



Spring 2016

# Beyond The Three-Category Model: An Exploration Of Sexual Orientation In Women Aged 18 And Older

Julie C. Wrocklage

As with any intellectual project, the content and views expressed in this thesis may be considered objectionable by some readers. However, this student-scholar's work has been judged to have academic value by the student's thesis committee members trained in the discipline. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

---

Follow this and additional works at: <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses>

 Part of the [Counseling Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Wrocklage, Julie C., "Beyond The Three-Category Model: An Exploration Of Sexual Orientation In Women Aged 18 And Older" (2016). *MSU Graduate Theses*. 2354.

<https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/2354>

This article or document was made available through BearWorks, the institutional repository of Missouri State University. The work contained in it may be protected by copyright and require permission of the copyright holder for reuse or redistribution.

For more information, please contact [BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu](mailto:BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu).

**BEYOND THE THREE-CATEGORY MODEL: AN EXPLORATION OF  
SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN WOMEN AGED 18 AND OLDER**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Counseling

By

Julie C. Wrocklage

May 2016

Copyright 2016 by Julie Christine Wrocklage

**BEYOND THE THREE-CATEGORY MODEL: AN EXPLORATION OF  
SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN WOMEN AGED 18 AND OLDER**

Counseling, Leadership and Special Education

Missouri State University, May 2016

Master of Science

Julie C. Wrocklage

**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study increases our understanding of sexual orientation in women aged 18 and older whose experiences do not fit within the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model of sexual orientation. Through in-depth interviewing, this study explored the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of five women who described their sexual orientation as ‘unlabeled’, ‘mostly heterosexual’, and/or reported experiencing sexual fluidity. The results suggest that gender is not always the determining factor in an individual’s experience of attraction and that the three-category model is an oversimplification of the complexity inherent in sexual orientation. The lived experience of the women in this study calls for the development of a more inclusive model of sexual orientation. Findings in this and other studies expanding on our awareness of sexual fluidity can be used to improve sexuality education in schools, to train counselors and psychologists effectively to understand and validate the experiences of clients, to promote healthy conversation about sexuality as an aspect of identity, and to reduce the stigma surrounding same-sex attraction in the United States.

**KEYWORDS:** sexual orientation, sexual fluidity, unlabeled, three-category model, mostly heterosexual, mostly homosexual, same-sex sexuality, sexual identity, women

This abstract is approved as to form and content

---

Angela L. Anderson, PhD  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University

**BEYOND THE THREE-CATEGORY MODEL: AN EXPLORATION OF  
SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN WOMEN AGED 18 AND OLDER**

By

Julie C. Wrocklage

A Masters Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
Of Missouri State University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Science in Counseling

May 2016

Approved:

---

Angela L. Anderson, PhD

---

Amy Chenoweth, MS

---

Rebecca J. Smotherman, MS

---

Julie Masterson, PhD: Dean, Graduate College

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. Anderson, for her investment in me and in this project. From our very first meeting, Dr. Anderson was right there with me in her understanding of and conviction about this work. Dr. Anderson has challenged and encouraged me in a way that's been very empowering for me. I could not have done this without Dr. Anderson and the support of my other two committee members, Amy Chenoweth and Rebecca Smotherman. I am very thankful to my committee for their consistent support throughout this process. Finally, I am deeply grateful to the five women I interviewed for this study for their courage in sharing with me their thoughts, feelings and experiences on such a personal subject as sexuality.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I: Overview of the Study .....	1
Rationale for the Study .....	5
Purpose of the Study .....	7
Research Questions .....	8
Research Design.....	8
Significance of the Study .....	9
Assumptions and Limitations of the Study.....	9
Definition of Terms.....	10
Chapter II: Review of Related Literature.....	12
Definitions and Measurement of Sexual Orientation.....	12
The Limitations of Sexual Orientation Labels.....	14
Bisexuality and Sexual Fluidity in Nonheterosexual Women .....	20
Sexual Questioning and Same-sex Sexuality among Heterosexual Women .....	24
Summary and Conclusions .....	27
Chapter III: Methodology .....	29
Research Design.....	29
Site of the Study.....	30
Participants.....	31
Data Collection Procedures.....	32
Role of the Researcher and Data Analysis.....	33
Chapter IV: Results .....	36
Participant 1 .....	37
Participant 2 .....	38
Participant 3 .....	38
Participant 4 .....	39
Participant 5 .....	40
Chapter V: Discussion .....	41
Research Question 1 .....	41
Research Question 2 .....	44
Research Question 3 .....	48
Research Question 4 .....	52
Research Question 5 .....	56
Summary and Conclusions .....	58
Recommendations.....	59
References.....	64
Appendices .....	69
Appendix A. Flyer .....	69

Appendix B. Research Survey .....	70
Appendix C. Human Subjects IRB Approval .....	72
Appendix D. Informed Consent Form .....	73
Appendix E. Interview Questions .....	75

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Age, Sexual Orientation Label and Relationship status .....	36
--	----

# CHAPTER I

## OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Dr. Jennifer Gunsallus (2013), sociologist and sexuality speaker, in her recent TED Talk said, "We don't talk about the complexity of sexuality. What happens when we don't talk about it is that sexuality ends up in the shadows, and that is where we have shame, embarrassment, exploitation, abuse, and fear." According to the World Health Organization (2006), sexuality is fundamental to being human and sexual health is associated with a person's overall physical, emotional, and social well-being. Despite the significance of sexuality to one's overall identity and well-being, sexuality remains a taboo topic in United States culture rarely addressed by parents, teachers, doctors, community leaders, and mental health providers (Reissing & Di Giulio, 2010). The purpose of the present study is to increase our understanding of the nature of sexuality in women 18 and older whose experiences do not fit within the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model of sexual orientation.

When sexual orientation emerged as a construct in the late nineteenth century, it was understood to be a phenomenon with two forms: exclusive same sex-sexuality (homosexuality) and exclusive other-sex sexuality (heterosexuality) (Diamond, 2008b). Same-sex sexuality has been documented throughout human history, but it wasn't until 1869 that 'homosexuality' was introduced as a clinical term (Hammack, 2005). Homosexuality was considered a psychological diagnosis until 1973 when it was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Second Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1968). Additionally, the American Psychiatric

Association (1998) released a statement in 1998 opposing any form of “reparative” or “conversion” therapy that is based on the assumption that homosexuality is a mental disorder. The stigma surrounding same-sex sexuality remains today, resulting in both social and political consequences for sexual minorities (that is, nonheterosexual individuals). Sexual orientation is the source of much debate in society today with political arguments in the United States centering on the question: Is sexual orientation something a person is born with or is it a chosen lifestyle? Furthermore, the commonly held view in the late nineteenth century was that women were uninterested in and incapable of sexual desire (“Sexual Orientation,” 2010). Prior to the sexual revolution and feminist movement in the 1960s, and to a lesser degree still today, women were not permitted the same freedom in society to express their sexual feelings or even to enjoy sex in ways socially permitted to men (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002; “Human Sexuality”, 2010). Additionally, women’s sexuality has remained largely misunderstood because of the majority of research informing our understanding of sexual orientation having been conducted on men (Blackwood & Wieringa, 2003; Mustanski, 2002; Shively, Jones, & De Cecco, 1984).

Currently, no standard measurement of sexual orientation has been developed; however, existing research has commonly defined sexual orientation as a multidimensional construct including one’s sexual attractions, behaviors, fantasies, and identity (Igartua, Thombs, Burgos, & Montoro, 2009; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010). This is the definition used in the present study. According to the American Psychological Association, sexual orientation “refers to an individual’s patterns of sexual, romantic, and affectional arousal and desire for other persons based on those persons’

gender and sex characteristics (American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009, p. 30). While research (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012) has shown there to be a substantial degree of complexity inherent in human sexuality, the ‘culturally approved’ three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual) model of sexual orientation is still most commonly used by researchers (Sell & Petruccio, 1996).

The three-category model of sexual orientation assumes that sexual orientation is early developing and stable throughout one’s life course, and that there is no variation among the different components of one’s sexual orientation (that is, attractions, behaviors, fantasies, and identity). To the contrary, research has revealed fluidity in women’s sexuality (Diamond, 2008b; Katz-Wise, 2013), sexual questioning among heterosexual women (Morgan & Thompson, 2011), same-sex sexuality among heterosexual women (Hoburg, Konik, Williams, & Crawford, 2004; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010) and the prevalence of both men and women labeling their sexual orientation as ‘mostly heterosexual’, ‘mostly homosexual’, or ‘unlabeled’ as opposed to one of the three discrete categories heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual, when given the option (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). While the three-category model of sexual orientation assumes congruence between the different aspects of one’s sexual orientation (attractions, behaviors, fantasies, identity), research supports the existence of discrepancies (Igartua et al., 2009). An example of this would be an individual identifying as ‘heterosexual’ while at the same time experiencing some degree of same-sex attraction. The three-category model of sexual orientation fails to capture the

experiences of these individuals and additional research is needed to develop a more inclusive and accurate model of sexual orientation.

Because research has revealed the limitations of the historical heterosexual/homosexual dichotomous understanding of sexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953), alternative models now exist, including the Kinsey Scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948); the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (Klein, 1978); Queer Theory, developed in the early 1990s (Spinelli, 2014); the Sell Assessment of Sexual Orientation (SASO) (Sell, 1996); and most recently, Lisa Diamond's (2008b) theory of Sexual Fluidity. Research has also shown that the sexual orientation of women tends to be flexible and subject to the influence of cultural and social factors (Baumeister, 2000; Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005) and Diamond (2008b) proposes that this is due to the prevalence of fluidity in women's sexuality, a phenomenon particularly difficult to understand within the context of the three-category model of sexual orientation. Diamond (2008b) states, "Sexual fluidity, quite simply, means situation-dependent flexibility in women's sexual responsiveness" (p. 3). Women who experience shifts in sexual identity over time, often contextually and relationship driven, might be experiencing sexual fluidity. As a result of the diversity of their experiences, many of the participants in Diamond's (2008b) 10-year longitudinal study reported considering themselves the 'exception' or 'deviant' by both mainstream societal expectations and perceived norms of the 'typical' gay experience, when, in fact, their experiences turned out to be very common within the study. Throughout Diamond's study, the most commonly selected sexual identity label was 'unlabeled'. Diamond recommends that, "Researchers must begin to systematically analyze 'unlabeled' individuals' distinct

social-developmental trajectories in order to build accurate models of sexual identity development over the life course” (Diamond, 2008a, p. 12). Qualitative research specifically exploring women’s sexuality is needed in order to build inclusive models to more accurately represent women’s experiences. While the present study focuses on women’s sexuality, current research (Diamond, 2013) is exploring the notion that fluidity is a general feature of human sexuality, male and female.

In the words of researcher Kinnish (2005), “Sexual orientation is a dimension of human existence that is fundamentally complex, varied in its expression, and likely to be multi-determined in its etiology. It seems counterintuitive, therefore, to presume uniform stability in orientation across individuals” (p. 181). Research has revealed an enormous amount of complexity and diversity in the etiology and expression of sexual orientation (Kinnish, 2005; Morgan, 2013). The present study seeks to better understand this diversity of expression through interviews with women whose experiences do not fit within the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model of sexual orientation.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Sexuality education programs in the United States vary widely in content (Landry, Darroch, Singh & Higgins, 2003), primarily teach abstinence (Weissbourd, Peterson & Weinstein, 2013), and rarely address sexual orientation and gender identity (Elia & Eliason, 2010). This is in contrast to what some would label a hyper-sexualized culture, with ready access to sexualized images and content on billboards, prime time television, print advertising and popular music. If educators and therapists remain silent on the issue

of sexuality, young people will rely solely on other sources to learn about sexuality. Advertising, for example, is a powerful force in shaping one's perception of normalcy. When it comes to gender and sexuality, advertisements in the United States typically portray heterosexual sexuality, rigid masculine/feminine gender roles, and the objectification of women, thus discouraging women from having agency over their own sexuality (Media Education Foundation, Jhally, & Kilbourne, 2010). Research is needed to inform sexuality education curriculum so that accurate information about sexuality, and specifically sexual orientation, is provided to adolescents in schools.

