e. When do you tell your partner about your sexuality?
      1. Is there hesitation? If so, why?
   f. What are some of challenges with having relations with a member of opposite sex versus same sex?

3. **Community (heterosexual and homosexual)**
   a. Do you feel you live in an area approving of different sexualities?
   b. Can you describe your relationship with (heterosexual/homosexual) community?
   c. Can you describe your overall experience about telling members of the (heterosexual/homosexual) community about your sexuality?

       d. Do you change how masculine or feminine you act when you interact with the (heterosexual/homosexual) community?
                1. Does a person's sex play a factor? If so, how?
       e. Are you more likely to come out in a heterosexual or homosexual community?

## 4. Demographics
       a. What's your age?
       b. What's your sex?
       c. What is your racial/ethnic background?
       d. What is your relationship status?
            i. Are you currently dating a person the same or opposite sex?
       e. What is the highest level of education you completed?
       f. Are you currently employed?
       g. Do you feel you were raised in a conservative, liberal, or moderate household?

## 5. Concluding Questions
       a. Do you regret identifying as bisexual?
       b. What are some of the positives of identifying as bisexual?
       c. What advice would you give to someone who thinks they might be bisexual?

# VITA

Jimmy Joe Esquibel was born in Hondo, Texas, on April 2, 1987, the son of Mary Esther and Armando O. Esquibel Sr. After graduating from Lytle High School in Lytle, Texas, in 2005, he continued his education at Palo Alto Community College in San Antonio, Texas. In January 2006, he enrolled at Texas State University-San Marcos where he received a Bachelor of Science in Applied Sociology degree in December 2009. While pursuing his studies, he was employed by Housing and Residential Life at Texas State University-San Marcos where in October 2010; Jimmy gave a seminar in non-monosexuality and gender non-conformity in residence halls at Oklahoma State University as part of the SWACHUHO conference. In January 2010, he entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos.

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This thesis was typed by Jimmy J. Esquibel.