It is important to have an accurate, comprehensive understanding of sexuality based on the lived experience of individuals and not societal expectations or stereotypes. Negative stereotypes, which can be reinforced through media, family and peers, perpetuate stigma and shame, resulting in mental health problems for individuals (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Logie, 2012). There is increased risk for suicide attempts, depression, anxiety and substance abuse for sexual minorities when compared with heterosexual individuals because of the stigma and discrimination surrounding same-sex sexuality (King, Semlyen, Tai, Killaspy, Osborn, Popelyuk, & Nazareth, 2008). Sexual stigma includes devaluing sexual minorities, negative attitudes, and lower status granted to nonheterosexual behaviors, identities, relationships and communities (Herek, 2007). Individuals who describe their sexual orientation as bisexual are particularly vulnerable to discrimination from both society at large and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Increased awareness and understanding of the nature of sexuality in women can contribute towards destigmatization of same-sex sexuality and improvement of the well-being of those

categorized in society today as sexual minorities. Further research into the nature of sexuality is needed to train counselors and psychologists to effectively address sexual concerns with clients, and to promote healthy conversations about sexuality as an aspect of identity.

Most researchers, historically, have recruited participants for studies on sexual orientation based on self-identification as lesbian, gay or bisexual; however, not all with same-sex attraction publicly identify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual, so the experiences of many sexual minorities have not been represented in the research. While the existing research can tell us a good deal about a small subset of sexual minorities, it fails to be inclusive of those individuals who choose not to identify as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual (Diamond, 2008b; Pedersen & Kristiansen, 2008). Existing research presents an incomplete picture of the experiences of sexual minorities generally and women specifically.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to increase our understanding of the nature of sexual orientation in women 18 and older whose experiences do not fit within the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model of sexuality. Specifically, this study's purpose is to explore the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of women who describe their sexual orientation as 'unlabeled', 'mostly heterosexual,' or 'mostly homosexual' when given the option, and/or women who report experiencing sexual fluidity.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) What factors contribute towards the participant describing her orientation as a) unlabeled, b) mostly heterosexual, or c) mostly homosexual?
- 2) How will participants perceive the three-category model of sexual orientation (with the three labels heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual) as representative of their lived experiences of a) sexual attractions, b) sexual behaviors, c) sexual fantasies, and d) sexual identity?
- 3) To what extent does the partner's gender play a role in determining the participants' experience of sexual attraction? What other factors play a role in determining the participants' experience of sexual attraction, and to what extent?
- 4) Through what sources and in what context will participants describe learning about their sexuality and what impact did this have on sexual identity development and experience of sexual desire?
- 5) How will participants describe experiencing continuity and stability in their sexual orientation over time? How will participants describe experiencing change in their sexual orientation over time (i.e. sexual fluidity)?

## **Research Design**

As the purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the nature of sexuality in women whose experiences fail to be captured by the three-category model of sexuality, a qualitative study is most appropriate. Five women 18 and older were interviewed about their sexuality. In-depth semi-structured interviewing allowed for women to openly express thoughts, feelings and experiences relating to sexuality. The interviews included a discussion of sexual orientation label, sexual attractions, behaviors, fantasies and identity. A qualitative interview approach provided women the opportunity to speak from their own frame of reference, allowing new insights to unfold. A within-case and cross-case analysis was conducted in order to identify themes.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has the potential to contribute towards the development of a more inclusive model of sexual orientation representative of the experiences of women. A more inclusive model would allow for individual women to be open about, understand, and embrace the complexity of their sexual identities. Through interviews women were offered the opportunity to narrate a ‘new normal’, speaking from their own frame of reference rather than attempting to fit their experiences into an existing model informed by research on men. This research expands the conversation about sexuality beyond the dichotomous, and therefore limiting, language often used in our society today. An increased acceptance of diversity within sexual orientation and reduction of fear and shame surrounding same-sex attraction is possible. Educators, counselors, and psychologists alike will benefit from a more nuanced understanding of women’s sexuality in order to educate students accurately as well as understand and validate the experiences of clients.

## **Assumptions And Limitations of the Study**

The researcher in the present study assumed that participants answered all interview questions honestly. It was also assumed that participants considered sexual orientation as an aspect of overall identity worthy of exploration and that participants were motivated to share their personal life experiences and ideas concerning their sexuality. Finally, the researcher assumed that participants had sufficient awareness of factors related to their personal sexual orientation and sexual history to answer questions consistently.

The generalizability of the results of the present study is limited because of the small number of participants and the qualitative nature of the data analysis. Cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity was limited because of the area in which the study took place.

### **Definition of Terms**

A plethora of terminology has been used in society and by researchers to describe sexual orientation. These terms are varied and rapidly changing with continued research and social progress. Please note that in this study the terms “sex” and “gender” are used interchangeably, as all five of the participants identified as cisgender. Included in this section are selected terms most relevant to the present study.

- 1) Heteronormative: Denoting or relating to a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation (Oxford Dictionary)
- 2) LGBTQ: Acronym for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning”
- 3) Sexual fluidity: situation-dependent flexibility in women’s sexual responsiveness; Lisa Diamond (2008b) summarizes her understanding of sexual fluidity in four points: 1) Women have a general sexual orientation, in that they are primarily attracted to men, women or both genders 2) In addition, women also possess a capacity for fluidity, that is a sensitivity to situations and relationships that might facilitate sexual arousal/desire 3) The sexual attractions triggered by fluidity may be temporary or long-lasting, depending on how consistently the woman encounters the facilitating factors. These attractions triggered by fluidity do not change a woman’s existing sexual orientation 4) Women have different degrees of fluidity (Diamond, 2008b)
- 4) Sexual minority: any individual who does not identify as ‘heterosexual’ (Diamond, 2008b)
- 5) Sexual orientation: a multidimensional construct including one’s sexual attractions, behaviors, fantasies, and identity towards same-sex, other-sex, or both

sexes (Igartua et al., 2009; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012)

- 6) Three-category model of sexual orientation: this model provides three categories for sexual orientation classification: heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual (Diamond, 2008b)
- 7) Cisgender: someone whose gender corresponds with their assigned sex

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Researchers are increasingly recognizing the complexity and multidimensional nature of sexual orientation (Diamond, 2008b; Morgan & Thompson, 2011; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). The purpose of this qualitative study is to increase understanding of the nature of sexuality in women whose experiences do not fit within the three-category model of sexuality. This literature review will provide a base of knowledge and context to aid in understanding the significance of the present study. Presented in this review of related literature will be a discussion of: a) definitions and measurement of sexual orientation b) the limitations of sexual orientation labels c) bisexuality and sexual fluidity in nonheterosexual women d) sexual questioning and same-sex sexuality among heterosexual women and e) summary and conclusions

#### **Definitions and Measurement of Sexual Orientation**

When it comes to defining and measuring sexual orientation, there is a lack of clarity and consistency in the literature, which makes for difficulty comparing data across studies (Shively et al., 1984). Most definitions of sexual orientation generally include both psychological and behavioral components (Sell, 1997). In the recent literature, sexual orientation has commonly been defined as a multidimensional construct including one's sexual attractions, behaviors, fantasies, and identity (Igartua et al., 2009; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010). According to the American Psychological Association (2008, p. 1), "Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional,

romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions." As this definition confirms, there is a complexity to sexual orientation that goes beyond the four components attraction, behavior, fantasy and identity. Within attraction, for example, there are various dimensions including emotional, romantic and sexual. When it comes to understanding what causes sexual orientation, there is no clear consensus in the research, though most researchers conclude sexual orientation results from an interplay of both biological and environmental factors. It is important to note that sexual orientation is not solely a personal characteristic within an individual, like biological sex, gender identity or age, as it is defined in terms of relationships with others (American Psychological Association, 2008). Diamond (2008b) defines sexual orientation as, "a consistent, enduring pattern of sexual desire for individuals of the same sex, the other sex, or both sexes, regardless of whether this pattern of desire is manifested in sexual behavior" (p. 12). What Diamond's definition suggests is that sexual desire, rather than sexual behavior, is the best predictor of sexual orientation.

Because research has revealed the limitations of the historical heterosexual/homosexual dichotomous understanding of sexuality (Diamond, 2008a, Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012), alternative models now exist. Alfred Kinsey, the man responsible for beginning research on sexuality in the United States, interviewed thousands of men and women about their sexual behavior. The result of his research was the development in 1948 of the Kinsey Scale, a seven-category continuum offering multiple sexual orientation options based on the sex of sexual partners ranging from "0"

representing “exclusively heterosexual” to “6” representing “exclusively homosexual” (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). Fritz Klein, founder of the American Institute of Bisexuality, developed a measurement tool for sexual orientation in 1978: the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG). The KSOG measures seven dimensions of sexual orientation: sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-identification, and heterosexual/homosexual lifestyle, each assessed past, present and ideal (“The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid”, 2014). Finally, the Sell Assessment of Sexual Orientation (SASO) was developed in 1996. This assessment has twelve questions, is intended to measure sexual orientation on a continuum, considers various dimensions of sexual orientation, and considers homosexuality and heterosexuality separately (Sell, 1997). Despite these innovations in the measurement of sexual orientation, researchers still tend to use the three-category model of sexual orientation in recruiting participants for their studies.

### **The Limitations of Sexual Orientation Labels**

Both society at large and the LGBTQ community commonly use the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model to conceptualize sexual orientation. Research exploring the applicability of the three-category model to women’s sexuality (Better, 2014), the meaning of labels for gay and lesbian youth (Coleman-Fountain, 2014), and the applicability of an expanded model of sexuality (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012) will be presented in this section of the literature review.

Better (2014), in her qualitative study, asks the question: does our current system of sexual categories and the language available for sexuality fit women’s lived

experiences and identities? Better conducted in depth interviews with 38 participants in the northeastern region of the United States, ranging in age from 20 to 62 and mostly white. Of these 38 women, 15 identified as heterosexual and 23 with a label falling under the 'queer identity' umbrella. Ten of the 23 women identified as bisexual, while the 13 others used labels outside of the three categories heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual such as: sexual, mostly straight, queer, fluid, category uncomfortable – married but flexible, polyamorous bi, and age 15-23 lesbian and age 23-on: heterosexual. During each interview, Better asked the women about their sexual identities including sexual history, role of sexuality in their life, reasons they have sex, role of relationship in their sexual life, and ways their understandings of gender affects their understandings of sex and sexuality. Better summarizes one of the interviewees, Kali's, statements relating to our current system of sexual categories:

Regardless of how sexuality gets defined by the individual, Kali feels that knowing one's own sexual desires and choices and having agency over that aspect of one's life leads to a feeling of liberation. Perhaps knowing ourselves, despite social and sexual categories that have not caught up to our lived experience is the greatest achievement (Better, 2014, p. 31).

Kali, who identifies as bisexual, confirms Better's suspicion that the current system of sexual categories (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) is insufficient in describing the lived experience of women. Relating to Better's research question about the language we currently have to describe sexuality, another participant, Tina, reported that attraction depends more on personality than gender for her. Tina, who identifies as 'mostly straight', confirmed that the vocabulary available in describing sexuality is insufficient to describe her experience of sexual fluidity. Tina also reported speculation as to why sexual categories and labels matter in social interaction. Better analyzed her data from the

interviews in light of sociologist Anthony Giddens's (1991) concepts of plastic sexuality and pure relationship as well as queer theory. These concepts are defined as follows: Plastic sexuality is sexuality without the intention or obligation of reproduction. Pure relationship is a relationship entered for its own sake, rather than out of obligation or necessity, existing for as long as each partner gains satisfaction from its existence. Queer theory is a post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the 1990s out of the fields of feminist and lesbian/gay studies which challenges the dominant essentialist notion of stable and fixed identity categories of gender and sexual expression, pushing for a more inclusive model (Spinelli, 2014). Many of the women interviewed for this study expressed their dissatisfaction with the labels available to them, that these were not adequate for describing their sexuality. Does this mean more labels should be developed? Or, as interviewee Tina mentioned should we be asking why it is that sexual categories and labels matter in social interaction? More research is necessary to confirm the intriguing findings from this small-scale qualitative study.

Coleman-Fountain, in his (2014) qualitative study, addresses the meaning of identifying as lesbian or gay to young people by asking them two questions: (a) Are gay and lesbian labels important? (b) How central is your sexuality to how you see yourself? Coleman-Fountain conducted in depth interviews with 19 white youth, aged 16-21, and living in the north east of England. Coleman-Fountain found that many of the youth he interviewed resisted a gay/lesbian label because they wanted to remain 'ordinary' and not be defined primarily by their sexuality. This phenomenon in which labels become unnecessary and sexuality is not central to one's identity is termed 'narrative of emancipation' (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). For example, one participant in Coleman-

Fountain's (2014) study, Louise, discussed how a 'lesbian' label represents a difference since it is often assumed that one is heterosexual until stated otherwise. She chose not to use the 'lesbian' label because she did not want to become 'wholly different' in the eyes of others. The term 'post-gay' is used to describe those that prefer an unlabeled identity. Similarly, an aspiring actress, Heather Matarazzo, interviewed at age 21 for "The Advocate," stated that she doesn't want to be known "as a lesbian that happens to be an actress; I wanted to be known as an actress that happens to be with a woman. Ok! Move on. Next subject" (as cited in Savin-Williams, 2005a, p. 16). Many of the youth in Coleman-Fountain's study purposefully resisted labels because they did not want stereotypes being applied to them.

Both Better's (2014) study on women's sexuality and Coleman-Fountain's (2014) study on gay/lesbian youth's response to labels revealed a significant incongruence between the lived experience of sexuality in individuals and the labels available to them to describe their experience, resulting in ambivalence and/or resistance to labels (Morgan, 2013). Kinsey states in his book, *Sexual Behavior of the Human Female*,

"It is a characteristic of the human mind that it tries to dichotomize in its classification of phenomena. Things either are so, or they are not so. Sexual behavior is either normal or abnormal, socially acceptable or unacceptable, heterosexual or homosexual; and many persons do not want to believe that there are gradations in these matters from one to the other extreme" (Kinsey et al., 1953, p. 469).

Despite sexual orientation theoretically being understood as existing on a continuum (Sell, 1997), rather than in discrete categories, the human tendency to want to categorize and label prevails.

In their quantitative survey study researchers Vrangalova and Savin-Williams' (2012) set out to assess the adequacy of the three-category system of sexual orientation

by surveying 1,784 individuals with diversity in race/ethnicity, religious background and geographic distribution within the United States. For this study, the three-category model was expanded to a five-category one, with the addition of two intermediate labels: ‘mostly heterosexual’ and ‘mostly homosexual’. The survey assessed sexual orientation, sexual attraction, and sexual partners. The data was analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and women and men were analyzed separately.

Ultimately the goal was to determine the more accurate conceptualization of sexual orientation, whether on a continuum or naturally occurring in three discrete categories. The researchers sought to find out whether the two exclusive identities (heterosexual and homosexual) were consistently exclusive and whether the three nonexclusive identities (mostly heterosexual, bisexual, and mostly homosexual) were consistently nonexclusive. The other question addressed was: Is sexual orientation best conceptualized as one-dimensional or two-dimensional? A one-dimensional measure of sexual orientation assumes that having more same-sex sexuality by necessity means having less other-sex sexuality. A two-dimensional measure of sexual orientation allows for two independently varying (unipolar) dimensions of sexual orientation: same-sex and other-sex, each ranging from ‘nonexistent’ to ‘strongly present’. This study was undertaken in order to capture the characteristics of those “in-between” individuals who are distinct from those fitting into heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual categories. The results of this study (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012) supported a five-category classification of sexual orientation. Further, data supported a continuous two-dimensional, rather than a categorical one-dimensional conceptualization of sexual orientation. The hypothesis that ‘mostly heterosexual’ would be the most frequently

selected nonheterosexual label in both men and women was confirmed. Consistent with earlier research (Morgan & Morgan, 2008), among women, the ‘mostly heterosexual’ label was selected by more participants than the three other nonheterosexual identity labels combined. The findings confirmed that the two intermediate sexual orientation groups (mostly heterosexual and mostly homosexual) were distinct from adjacent heterosexual and homosexual sexual orientation groups. More women than men reported nonexclusivity in their sexual attraction and/or sexual partners consistent with earlier research on the flexibility in women’s sexuality (Kinnish et al., 2005; Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2008b). Most significantly, this study confirmed the viability of a mostly heterosexual identity group supported by the fact that it was the most frequently selected nonheterosexual identity label among both men and women. The authors concluded,

“These data suggest that sexual orientation is a continuously distributed characteristic and decisions to categorize it into discrete units, regardless of how many, may be useful for particular research questions but are ultimately external impositions that are not consistent with reports of individuals” (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012, p. 96)

If sexual orientation exists on a continuum, then attempts to categorize are ultimately arbitrary and a reconceptualization of sexual orientation would be more productive.

The three-category model of sexuality did not adequately represent the experiences of many of the participants in Better’s (2014) study, Coleman-Fountain’s (2014) study, and Vrangalova & Savin-Williams’ (2012) study. The results of these studies confirmed that the nature of sexuality is complex with a high degree of variance between different individuals. Women’s sexuality is particularly difficult to understand within the context of the three-category model of sexual orientation because of the prevalence of sexual

fluidity in women. The next section of this literature review will discuss bisexuality in women as well as introduce the concept of sexual fluidity.

### **Bisexuality and Sexual Fluidity in Nonheterosexual Women**

Research has revealed that the sexual orientation of women tends to be distinct from that of males in that it is more flexible and subject to contextual factors (Baumeister, 2000; Kinnish et al., 2005). Diamond (2008b) proposes that this difference in male and female sexual orientation is due to the prevalence of fluidity in women's sexuality. Diamond examined the degree of stability and continuity in female same-sex sexuality in her research, concluding, "My findings suggest that for women with nonexclusive attractions, fixed identities may never completely succeed in representing the complicated, situation-specific, and sometimes relationship-specific nature of their sexual self-concepts" (Diamond, 2008b, p. 70). Diamond suggests that it is the three-category system of rigid categorization of sexuality that is misguided, not women's lived experiences.

Diamond's (2008a) 10-year longitudinal study advances our understanding of bisexuality and, more generally, female sexual development over the life course. Many earlier studies have excluded bisexual participants for the sake of 'conceptual and methodological clarity', considering these individuals to be the 'exceptions' to the norm. Diamond's study explores the sexual attractions, behaviors, and identities of 79 nonheterosexual women, aged 18-25 at first meeting over a 10-year period through in-depth interviewing. The issue explored in this study was the nature of bisexuality.

The three-category essentialist model of sexuality commonly accepted in United States culture with the fixed categories of heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual does not allow for longitudinal change. Diamond (2008a) found identity change to be more common than identity stability in her study. Participants for Diamond's study were recruited from lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) events, classes on gender/sexuality at a large private university, and LGB student groups at universities, small and large, public and private. The selection criteria was a 'rejection or questioning of heterosexual orientation'. Diamond asked each participant at the first interview, "How do you currently label your sexual identity to yourself, even if it's different from what you might tell other people? If you don't apply a label to your sexual identity, please say so." In subsequent interviews, Diamond documented each woman's same-sex attractions and other-sex attractions with percentages and sexual behavior with a count of men or women which they had engaged with sexually.

The results show significant fluidity in bisexual, unlabeled, and lesbian women's attractions, behaviors, and identities. Qualitative data was analyzed through identification of themes in women's interviews, while quantitative data was analyzed using a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), and polynomial contrast. By the 10-year point, 67% of participants had changed their sexual identity label at least once. Also, 80% of participants claimed 'bisexual' or 'unlabeled' identity at some point within the study. More participants transitioned to a 'bisexual' or 'unlabeled' identity label than to a 'lesbian' or 'heterosexual' identity label. Contrary to the stereotype that bisexual women are incapable of or not interested in monogamy, the results of this study show that more than 60% of the Interview 1 (T1) bisexual women were in relationships lasting longer

than five years. The notion that bisexuality is a transitional stage for women who will eventually adopt the 'lesbian' label or as an experimental phase among heterosexual women was not supported with the results of this study; this finding is also supported by Savin-Williams, Joyner, & Rieger's (2012) subsequent study. The notions of bisexuality as a distinct orientation and as a heightened form of sexual fluidity were supported by Diamond's (2012a) study.

The most frequently adopted label throughout Diamond's (2008a) study was 'unlabeled', which seemed to serve different purposes for different women in the study: (a) ongoing sexual questioning (b) "attracted to the person, not the gender" (c) openness to future change and (d) "almost-but-not-quite-exclusive" sexual experience. Many 'unlabeled' participants felt that the, "existing range of sexual identity categories and process of categorization in general is limiting and restrictive" (Diamond, 2008a, p. 7). With so many women in this study describing their sexual orientation as 'unlabeled', it becomes necessary to conduct qualitative research to gain an understanding of the experiences of these women.

Sexual fluidity, as put forth by Diamond (2008b), includes four elements: (a) Women do have a general sexual orientation, that is, they are predominately attracted to males, females, or both, (b) Women also possess a capacity for fluidity, that is, certain situations or relationships might facilitate sexual feelings, (c) sexual attractions triggered by fluidity might be temporary or long-lasting, but do not alter a woman's basic sexual orientation and, (d) not all women are equally fluid, rather, they have different degrees of sensitivity to situational and interpersonal factors.

Katz-Wise (2013) in her dissertation extends Lisa Diamond's sexual fluidity concept to a new sample of sexual minority women and to sexual minority men. She asks the question, "Is sexual orientation stable, fluid, or contextual?" Katz-Wise conducted a two part study with part one being an online questionnaire and part two being in depth qualitative interviews. Her participants were sexual minority young adults living in Wisconsin, aged 18-26, 124 women and 75 men. The online questionnaire assessed sexual identity development, changes in attractions and sexual identity over time, and contextual factors and demographics; 64% of women and 52% of men reported sexual fluidity, as measured by change in attractions. For part two of her study, Katz-Wise interviewed six women, eight men, and four transgender individuals about sexual identity development, use of sexual identity labels, and interpretation of sexual fluidity. To integrate her results, Katz-Wise used a 'facilitative environments model', which recognizes that sexual identity development and sexual fluidity occur at intersections of individual (self-realization), interpersonal (societal interactions) and societal (cultural norms) aspects of identity. Overall, Katz-Wise found her results to be consistent with Diamond's study, furthering the concept of sexual fluidity.

Even before this concept of sexual fluidity emerged with Diamond's (2008b) research, researchers such as Baumeister (2000) and Kinnish et al. (2005) had recognized women's sexuality to be more flexible than men's. It is possible that the higher prevalence of fluidity in women's sexuality is related to women's lower levels of internalized stigma when compared to men (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Diamond's study supports the prevalence of sexual fluidity in sexual minority women; more research is needed to explore sexual fluidity in men and heterosexual women. A recent longitudinal

study (Mock & Eibach, 2012) with 2,560 participants produced data supporting the heightened stability of heterosexual identity compared to other sexual orientation identities, but the researchers suggested that this might have been a result of the normative status of heterosexuality. For example, even if a heterosexual woman did experience same-sex attraction, behavior or fantasy, because of the stigma surrounding same-sex sexuality in the United States, she might not disclose this. Also, Mock and Eibach's (2012) study was limited in that the only options to describe sexual orientation provided to participants were heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual. Researchers have not yet investigated sexual fluidity in women who describe their sexual orientation as 'heterosexual', but the next section of this literature review addresses what research has been conducted with heterosexual women. This research reveals both sexual questioning and same-sex sexuality among heterosexual women.

### **Sexual Questioning and Same-Sex Sexuality among Heterosexual Women**

The majority of the existing research on sexual orientation focuses on sexual minorities, with studies just now beginning to explore heterosexual identity development. This lack of attention in the research is likely due to the influence of 'compulsory heterosexuality', the conceptualization of heterosexuality as a uniform set of attractions and behaviors considered to be the "norm" and only option (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). Morgan (2012) points out that sexual identity usually only becomes visible as an aspect of overall identity development when a person diverges from the heterosexual "norm". Despite the limited research, studies are beginning to reveal variation within heterosexual individuals' identity development. The following studies delve into the

experience of heterosexual women in identity development and understanding of their sexuality.

Morgan and Thompson's (2011) study assessed and described the sexual orientation questioning processes of heterosexually identified women and compared these processes with those of sexual minority women. The aim of this study was to discover the frequency of sexual orientation questioning among heterosexual women. The participants for this study were 333 female college students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at a university in northern California. These students were aged 18-23 with 228 identifying as exclusively straight/heterosexual, and 105 as sexual minorities (73 mostly straight, 21 bisexual, 4 mostly gay/lesbian, and 7 exclusively gay/lesbian). Each student completed an online questionnaire, which included a demographics section, two open-ended questions, and several additional measures.

So, how many of the 228 heterosexual women had thought about and/or questioned their sexual orientation? Approximately two-thirds of the heterosexual women (154 women) indicated having thought about or questioned their sexual orientation, including the consideration of alternative sexual orientation indicators. Sexual orientation questioning began due to one or more of the following in both heterosexual and sexual minority women alike: prompting of social environment (being at college) and openness to exploring sexuality. This research shows that sexual orientation questioning is fairly common among college women, heterosexual and nonheterosexual. What was also found was that, despite recognizing same-sex interest or attraction within themselves, the heterosexual questioning women chose to maintain the 'heterosexual' label; further research is needed to find out why, but it could be because of 'compulsory

heterosexuality' as mentioned earlier. Morgan and Thompson (2011) state that, "Ultimately, the results of this study raise doubts about the current theoretical conceptualization of heterosexuality as a singular, monolithic, universal sexual identity and should prompt researchers to further explore the likely diverse trajectories of female heterosexual identity development" (Morgan and Thompson, 2011, p. 27). With this comment, Morgan and Thompson (2011) are suggesting that just as there is complexity to sexual minority identity development, there is complexity to heterosexual identity development worthy of study.

Vrangalova and Savin-Williams' (2010) quantitative study furthers our understanding of heterosexually identified young adults. This study compared exclusive and nonexclusive heterosexual-identified young adults in terms of behavioral and attitudinal differences relating to sexuality. In this context the term exclusive indicates congruence among sexual orientation indicators (attraction, behavior, fantasy, and identity) while nonexclusive indicates incongruence. The sample was 203 heterosexual students at a large elite Northeastern university, half of which were female (47%), with a mean age of 23 and ethnically diverse with 38% non-white and 28% international students. Correlational analysis was used to interpret the data. It was found that the majority of heterosexually identified young adults in the study (84% of women and 51% of men) reported the presence of same-sex sexuality in at least one sexual orientation indicator – sexual attractions, fantasies or behaviors. The researchers found that as the degree of same-sex interests in women increased, their attitudes became more permissive and sexual experiences increased; behaviors and attitudes did not change for men. This is consistent with prior research identifying women as sexually fluid, the very nature of

their sexuality being different from men's (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010). Vrangalova and Savin-Williams summarize, "Results in this study confirmed earlier reports that not all heterosexually identified young adults are exclusively other-sex oriented in all components of their sexual orientation. The reasons why these nonexclusive individuals maintain a heterosexual label, however, remain unknown" (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010 p. 99). As the authors state, this study confirms earlier research that suggest the possibility of a 'mostly heterosexual' category of sexuality. This study and previous research (Igartua et al., 2009) has identified discrepancies between sexual identity and other sexual orientation indicators among heterosexual individuals.

Sexual minorities are commonly viewed as 'different' or 'other' because of their same-sex interest and their sexual questioning. Morgan and Thompson's (2011) study shows us that the sexual questioning usually associated with sexual minorities is actually common among heterosexual women as well. Vrangalova and Savin-Williams' (2010) study reveals that the way many in our culture perceive the majority of people being 100% heterosexual or 100% homosexual is inconsistent with the research.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Recent studies reveal that because of the complexity inherent in human sexuality many individuals do not feel the labels offered by the three-category model of sexual orientation accurately represent their lived experience (Better, 2014; Coleman-Fountain, 2014); Research supports the viability of "mostly heterosexual" as an additional sexual orientation label (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). Sexual fluidity, a phenomenon

further investigated in the present study, provides an alternative lens through which we can understand sexuality in women in that it recognizes the capacity for situational variability in sexual responsiveness (Diamond, 2008b). Research has shown that sexual questioning and same-sex sexuality is common among heterosexual women as well as sexual minorities (Morgan & Thompson, 2011; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams', 2010). The purpose of the present qualitative study is to increase our understanding of the nature of sexuality in women whose experiences do not fit within the three-category model of sexuality.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Numerous quantitative studies (Better, 2014; Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Diamond, 2008a; Igartua et al., 2009) have revealed a prevalence of women who feel unable to describe their sexuality with the labels offered by the three-category model of sexual orientation (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual). When given the option a significant number of women choose to describe their sexual orientation as ‘mostly heterosexual’ or ‘mostly homosexual’ (Savin-Williams, 2013; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010). Additionally, the women in Diamond’s (2008a) 10-year longitudinal study, most commonly chose to describe their sexual orientation as ‘unlabeled’. Since these women have typically been considered ‘exceptions’ and excluded from research studies, our awareness and understanding of their experiences is very limited. The present study seeks to understand the nature of sexuality in those women whose experiences do not fit within the three-category model of sexual orientation. In order to gain an in-depth understanding beyond basic prevalence, qualitative research is necessary. In this chapter, the methods and procedures for the present qualitative interview study will be discussed.

#### **Research Design**

This qualitative multiple case study seeks to better understand the nature of sexuality in women whose experiences fail to be captured by the three-category model of sexual orientation. A qualitative approach was most appropriate as it allowed for the researcher to obtain an in-depth, in-context understanding of the participants. Qualitative

semi-structured interviews provided women the opportunity to openly express thoughts, feelings and experiences relating to sexuality, speaking from their own frame of reference. As a result of the quantitative research that has been done, we are now aware of the prevalence of women whose experiences do not fit neatly into the categories offered by the three-category model of sexuality. The task of the present study was to provide a space for women to share about their experiences rather than trying to fit those experiences into an existing paradigm.

### **Site of the Study**

This study was conducted in a small metropolitan area in southwest Missouri: Springfield, Missouri. According to the “United States Census Bureau” (2015) the estimated population of Springfield, Missouri in 2013 was 164,122; Springfield, Missouri is the third largest city in Missouri, after St. Louis and Kansas City. An estimated 88.7% of the population are White, 4.1% African American, 0.8% American Indian and Alaska Native, 1.9% Asian, 0.2% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, 3.7% Hispanic or Latino, and 3.2% two or more races. Springfield has been referred to as the ‘buckle of the Bible belt’ because of the high prevalence of conservative Christianity in this area. Politically, Springfield tends to be conservative. For example, in April 2015 voters repealed a nondiscrimination ordinance that would have protected Springfield residents from discrimination in employment and housing based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Herzog, 2015).

## **Participants**

To ensure recruitment of participants that are thoughtful, informative and articulate (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012) about sexuality, purposive sampling was used. Participants were women aged 18 and older, some in ‘emerging adulthood’ (age 18 – 25) (Arnett, 2007) and some older who were able to reflect upon their past and current life experiences. Arnett (2007) describes ‘emerging adulthood’ as an age period from late teens to twenties characterized by: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities.

Three of the five participants were recruited from a Human Sexuality course at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri with permission from the professor teaching the course. After providing a brief overview of the study verbally to the class, an informational flyer (Appendix A) and a short survey (Appendix B) were distributed. The students were given five minutes to fill out the survey and then they were collected. The flyer was left with the students so that if anyone decided later they did, in fact, want to participate in the study, they could still contact the researcher.

Potential participants were informed that their name and all personally identifying information shared with the researcher would be kept entirely confidential and that by participating in this study they would play an integral role in advancing our knowledge of women’s sexuality. These recruiting strategies ensured participants were educated, and had an interest in human sexuality. As a result of the researcher’s desire for a diverse group of participants within the required criteria, age and sexual orientation label/experience of sexual fluidity were the most important factors in determining which participants to interview.

Interviews for the present study took place in a private location familiar to the participant and free of distractions to ensure confidentiality. Four participants were interviewed at a private conference room in a library, and one in a private office location.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was filed and approved prior to beginning this study (Appendix C). Participants' rights were of utmost priority in this study and informed consent forms were provided to and signed by participants before interviewing began (Appendix D). Participants were assured that their identities would be concealed throughout completion of the research. In addition to assuring confidentiality, the informed consent form communicated to each participant that she has the option to read and edit the transcript of the completed interview, can end her participation at any point and can choose to abstain from answering any of the questions asked.

Prospective participants were contacted by the researcher via phone or email to determine interest and availability for this study. With those five participants chosen through purposive sampling for the study, semi-structured interviews (Appendix E) were conducted in person over the course of two meetings, each lasting 1-1.5 hours. With the exception of the interview with Participant 5, which was completed in one meeting, having two meetings allowed for reflection between meetings for both participant and researcher. The researcher encouraged the participants to keep a journal to record thoughts or feelings that came up for them between the first and second meeting. Artifacts, such as the participants' journals, were collected if available and permission was granted.

## **Role of the Researcher and Data Analysis**

The researcher conducted the interview in a professional manner and provided informed consent to the participants. Since the quality of the data largely depended on the ability of the researcher to establish rapport with the participants, careful consideration was given to the role of the researcher in the interview process. Reassuring the participant of the researcher's objectivity, in other words, her nonjudgmental stance, was very important. According to Kinsey et al. (1953) who conducted thousands of interviews with men and women about their sexuality,

“...reassurance has depended on the ease and objective manner of the interviewer, on the simple directness of his questions, on his failure to show any emotional objection to any part of the record, on his tone of voice, on his calm and steady eye, on his continued pursuit of the routine questioning, and on his evident interest in discovering what each type of experience may have meant to each subject” (p. 59).

During the interview, the researcher used active listening, affirmation, tone of voice, and nonverbal skills to demonstrate interest and provide a safe, nonjudgmental environment in which to facilitate honest discussion.

While the interview process is not the same as counseling, the researcher conducted herself according to Carl Rogers' (1979) humanistic approach, providing the participant with unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathy. There is a clear distinction between an interview and a counseling session. The purpose of the interview is to obtain information about the participant. In an interview, the researcher is seeking to understand the participant but it is not assumed that the participant has a problem she is seeking help with, as is the case with counseling. The goal of the researcher is to understand the participant as accurately as possible so that the resulting data is meaningful. In order for this to be possible, the researcher must have the skills and make

the effort to build a trusting, comfortable, respectful, working relationship with the participant.

Additionally, the researcher was educated about sexual orientation in order to connect with the participant and ask relevant questions, sometimes spontaneously, that invite insightful and elaborate comments from the participant. The researcher used minimal self-disclosure when it was determined that doing so would strengthen the researcher-participant relationship such that the participant would feel more comfortable sharing. Consistent with the position of the American Psychological Association, it is the view of the researcher, “that same-sex sexual and romantic attractions, feelings, and behaviors are normal and positive variations of human sexuality, regardless of sexual orientation identity” (APA, 2015, para. 2). The researcher identifies her sexual orientation as unlabeled, and reports having experienced sexual fluidity, having had relationships with both men and women. To ensure that the researcher maintained awareness of her own biases relating to this topic, and so that these biases did not impact the way in which she interacted with the participants, a reflective journal was kept throughout the data collection. In summary, the role of the researcher is to maintain professionalism while at the same time creating an environment in which the participant feels comfortable to speak honestly and openly about sexuality.

All interviews were transcribed. A transcription log was used to organize topics discussed in each interview. The researcher’s reflective journal helped the researcher distinguish between her own thoughts and feelings and the true perspective of the participant. Peer debriefing was used to test the researcher’s growing insights (Gay et al., 2012). This was accomplished through discussion of the researcher’s perceptions,

understandings, and insights resulting from the data analysis with the researcher's thesis committee. Interview content was analyzed for themes and coded accordingly. Within-case analysis and cross-case analysis was conducted. In order to reduce researcher bias, a second reader with expertise in human sexuality cross-checked the researcher's initial analysis. Each of the research questions was addressed in light of the data gathered.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted in person over the course of two meetings, each lasting 1-1.5 hours. Upon completion of the interview process, each interview was transcribed. The researcher read each interview, identifying key points in the margins of the transcripts. Excerpts from the transcripts demonstrating significant findings were highlighted. Each interview was summarized as to content and themes were identified. With reference to Participant #, Interview # and Page #, the researcher documented the intersections in themes across interviews. Each participant provided her age, sexual orientation label, and relationship status (Table 1). The resulting data from the interviews with each participant is presented here.

Table 1. Age, Sexual Orientation Label, and Relationship status. Data are for each participant at the time of her interview.

	Age	Sexual Orientation Label	Relationship Status
Participant 1	23	Mostly heterosexual	In relationship with a man (<1 yr)
Participant 2	41	Lesbian	In relationship with a woman (3 yrs)
Participant 3	22	Mostly heterosexual	In relationship with a man (1 yr)
Participant 4	26	Unlabeled	In relationship with a woman (3 yrs)
Participant 5	33	Heterosexual	Married to a man (4 yrs)

## **Participant 1**

At the time of her interview Participant 1, age 23, described her sexual orientation as “mostly heterosexual”. She explained that she has dated a lot of different people, that appearance is not most important for her in choosing a partner, and that she is attracted to the person, not the gender. Participant 1 reported appreciating both genders separately and for different reasons. She expressed her feeling that sexual orientation categories and labels are limiting.

Participant 1 shared that her family is open-minded and supportive. Her parents have been married for twenty-five years and she has two brothers, one that is heterosexual and one that is homosexual. Participant 1 explained that growing up she had no exposure to same-sex relationships in her social surroundings and felt pressure to be heterosexual. It was in college that Participant 1 learned of more nuanced labels for sexual orientation and had the opportunity to explore and reflect on her own sexuality. Participant 1 experienced same-sex attraction for the first time when she was fourteen, but did not take it seriously or consider it to mean anything at that time. It wasn't until college that Participant 1 had her first relationship with a woman; this relationship lasted for one year. She shared that this relationship broadened her thinking and allowed her freedom from the gender roles she was used to. Prior to this relationship with a woman, all her relationships and sexual experiences had been with men, including one engagement. Participant 1 expects that she will continue to experience shifts in her sexual orientation as time goes on. At the time of her interview, Participant 1 was in a relationship of less than one year with a man.

## **Participant 2**

At the time of her interview Participant 2, age 41, described her sexual orientation as “lesbian”, but explained that she does not personally feel the need for a label; rather, she uses one so others can understand her. Further, she shared that she prefers the Kinsey Scale as a measure of sexual orientation and would put herself at a four or five on the Kinsey Scale. At the time of her interview Participant 2 stated that she is sexually attracted to women and not men.

The messages Participant 2 received from her mother growing up led her to associate same-sex attraction with feelings of disgust. There was no talk of sex in her household growing up other than her grandmother advising her not to have sex. Participant 2 was expected to aspire to be a dutiful Christian wife, but she chose to rebel by going to college and joining the military.

Participant 2 dated several men throughout high school and college. Her first long-term relationship with a man resulted in over 10 years of marriage and two children. Participant 2 reported feeling like something was wrong with her because she felt love for her husband but was never sexually attracted to him. It was not until the age of 34, when a woman flirted with her, that Participant 2 experienced “butterflies” for the first time. After a very difficult several months, Participant 2 and her husband separated. After the separation Participant 2 dated women and at the time of her interview Participant 2 was in a relationship of three years with a woman.

## **Participant 3**

At the time of her interview Participant 3, age 22, described her sexual orientation as “mostly heterosexual”. She explained that she considers her experience of attraction to

be “so much more than words I can say”. Also, she described feeling that the three-category model of sexual orientation is limiting. While Participant 3 reported “finding beauty in women” in high school, it was not until college that she gained an awareness of her sexual attraction towards women. She shared that she has not had any sexual experience with women and that she is trying to “figure out” her sexual orientation. She reported that all of her relationships have been with men, and that she does not picture herself in a relationship with a woman.

Participant 3 described her parents and her sister as conservative. She explained that her parents did not talk with her about sex other than advocating abstinence. At the age of 14, Participant 3 completed a purity class in which she pledged not to have sex before marriage. Participant 3 was raised a Christian and was very involved with a ministry during college, but at the time of her interview, she did not identify as a Christian. She expressed a desire to not be set in any one way of thinking or belief system when it comes to both religion and sexuality. At the time of her interview, Participant 3 was in a relationship of one year with a man.

#### **Participant 4**

At the time of her interview Participant 4, age 26, described her sexual orientation as “unlabeled”. She explained that her sexual orientation is very “fluid” and her experience of attraction changes on a day-to-day basis. Participant 4 shared that there was a time when she thought she was straight, then lesbian, then bisexual, but it was so exhausting trying to “figure it out” that about two years ago she decided that a label did not matter to her anymore. She reported openness to dating anybody: men, women and transgender individuals. She also explained that she is more attracted to women and

would rather be in relationships with women. Prior to her current relationship, Participant 4 reported dating and having long-term relationships with both men and women. Growing up in a conservative rural town of 700 people, Participant 4 reported being “scared to not be straight”. She shared that sex was not something her parents discussed with her. Participant 4 reported thinking that being gay was “unacceptable” until college. At the time of her interview, Participant 4 expressed feeling connected to the LGBTQ community. Further, she explained that she feels more comfortable with her sexual orientation as society becomes more open, with the legalization of same-sex marriage for example. At the time of her interview, Participant 4 was in a relationship of four years with a woman.

### **Participant 5**

At the time of her interview Participant 5, age 33, described her sexual orientation as “heterosexual”. Participant 5 reported having three same-sex experiences, two in high school and one at age 29. She explained that she has always been attracted to men and while she considers women to be physically attractive, she does not want to be in a relationship with a woman. Participant 5 explained that it was curiosity and openness to new experiences that led her to have the same-sex experiences. Her parents did not talk to Participant 5 about sex growing up. It was in a human sexuality course the semester of her interview that Participant 5 first learned about alternatives to the three-category model of sexual orientation such as the Kinsey scale and sexual fluidity. Participant 5 reported dating men, getting pregnant at 18, and having one marriage before her current husband. At the time of her interview, Participant 5 was in a marriage of four years to a man.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The five research questions of this study were explored through in depth interviewing with five women. Semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted in person over the course of two meetings, each lasting 1-1.5 hours. Each interview was transcribed and a within-case and cross-case analysis was conducted. Discussion of the data is presented here, organized by research question.

#### **Research Question 1**

*What factors contribute towards the participant describing her orientation as a) unlabeled, b) mostly heterosexual, or c) mostly homosexual?* The data suggests that the way participants described their sexual orientation was influenced by the following factors: past and current sexual experiences, experience of attraction, consideration of how others might respond to the label, and beliefs about labels.

Both Participants 1 and 3 described their sexual orientation as “mostly heterosexual” at the time of the interviews. Having more sexual experience with men than women led Participant 1 to use the label “mostly heterosexual”. For Participant 3, though her sexual experience had been solely with men, it was her experience of sexual attraction towards women that led her to use the label “mostly heterosexual”. Participant 1 explained that even though the label “mostly heterosexual” fit best for her she often used the label “heterosexual” when she’d talk to people she didn’t know well enough or people that she could tell were close-minded. Participant 1 described her experience using the label “mostly heterosexual” in this excerpt from her interview,

“That’s another thing is many people don’t understand when I want to tell them. If you had to put me into a category, I would say I’m mostly heterosexual. To them, they haven’t heard of these categories, because there’s only the three. And so whenever I say that, they go, ‘Oh, okay. So you’re bi.’ And so then it’s one of those, well let me educate you about all this stuff and it takes twenty minutes to go that way. And so [laughs] if I don’t have that amount of time or patience for that, I just say—if they say ‘oh you’re bi or oh so you’re straight, but you’re just kinda on the edge,’ I just kind of give it to them and say, ‘yeah, sure, if that’s what you believe.’ And then I go on with my day.”

Here, Participant 1 has described the challenge that it is to feel understood when her sexual orientation does not fit into the three-category paradigm. Further, she reported feeling exhausted and like a “defense attorney” in those conversations where she has to explain to others that there are some people that don’t fit into the commonly accepted sexual orientation labels. Participant 4, who described her sexual orientation as “unlabeled” in her interview, reported a similar experience to Participant 1 in that she will sometimes say that she is gay, even though she doesn’t feel that label accurately describes her experience. She explains,

“I don’t like tell people that like oh well I’m gay or I’m lesbian or like I’m bisexual. I just tell them that I’m dating a girl and leave it at that pretty much... But it’s hard when people like ask you. Like you tell them you have a girlfriend, and they’re like, ‘So, you’re gay?’ And it’s like, ‘No, not really,’ but sometimes I just say yes because it’s like way easier.”

To avoid being questioned, Participant 4 reported that she sometimes would let others assume that she was gay. During her interview, Participant 4 expressed her wish that everybody could date who they wanted to date without having to label it one way or another. Participant 4 explained that she experiences attraction towards men, women, and transgender individuals. Her experience of sexual attraction shifts on a daily basis, making it very difficult to find a label to accurately describe her experience. Participant 4 reported that two years ago she decided labeling her sexual orientation didn’t matter to

her anymore and this decision took pressure off of her. The reasons Participant 4 shared for describing her sexual orientation as “unlabeled” reflected Diamond’s (2008a) previous research: a) ongoing sexual questioning b) “attracted to the person, not the gender” c) openness to future change and d) “almost-but-not-quite-exclusive” sexual experience.

Participant 3 shared that she is trying to figure out her sexuality; she reported experiencing sexual attraction towards women but doesn’t picture herself in a relationship with a woman and at the time of her interview uses the label “mostly heterosexual”. She feels pressure from society to be able to explain her sexuality, and specifically she feels pressure to identify as heterosexual. Participant 2 described her sexual orientation as “lesbian” and Participant 5 described her sexual orientation as “heterosexual”; their experiences are presented in the discussion following Research Question 2.

Oftentimes it is assumed that sexual orientation is the most important aspect of identity for sexual minorities; this was not true for Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. For example, Participant 1 considers her career ambitions and being an advocate for others to be the central aspects of her identity. Both Participants 2 and 3 expressed that having a relationship is important to them, but that the sexual orientation label itself is not very important. Participant 2 shared her observation that other people are more interested in her sexual orientation than she is.

Participants 1, 3, and 4 described their sexual orientations using more nuanced and inclusive labels as opposed to the labels provided by the three-category model. Participants 2 and 5 used three-category model sexual orientation labels. The data

suggests that a desire to be understood underlies the use of the label “mostly heterosexual” by Participants 1 and 3 and “unlabeled” by Participant 4. When these participants did resort to using the three-category labels “heterosexual” and “homosexual”, this was a way for Participants 1, 3, and 4 to avoid lengthy conversations in which they’d have to explain the nature of their sexual orientations. Comments made by Participants 1, 3, and 4 reflect an understanding of their own sexual orientations as flexible and complex.

## **Research Question 2**

*How will participants perceive the three-category model of sexual orientation (with the three labels heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual) as representative of their lived experiences of a) sexual attractions, b) sexual behaviors, c) sexual fantasies, and d) sexual identity?* For various reasons, all five participants expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with the three-category model of sexuality. Consider Participant 2 who described her sexual orientation as “lesbian”. When asked why she uses this label, Participant 2 responded, “Oh, cuz you asked me.” Further discussion revealed that Participant 2 was content without a label, but used “lesbian” for the sole purpose of helping others to understand her. She explained, “I’m just who I am and I’m attracted to women, um, but I don’t feel like I need to justify that.” Additionally, Participant 2 expressed her understanding of the societal implications of sexual orientation labels with the following comments, “I think there’s an inherent prejudice when you la—label someone gay, lesbian, transgender, whatever it is. There’s an inherent like, okay, now it’s okay to discriminate against this person...I feel like once you give people label, it’s permission to put you in a box and make sure you stay there.” Participant 2 reported

considering labels to be society's need and her comments indicated that she has a high degree of awareness as to the political and social consequences of sexual orientation labels in the United States. The data from this study as well as Coleman-Fountain's (2014) findings support the notion that labels come with stereotypes and people resist labels in order to avoid being defined primarily by sexual orientation.

Both Participants 2 and 3 stated that they would prefer using the Kinsey scale to describe their sexual orientation as opposed to the three-category model. In the words of Participant 2, "I just think that the three-category model—that's what society accepts—if people define themselves along that scale—where in actuality the actions they take may not be—may not fall or fit perfectly into that three-category model." Here Participant 2 suggests that human sexual behavior is not easily categorized and that the labels available in the three-category model often fail to accurately represent individuals' lived experience.

For a variety of reasons and to varying degrees, all five participants expressed feeling that sexual orientation labels are limiting. For example, Participant 5 who describes her sexual orientation as "heterosexual" said,

"But, you know, with me having a couple experiences with same-sex, I mean it's—yes I label myself as heterosexual but I don't think it's really important especially if somebody is right in the middle or kinda goes back and forth depending on the time in their life. So I don't think label is the most important, it's just kind of what feels right, what, you know, for that particular person... I mean I label myself as heterosexual but I understand that it can go a little different way too."

These comments suggest that Participant 5 views sexual orientation as something that can be fluid throughout the life course, such that having a fixed label isn't mandatory.

Though Participant 5 stated that she never considered herself bisexual, she expressed

uncertainty as to where she fit in the three-category model, since she did have sexual experiences with women. Participant 5 reported using the sexual orientation label heterosexual because she is exclusively attracted to men and all of her relationships have been with men. The same-sex experiences paired with her unchanging sexual orientation label “heterosexual” suggest that Participant 5 experienced what Diamond (2008b) terms sexual fluidity for the following reasons: a) Participant 5 has a general sexual orientation, being attracted predominately to males b) a certain situation and/or relationship facilitated sexual feelings for her and c) the sexual attraction was temporary and did not alter her basic sexual orientation.

All five participants expressed feeling a sense of ambiguity about the bisexual label and thus not feeling comfortable using it. Participant 3 expressed her feeling that the three-category model of sexual orientation was limiting with the following comments,

“And so I think that life is like such a precious thing that like if the—if the moment came where like I fell in love with a woman then like why not? Like why do I have to like stay over on this side? Like, I don’t know. Like I think that it should kinda be that way with everyone. And [pauses] I—I mean I—not that I would wanna like push my beliefs on anyone else but I think that’s almost silly that in our society that we say that you only have to be with x or y or whatever.”

This objection to fixed sexual orientation labels Participant 3 expresses here was also expressed by Participants 1, 4, and 5. Additionally all five participants communicated a sense of longing for people to be more open about sexuality. Participant 1 articulates her thoughts on what it might be like if more people were open about sexuality, “So that was like a huge thing that I had reflected on when we were talking because it was just so weird to me to be the outlier when if everyone was truthful with themselves, I bet we’d have a whole lot of gray area.” The suspicion Participant 1 expresses here that there are

others out there with similar thoughts, feelings and experiences relating to sexual orientation as her was shared by Participants 3 and 4 as well.

Participants 1, 3, and 4 described their sexual orientation without using the three-category model labels. Participant 1 who described her sexual orientation as “mostly heterosexual” shared her observation that labels and categories provide human beings with a comfort zone, but that for her they are limiting. The discontent Participant 1 felt with the three-category model of sexual orientation was reflected in her description of herself as someone who experiences attraction to the person, not the gender. Participant 4 found it to be very confusing and complicated to find a label within the three-category model to fit her lived experience. She explained that her experience of attraction towards men, women and/or both genders changes day-to-day and that she has described her sexual orientation as straight, lesbian, and bisexual at various points throughout her life. At the time of her interview, she described her sexual orientation as “unlabeled”. When Participant 2 was asked to share any additional insights about sexuality that she’d gained throughout her experiences, she expressed the following,

“I mean I don’t know if society will ever change but understanding that everybody doesn’t fit into this square box. You can’t force everybody to conform to expectations...And expecting humans to fit into this box and ignore their instincts, their emotions, their feelings, just to fit the behaviors that are expected and deemed normative. I guess that would be my message. I don’t know if that makes sense, but to allow people to be themselves.”

Participant 2 expressed a longing for an expanded and more inclusive definition of what is considered to be normal in her interview. She hopes for a society in which there is more freedom for individuals to be their authentic selves.

To varying degrees all participants in this study perceived the three-category

model of sexual orientation (with the three labels heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual) to be insufficient in capturing their lived experiences. Despite their reservations about labels, however, Participants 2 and 5 used three-category model labels. On the other hand, Participants 1, 3, and 4 went beyond the three-category model, using labels they felt more accurately represented their experiences. Consistent with earlier research (Morgan and Thompson, 2011) the data in the present study suggests that even among those that use the same sexual orientation label, there is not a uniformity of experience. As a result of their lived experiences, all five of the participants in this study objected to the three-category model assumption that sexual orientation is always early developing and stable. The attempts Participants 1, 3, and 4 made to fit their lived experiences into the three-category model labels resulted in frustration and confusion. A desire for an acknowledgment and acceptance of nuance when it comes to sexual orientation was expressed by Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

### **Research Question 3**

*To what extent does the partner's gender play a role in determining the participants' experience of sexual attraction? What other factors play a role in determining the participants' experience of sexual attraction, and to what extent? Gender played a role in determining attraction to varying degrees for each participant. The data in this study suggests the following factors determined the participants' experience of sexual attraction: character traits, personality, and an emotional connection.*

Participants 3 and 4 considered gender to play a somewhat significant role while Participants 2 and 5 considered gender to play a significant role. For Participant 1 gender

is not the determining factor in her experience of attraction. During her interview

Participant 1 explained,

“I just find the person attractive. I don’t look at the genders of who I’m falling in love with or getting emotions for. So I just have certain qualities that I find in people and if they happen to be a female, cool, if they happen to be a male, cool. So, I find my orientation as just, you’re looking at the person instead of their gender.”

Participant 1 reported experiencing attraction to the person, not the gender. While she was able to articulate very specifically what she liked about men and what she liked about women, Participant 1 shared that it didn’t make sense to her to rank the genders; rather, she explained that she appreciates both genders separately. While at one point, Participant 1 did consider the “bisexual” label, she concluded that it didn’t fit since she didn’t feel equally attracted to men and women. Participant 1 was introduced to more nuanced labels in college and settled on “mostly heterosexual” as her sexual experiences had been primarily with men.

After a number of sexual experiences with men and three long-term relationships (two with men, one with a woman), Participant 1 concluded that she doesn’t have a physical “type”. In her own words,

“I’ve dated so many different people. Tall, short, fat, skinny, white, black, everything. And, so, I think that’s another big thing, whenever people are trying to figure out sexuality, and how you’re oriented towards it, well they’ll say, well what’s your type? And I always go straight into, well, trusting and loyal, and they’ll go, no what’s your type, and they want a physical thing. And I can’t really give em that. Because appearance is just appearance.”

When it comes to her “type”, Participant 1 thinks about character traits, rather than appearance and this is difficult for her to communicate to others who want to know what her physical “type” is.

Participant 4, who describes her sexual orientation as “unlabeled”, reported feeling similarly to Participant 1 that gender was not of primary importance in her experience of attraction. In her own words,

“And like if that happens to be a guy, then like that’s fine. If it happens to be a girl, like that’s fine. If it happens to be someone that’s like transgender, that’s cool. I don’t know—it’s just like—[pauses]—I don’t know—I care more about their personality... Like what they say and like just them as like a person. Before like what they happen to have between their legs.”

Participant 4 stated that she is open to dating anybody: men, women and transgender people, so describing her sexual orientation as “unlabeled” seemed to fit best for her. Aside from physical attraction, Participant 4 reported being attracted to a partner’s personality, specifically people that put her at ease, are easy to talk to, and likeable. In further discussion, Participant 4 explained that she understands sexual orientation as something that goes beyond who you want to have sex with, and that for her an emotional connection is important. Participant 3 agreed that an emotional connection was important and further suggested that attraction is often a complex subconscious experience difficult to put into words. Participant 1 included personality among the following in her list of qualities that attract her to a person: driven, trustworthy, and loyal. Participants 1, 2, and 4 included funny as a quality that is attractive to them. Participants 1 and 3 had in common open-minded as a quality that is attractive to them. Both the findings in the present study, specifically with Participants 1, 3, 4, and the results from Better’s (2014) study support the notion that, for many women, personality is more important than gender in determining sexual attraction.

For Participant 2, gender played an important role in her experience of attraction. She explains her experience this way,

“I never felt like attraction attraction. I felt like, okay he’s suitable this way, like, we have this in common. I can hang out with him. We have these similar interests. Um, I think the worst was with my husband because I was never sexually attracted to him. But I felt love for him and I felt in love with him. But I wasn’t attracted to him. So, it was, um, a struggle for me. I prayed all the time. What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I just be attracted to him? I thought there was something wrong with me. I thought maybe I was asexual or something like that. Um, so then I met a female, I won’t go into who it was, just—This person kind of flirted with me and I got butterflies for the first time in my whole entire life at the age of 34.”

Participant 2 thought something was wrong with her because she was not sexually attracted to her husband. So when, at the age of 34, she experienced attraction towards a woman, it was a turning point to say the least. It was this experience that allowed Participant 2 to gain an experiential knowledge of what attraction is. She described realizing that attraction is more about the way a person looks at you or the way they smell, as opposed to them having similar interests and political views as you. In addition to physical attraction, Participant 2 stated that she is attracted to someone with intellect, someone who can speak appropriately and is there for you and also wants you to be there for them. Participants 3 and 5 both expressed recognizing the beauty in women and Participant 3 reported experiencing sexual attraction towards women, but both participants stated they could not necessarily see themselves in a relationship with a woman.

The three-category model of sexual orientation is built on the assumption that gender is the determining factor in an individual’s experience of sexual attraction. For all the participants in this study, other factors, such as character traits, personality and an emotional connection, played important roles in their experiences of attraction.

Participant 1, for example, explained that gender is not the first thing that she considers when it comes to attraction. She described herself as being attracted to the person, not the

gender. This openness to both genders was shared by Participants 3 and 4. On the other hand, Participant 2, after years of marriage to a man she was not sexually attracted to, now understands herself to be exclusively attracted to women. This data suggests that gender is sometimes, but not always the determining factor in an individual's experience of attraction and that the three-category model of sexual orientation is an oversimplification of the complexity inherent in humans' experience of attraction. The lived experience of the participants in this study calls for the development of a more inclusive conceptualization of sexual orientation.

#### **Research Question 4**

*Through what sources and in what context will participants describe learning about their sexuality and what impact did this have on sexual identity development and experience of sexual desire?* The sources and context in which participants reported learning about their sexuality included: family, religion, social surroundings, sexual partners, the media, and perceived societal norms and expectations. Participants 3, 4, and 5 were currently enrolled in a human sexuality college course at the time of the interviews. Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 reported that there was no substantial discussion about sexuality in their households growing up. On the other hand, Participant 1 shared that her family was very open about sexuality.

Participant 1 expressed gratitude for having a supportive and accepting family such that she was able to explore her sexuality and be who she wanted to be without judgment or rejection. Though Participant 1 was raised Catholic, when her mother talked to her about sex around age 14, she did not push abstinence. Despite the openness within her family, Participant 1 still felt the pressure from religion, social surroundings, and

societal expectations not to deviate from heterosexuality. She simply did not know anyone who was not heterosexual as a teenager and described her perception of normal as, “being straight, getting married, and having kids”. As an adult, Participant 1 found her way in spite of the pressure she felt to fit a certain mold. In her words,

“I’m very much—I’m not in the mindset that most people are of the trying to understand because this category, this category, this category, like we had talked about earlier. They’re trying to understand in the stereotypes and the perspectives and everything that’s already been mapped out for us. I’m one of those people that I just have that open mind. And, you know, every experience we have shapes us. So I’ve had the ones with males. I’ve had the ones with the females. I’ve had the ones of just, you know, just sitting and thinking about what do I want. Blocking out society. Blocking out my family. Blocking out whatever other people try to tell you. And I feel a lot of people don’t do that. They would rather look on social media. They would rather, you know, stay with society’s role. And not really internally go through that with themselves.”

Through introspection, Participant 1 was able to identify what she truly wanted apart from any role her family or society expected her to play.

Participant 2 received the message from her family that heterosexuality was the only acceptable expression of sexuality. Here, she explains how this affects her today,

“I had wished that, um, growing up that there had not been such a, um, stigma about being—not being heterosexual. About being anything else but heterosexual. That it’s--even after the experience it’s carried through a lot of internalized shame, um, and even though I’m comfortable with who I am now, there’s still always in the back of my head that message that, ‘oh no, that’s not what you’re supposed to be.’”

Participant 2, even now that she is in a long-term relationship with a woman, still feels shame about her sexual orientation because of the homophobia she experienced at a young age. During her interview, Participant 2 shared about a repressed memory from before the age of five that came back to her in therapy in which her mother taunted her for saying that she liked a girl. Participant 2 shared that there was no talk of sex in her household with the exception of one conversation with her grandmother prompted by her

experience of sexual abuse when she was five years old in which she was told not to have sex. She reported learning about sex from television and friends. Coming out was not easy for Participant 2. Her husband “outed” her on Facebook to all their family and friends without her consent. In her own words, “I think it was the most stressful experience I’ve ever had in my whole entire life. And I’ve been through a lot. I was overseas in the military after 9/11. I went to fifteen hour shifts as a new mom, didn’t see my newborn child for six months. And this was—this was more stressful than that.” It was devastating to Participant 2 when her husband outed her because of the stigma surrounding nonheterosexuality in her family growing up and in her social surroundings as an adult. Like Participants 1 and 2, Participants 3 and 4 felt similar pressure from family, religion and society to be heterosexual.

As a result of the influence of her conservative family and her Christian faith growing up, it’s been a process for Participant 3 to accept herself as a sexual being. The only discussion of sex Participant 3 had with her parents concerned the importance of abstinence. At the age of 14, Participant 3 went through a purity class in which she pledged not to have sex before marriage. Today Participant 3 is unmarried and sexually active. She reported that it was a challenge to overcome the shame she experienced as a result of her belief that sex before marriage is a sin. Additionally, as someone with a high sex drive, she explained that it was difficult for her to feel normal when the culture and media promotes the stereotype that men are always more sexual than women. Through her romantic relationships Participant 3 was exposed to new ideas about sexuality, allowing her to see beyond the messages she received growing up and begin to explore her own experience of same-sex attraction. In her words, “And I think with that [religion]

and with my sexuality, it's just part of me figuring out who I am outside of the, the kind of box that my family put me in growing up." Self-discovery for Participant 3 has involved stepping beyond the expectations of her family.

Growing up in a rural town of 700 people, Participant 4 considered being gay to be unacceptable until she came to college. Her family did not talk about sexuality in her household growing up and she felt pressure to be one way or another, gay or straight, until she learned of more nuanced and inclusive sexual orientation labels in college. Participant 5 who identifies as heterosexual was not educated about sexuality by her parents. It was not until she enrolled in a human sexuality course at the age of 33 that she learned about the Kinsey Scale and sexual fluidity as alternative measures of sexual orientation.

These participants' stories suggest that there is a link between participants' upbringings and their sexual identity development and experience of sexual desire. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4 had to struggle to express their authentic selves in the heteronormative environments they found themselves in whether that was family, religion, social surroundings, the media, or perceived societal norms and expectations. Participants 2 and 3 reported having to overcome shame in order to accept and be open about their sexual orientations. All five participants described learning about sexuality in the context of their sexual relationships. Participant 1 was the exception to the rest of the participants in that her family was very open about sexuality. Gaining more knowledge about sexuality and sexual orientation, whether through self-discovery, conversations with others, or a human sexuality course was empowering for participants; this knowledge allowed participants to feel normal and to express themselves more freely

## Research Question 5

*How will participants describe experiencing continuity and stability in their sexual orientation over time? How will participants describe experiencing change in their sexual orientation over time (i.e. sexual fluidity)?* To varying degrees, Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 all reported experiencing change in their sexual orientation over time.

This excerpt from the interview with Participant 1 provides insight as to her experience of sexual fluidity,

“I mean I went from ‘definitely hetero’ to, you know, ‘mostly hetero’, to, you know, dating a female anyway, to coming back to being ‘mostly hetero’. I think I’ll bounce around. Um, but that, again, that’s just kind of people giving me labels. Whereas I mean myself sexually it’s like, you know, I go where I wanna go. And what feels good at the time. So, will I fluctuate between genders? Yeah, probably. But, I don’t see it as something that’s like a big deal. Whereas some people would be like, you went from gay to straight to gay to straight? Like they don’t realize this whole—there is kind of a spectrum of [laughs] where I could be.”

Participant 1 expects change in her sexual orientation over time and this has been her experience thus far. At age 23, having already been in two long-term relationships with men and one with a woman, Participant 1 has accepted change as characteristic of her sexual orientation. She acknowledged that from an outsider’s point of view she “may look all over the place” but explained that she is very thoughtful about her relationship decisions and that a process of self-discovery was taking place for her every step of the way.

Participants 3 and 4 also have experienced change in their sexual orientations and think that will be the pattern in the future as well. Participant 3 feels that she is just at the beginning of exploring her sexuality and expects that it will evolve and grow as time goes on. Participant 4 expects that her sexual orientation will stay consistent in how flexible it

is. She reported during her interview that her sexuality is very fluid and open and that her feelings of attraction change day-to-day. She observed that her experience of sexual attraction and fantasies are flexible, but that she is more consistently attracted emotionally and romantically to women than men.

At the time of their interviews, both Participants 2 and 5 were in long-term relationships and expect they will experience stability in their sexual orientations as time goes on. Participant 2 recognizes that she honestly doesn't know if her sexual orientation will change, acknowledging that anything could happen, but stating that she is definitively attracted to women. Participant 5 considers her same-sex experiences to be the result of "momentary attraction", describing them as one-time experiences and, nothing that would cause her to question her heterosexuality.

Past experience of change in sexual orientation and/or sexual fluidity appears to be the common thread among the five participants in this study; however, the data revealed diversity of thought regarding expectations for the future. The participants that reported expecting stability in their sexual orientations were Participants 2 and 5, aged 41 and 33, respectively. Participants 1, 3, and 4, all in their twenties, reported expecting change in their sexual orientations over time. The data suggests that whether the participant expected stability or change in their sexual orientation over time could be related to their age and/or developmental stage in life, as well as their preference for stability or change generally. For example, Participants 1 and 3 fall into what researcher Arnett (2007) terms the 'emerging adulthood' stage of life, which is reflected by identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities. Additionally,

the data from interviews with Participants 1 and 4 support the notion that some degree of flexibility is a general property of sexuality (Diamond, 2008b).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

All five participants expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with the three-category model of sexual orientation. It was this dissatisfaction with the three-category model that led Participants 1 and 3 to use the more nuanced label “mostly heterosexual” to describe their sexual orientations. Participant 4 experienced such distress in trying to find a label that fit her experiences that she decided to go without a label at all. Though Participant 2 uses the three-category label “lesbian”, she explained that the label is not important to her; rather, she uses it for the sole purpose of helping others to understand her. Participant 5, in her own words, stated, “I mean I label myself as heterosexual but I understand that it can go a little different way too.” All five participants expressed a desire to be understood and a resistance to the stereotypes that come with labels.

While the three-category model is built on the assumption that gender is the determining factor in an individual’s experience of attraction, all five participants in this study cited qualities beyond gender such as character traits, personality and emotional connection as determining attraction for them. The words of a former patient of psychotherapist Stephanie Dowrick (1994) illuminate the findings in this study,

“I am not going to tell you whether my lover is a woman or a man because one of the great bonuses is that this is not a determining factor. Of course how I relate is affected by my lover’s gender, but it is not any longer primary. Sometimes I am astonished by this myself, yet it also seems like the most natural thing in the world and you really wonder why people make such a fuss about who is gay and who is straight” (p. 69).

Gender is not a primary determining factor of attraction for Dowrick's patient nor is it for Participants 1, 3, or 4 of the present study. For all five participants in this study, the lack of information about sexuality growing up in heteronormative environments resulted in disempowerment. Learning about sexuality and sexual orientation whether through self-discovery, conversations with others, or a human sexuality course allowed for participants to gain a sense of agency over their own sexuality.

The three-category model was insufficient in representing the lived experiences of the women in this study, further supporting the need for, "movement away from more essentialist conceptualizations of sexual orientations and identity and toward multidimensional and complex understandings of these concepts" (Morgan, 2013, p. 58). A more sophisticated approach to conceptualizing sexual orientation is needed to accurately represent the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the women interviewed in this study. Research (Diamond, 2008b; Hammack, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2005b) has begun to explore new paradigms for understanding sexual orientation and these ideas along with further recommendations will be presented in the next section.

## **Recommendations**

**New Conceptualizations of Sexual Orientation.** Findings in this study call for the development of a more inclusive model of sexual orientation, one that does not abandon sexual orientation labels altogether but does reflect the richness of experience not captured by the three-category model. Consistent with earlier research (Better, 2014; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012), the results of the present study revealed a complexity within sexual orientation in women. In light of her findings,

Diamond (2008b) called for an expanded understanding of sexuality, beyond the rigid, categorical models commonly used in contemporary society. In her words,

“We require an altogether new type of model, one that systematically explains both stability and variability, in sexuality; places equal emphasis on intrinsic orientations and the capacity for fluidity; emphasizes the ongoing interactions between women and the diverse contexts within which sexuality is expressed; makes sense of the complex links between love and desire; takes seriously the capacity for novel forms of sexual and emotional experience that emerge unexpectedly over the life course; and makes no assumptions about authentic sexual types or normal developmental pathways” (p.237).

Diamond proposes a new approach to conceptualizing sexual orientation over the life course, based in dynamical systems theory. Dynamical systems models seek to describe how complex patterns emerge, stabilize, change and restabilize over time, and these models have recently been applied to the social sciences. Diamond (2007) states, “Accordingly, in order to develop models of female same-sex sexuality capable of representing all of its diverse manifestations, we must set aside the assumption of normative stability and instead place processes of change at the center of our analyses” (p.157). A dynamical systems approach to sexual orientation would seek to understand the complexity, variation and flexibility in sexual orientation revealed by earlier research (Morgan, 2013) and including the results of the present study.

Savin-Williams (2005b) suggests a differential developmental trajectories approach to understanding sexual orientation because it takes into account within-group variability in developmental pathways. In light of the present study’s results, a differential developmental trajectories approach seems more appropriate than existing stage-models of sexual identity development. Further, Hammack (2005) acknowledges the impact of cultural, social, and historical contexts on sexual identity development in his application of life course development theory to sexual orientation. In the future,

researchers will benefit from taking a moderate stance between essentialism and constructionism in their study of sexual identity development and familiarizing themselves with these new conceptualizations of sexual orientation.

More than one of the women interviewed in this study expressed understanding her sexual orientation as encompassing much more than whom she wants to have sex with. The results from this study revealed that gender is not always the determining factor in attraction and that there are many different types of attraction beyond sexual attraction including: romantic, aesthetic, sensual, emotional, and intellectual. These findings suggest that it may be more appropriate to use the term “affectional orientation” as opposed to “sexual orientation”. Use of the term affectional orientation presumes that the orientation of a person’s affections goes beyond sexuality. While sexual attraction plays a role in affectional orientation, it is not the sum of any relationship. (Gregoire & Jungers, 2007). Also, the term affectional orientation is more inclusive of asexual individuals who do not experience sexual attraction.

**Beyond Assumptions and Stereotypes.** While there are labels that exist to describe individuals who do not fit into the categories offered by the three-category model, such as “queer” and “pansexual”, those that use these labels are often deemed to be in an “other” status and as a result experience the negative impacts of stigma and discrimination (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). Savin-Williams (2005a) says the following about nonheterosexual youth,

“We must stop treating them as if they were a separate species; stop focusing solely on “gay versus straight” research; and stop treating them as if they were a collective, as if “gay youth” were a meaningful entity... Their desire is to witness the elimination of sexuality per se as the defining characteristic of the person” (p. 19).

As researchers and in society we must recognize that nonheterosexual individuals are not wholly different from heterosexual individuals. We must also not assume that sexuality is primary to a nonheterosexual individual's identity; this was not the case for any of the participants in the present study. The results of the present study can be used as a tool for normalizing same-sex sexuality and sexual fluidity across the lifespan. My hope is that new insights gained from this study will give permission, in a sense, for individuals to experience their sexuality as it unfolds rather than attempt to conform to a societal standard of what is considered "acceptable".

For the participants in this study sexuality education resulted in empowerment. This finding suggests that sexuality education, including a discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity, should be included in middle and high school curriculum. In contrast to advertising's exploitation of female sexuality (Media Education Foundation, Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010), formal sexuality education would empower women to have agency over their own sexualities. Also, it would be beneficial for a human sexuality course to be a requirement of counseling and psychology graduate programs. This would prepare future counselors and psychologists to address any sexual concerns that clients may come to them with, in an informed, therapeutic manner.

**Further Study.** Further study in the area of sexual orientation is necessary. Specifically, it would be beneficial to explore sexual fluidity in men in the same way that this qualitative study explored sexual fluidity in women. Also, findings from the present study suggest that, in future studies recruitment of participants should be based on criteria beyond sexual orientation labels so as to allow for inclusion of those who resist labels.

Furthermore, to ensure the generalizability of future studies, quantitative studies with larger sample sizes should be conducted.

Consistent with previous findings (Julian, Duys & Wood, 2014), the results of the present study confirm the importance of considering contextual factors such as family, religion, social surroundings, sexual partners, the media, and perceived societal norms when seeking to understand sexual identity development in women. The women in this study varied in age from early twenties, to early thirties and forties, thus experiencing different sociopolitical environments and having varying access to information about sexuality. Some of the labels used in contemporary society for sexual orientation did not exist until later in life for some of the women in this study. Results from the present study suggest that contextual factors be taken into account in future research on sexual orientation. Also, all five of the participants in this study expressed a resistance to the heterosexual mold and a desire for freedom from gender roles. While exploration of these topics was not immediately relevant to the present study, these topics are worthy of further study. With additional analysis one may conclude that in resisting gender roles, these women are, in actuality, resisting a larger power structure in which those doing the labeling of sexual orientation and gender identity hold the power. Further researchers will benefit from exploring the intersectionality of various aspects of identity as they relate to sexual orientation including gender, race, class, age, geography, and culture.

The findings from this study can contribute towards a move away from heteronormative attitudes and towards the cultivation of a cultural climate accepting of diversity within sexual orientation. My hope is that, as a society, we can evolve into a more nuanced understanding of sexuality.

## REFERENCES

- American Psychiatric Association (1998), *Position statement on psychiatric treatment and sexual orientation*. American J. Psychiatry, 1999; 156:1131.  
[www.psych.org/edu/other\\_res/lib\\_archives/archives/980020.pdf](http://www.psych.org/edu/other_res/lib_archives/archives/980020.pdf)
- American Psychological Association. (2008). *Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality*. Washington, DC  
[Retrieved from [www.apa.org/topics/orientation.pdf](http://www.apa.org/topics/orientation.pdf)]
- American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. (2009). *Report of the task force on appropriate therapeutic responses to sexual orientation*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Emerging Adulthood: What Is It, and What Is It Good For?. *Child Development Perspectives*, 1(2), 68-73. doi:10.1111/j.1750-8606.2007.00016.x
- Balsam, K. F., & Mohr, J. J. (2007). Adaptation to Sexual Orientation Stigma: A Comparison of Bisexual and Lesbian/Gay Adults. *Journal Of Counseling Psychology*, 54(3), 306-319. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.54.3.306
- Baumeister, R. F. (2000). Gender Differences in Erotic Plasticity: The Female Sex Drive as Socially Flexible and Responsive. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(3), 347.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Twenge, J. M. (2002). Cultural suppression of female sexuality. *Review of General Psychology*, 6(2), 166-203. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.6.2.166
- Better, A. (2014). Redefining Queer: Women's Relationships and Identity in an Age of Sexual Fluidity. *Sexuality & Culture*, 18(1), 16-38. doi:10.1007/s12119-013-9171-8
- Blackwood, E., and S.E. Wieringa. (2003). Sapphic shadows: Challenging the silence in the study of sexuality. In L.D. Garnets and D. C. Kimmell, eds., *Psychological perspectives on lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (pp. 410-434). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cohler, B. J., & Hammack, P. L. (2007). The Psychological World of the Gay Teenager: Social Change, Narrative, and "Normality". *Journal Of Youth & Adolescence*, 36(1), 47-59. doi:10.1007/s10964-006-9110-1
- Coleman-Fountain, E. (2014). Lesbian and gay youth and the question of labels. *Sexualities*, 17(7), 802-817. doi:10.1177/1363460714531432

- Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-II.* (1968). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association.
- Diamond, L. M. (2007). A Dynamical Systems Approach to the Development and Expression of Female Same-Sex Sexuality. *Perspectives On Psychological Science (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 2(2), 142-161. doi:10.1111/j.1745-6916.2007.00034.x
- Diamond, L. M. (2008a). Female Bisexuality From Adolescence to Adulthood: Results From a 10-Year Longitudinal Study. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(1), 5-15. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.44.1.5
- Diamond, L. M. (2008b). *Sexual fluidity understanding women's love and desire.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Diamond, L. M. (2013). Just how different are female and male sexual orientation? [Powerpoint slides]. Retrieved from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2rTHDOuUBw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2rTHDOuUBw)
- Dowrick, S. (1994). *Intimacy and solitude.* New York: Norton.
- Elia, J. P., & Eliason, M. (2010). Discourses of Exclusion: Sexuality Education's Silencing of Sexual Others. *Journal Of LGBT Youth*, 7(1), 29-48. doi:10.1080/19361650903507791
- Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. (2012). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gregoire, J., & Jungers, C. M. (2007). *The counselor's companion: What every beginning counselor needs to know.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gunsallus, J. (2013, January 7). Sex: Mind full or Mindful? Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NT9isHpaG-M>
- Hammack, P. L. (2005). An Integrative Paradigm. *Human Development (0018716X)*, 48(5), 267-290. doi:10.1159/000086872
- Hatzenbuehler, M. L. (2009). How Does Sexual Minority Stigma "Get Under the Skin"? A Psychological Mediation Framework. *Psychological Bulletin*, 135(5), 707-730. doi:10.1037/a0016441
- Herek, G. M. (2007). Confronting Sexual Stigma and Prejudice: Theory and Practice. *Journal Of Social Issues*, 63(4), 905-925. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2007.00544.x

- Herzog, S. (2015, April 8). Emotions high as LGBT protections repealed in Springfield. News-Leader. Retrieved from <http://www.newsleader.com/story/news/politics/elections/2015/04/07/lgbt-protections-repeal-losing-late-counting/25440407/>
- Hoburg, R., Konik, J., Williams, M., & Crawford, M. (2004). Bisexuality Among Self-Identified Heterosexual College Students. *Journal Of Bisexuality*, 4(1/2), 25-36.
- Human Sexuality. (2010). In *Sex and Society*(Vol. 2, pp. 384-389). Tarrytown: Marshal Cavendish Corporation
- Igartua, K., Thombs, B. D., Burgos, G., & Montoro, R. (2009). Concordance and discrepancy in sexual identity, attraction, and behavior among adolescents. *Journal Of Adolescent Health*, 45(6), 602-608. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.03.019
- Julian, N., Duys, D. K., & Wood, S. M. (2014). Sexual Identity Formation of Women Who Love Women: A Contextual View Point. *Journal Of LGBT Issues In Counseling*, 8(2), 189-205. doi:10.1080/15538605.2014.895665
- Katz-Wise, S. L. (2013). Beyond labels: Sexual fluidity and sexual identity development in sexual minority young adults. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 73
- King, M., Semlyen, J., Tai, S. S., Killaspy, H., Osborn, D., Popelyuk, D., & Nazareth, I. (2008). A systematic review of mental disorder, suicide, and deliberate self harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people. *BMC Psychiatry*, 81-17.
- Kinnish, K., Strassberg, D., & Turner, C. (2005). Sex Differences in the Flexibility of Sexual Orientation: A Multidimensional Retrospective Assessment. *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, 34(2), 173-183. doi:10.1007/s10508-005-1795-9
- Kinsey, A., Pomeroy, W., & Martin, C. (1948). *Sexual behavior in the human male* (pp. 636-659). Philadelphia, PA: Saunders
- Kinsey, A., Pomeroy, W., Martin, C., & Gebhard, P. (1953). *Sexual behavior in the human female* (pp. 468-475). Philadelphia, PA: Saunders.
- Klein, F. (1978). *The bisexual option: A concept of one-hundred percent intimacy* (1st ed.). New York: Arbor House.
- Landry, D. J., Darroch, J. E., Singh, S., & Higgins, J. (2003). Factors Associated with the Context of Sex Education In U.S. Public Secondary Schools. *Perspectives On Sexual & Reproductive Health*, 35(6), 261-269.
- Logie, C. (2012). The Case for the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health to Address Sexual Orientation. *American Journal*

*Of Public Health*, 102(7), 1243-1246. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2011.300599

- Media Education Foundation., Jhally, S., & Kilbourne, J. (2010). *Killing us softly 4: Advertising's image of women*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.
- Mock, S., & Eibach, R. (2012). Stability and Change in Sexual Orientation Identity Over a 10-Year Period in Adulthood. *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, 41(3), 641-648. doi:10.1007/s10508-011-9761-1
- Morgan, E. M. (2013). Contemporary issues in sexual orientation and identity development in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1, 52-66.
- Morgan, E. (2012). Not Always a Straight Path: College Students' Narratives of Heterosexual Identity Development. *Sex Roles*, 66(1/2), 79-93. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-0068-4
- Morgan, E. M., & Thompson, E. M. (2011). Processes of Sexual Orientation Questioning among Heterosexual Women. *Journal Of Sex Research*, 48(1), 16-28. doi:10.1080/00224490903370594
- Morgan, E. M., Steiner, M. G., & Thompson, E. M. (2010). Processes of Sexual Orientation Questioning among Heterosexual Men. *Men & Masculinities*, 12(4), 425-443.
- Mustanski, B. S. (2002). A Critical Review of Recent Biological Research on Human Sexual Orientation. *Annual Review Of Sex Research*, 13(1), 89.
- Pedersen, Willy, & Kristiansen, H. (2008). Homosexual Experience, Desire, and Identity Among Young Adults. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 54(1/2), 68-102
- Reissing, E. D., & Di Giulio, G. (2010). Practicing Clinical Psychologists' Provision of Sexual Health Care Services. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice*, 41(1), 57-63. doi:10.1037/a0017023
- Rogers, C. R. (1979). The Foundations of the Person-Centered Approach. *Education*, 100(2), 98.
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2005a). The New Gay Teen: Shunning Labels. *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 12(6), 16-19.
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2005b). *The new gay teenager*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Savin-Williams, R., Joyner, K., & Rieger, G. (2012). Prevalence and Stability of Self-Reported Sexual Orientation Identity During Young Adulthood. *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, 41(1), 103-110. doi:10.1007/s10508-012-9913-y

- Shively, M. G., Jones, C., & De Cecco, J. P. (1984). Research on Sexual Orientation:. *Journal Of Homosexuality*, 9(2/3), 127-136. doi:10.1300/J082v09n02\_08
- Sell, R. L. (1996). The Sell Assessment of Sexual Orientation: Background and scoring. *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, & Bisexual Identity*, 1(4), 295-310.
- Sell, R. L. (1997). Defining and measuring sexual orientation: A review. *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, 26(6), 643.
- Sell, R. L., & Petruccio, C. (1996). Sampling homosexuals, bisexuals, gays, and lesbians.. *Journal Of Homosexuality*, 30(4), 31.
- Sexual Orientation. (2010). In *Sex and Society*(Vol. 3, pp. 805-806). Tarrytown: Marshal Cavendish Corporation
- Spinelli, E. (2014). Being Sexual: Human Sexuality Revisited. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 25(1), 17-42.
- The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid. (2014, January 1). Retrieved May 4, 2015, from <http://www.americaninstituteofbisexuality.org/thekleingrid/>
- United States Census Bureau. (2015, March 31). Retrieved April 22, 2015, from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/29/2970000.html>
- Vrangalova, Z., & Savin-Williams, R. C. (2010). Correlates of Same-Sex Sexuality in Heterosexually Identified Young Adults. *Journal Of Sex Research*, 47(1), 92-102. doi:10.1080/00224490902954307
- Vrangalova, Z., & Savin-Williams, R. (2012). Mostly Heterosexual and Mostly Gay/Lesbian: Evidence for New Sexual Orientation Identities. *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, 41(1), 85-101. doi:10.1007/s10508-012-9921-y
- Weissbourd, R., Peterson, A., & Weinstein, E. (2013). Preparing students for romantic relationships. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(4), 54-58.
- World Health Organization, Department of Reproductive Health and Research,. *Defining Sexual Health: Report Of A Technical Consultation On Sexual Health 28-31 January 2002, Geneva*. Geneva: WHO Press, 2006. Web. 20 May 2015.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Flyer

#### **Beyond the Three-Category Model: An Exploration of Sexual Orientation in Women Aged 18 and Older**

##### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of the present study is to increase our understanding of the nature of sexuality in women 18 and older whose experiences do not fit within the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model of sexual orientation. Specifically, this study will explore the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of women who would describe their sexual orientation as ‘unlabeled’, ‘mostly heterosexual,’ or ‘mostly homosexual’ when given the option, and/or women who report experiencing sexual fluidity.

##### **Why should I participate?**

The primary benefit to you is the opportunity to play an integral role in advancing our knowledge of women’s sexuality. This is necessary to improve sexuality education in schools, train counselors and psychologists effectively to address sexual concerns with clients, promote healthy conversation about sexuality as an aspect of identity, and reduce stigma surrounding same-sex sexuality in the United States.

##### **What is the time commitment?**

Two in-person interviews; 2-3 hours in total

##### **What will you ask me in the interview?**

Questions will be asked about your sexuality primarily focusing on sexual attractions and sexual identity.

##### **What will you do with my interview content?**

Your interview will be used in the production of a thesis at Missouri State University, though no personally identifying information will be revealed. You would also have the option of reading the preliminary description of our interview before it is utilized in the final project.

##### **Who do I contact?**

Please email Julie Wrocklage at [Wrocklage25@live.missouristate.edu](mailto:Wrocklage25@live.missouristate.edu) or text her at 314-420-7340. From there we will set up an initial, informal phone call or meeting to discuss the possibility of working together.

## Appendix B. Research Survey

1) **I have found it difficult to find a label that felt right to describe my sexuality.** *(Circle the response that best fits)*

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

2) **I have experienced flexibility and/or change in my sexual attractions, behaviors, fantasies and/or identity throughout my life.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

3) **Gender is the primary determining factor in my experience of attraction towards a person.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

4) **Having a label for my sexual orientation is important to me.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

5) **I have had sexual and/or romantic relationships with both men and women.** *(Please circle your response)*

YES or NO

6) **Which label best describes your sexual orientation?** *(Circle the label(s) that apply)*

- Heterosexual (Straight)
- Mostly heterosexual (Mostly straight)
- Bisexual
- Mostly homosexual (Mostly gay/lesbian)
- Homosexual (gay/lesbian)
- Unlabeled
- Asexual
- Other \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please indicate here how you would describe your sexual orientation)

7) **Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_

8) **Would you be open to the possibility of being interviewed for a study exploring sexuality in women?** Your name and all personally identifying information you share with me will be completely confidential. You would also have the option of reading the preliminary description of our interview before it is utilized in the final project. *(Please circle your response)*

YES or NO

**9) What is an email and phone number I can contact you at to discuss the possibility of working together?** By providing your information, you are not obligated to participate.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C. Human Subjects IRB Approval

IRB Notice

IRB <irb\_no\_reply@cayuse.com>

Thu 6/11/2015 11:54 AM

To: Anderson, A Leslie <ALAnderson@MissouriState.edu>;

Cc: Wrocklage, Julie C <Wrocklage25@live.missouristate.edu>;

To: Angela Anderson

Counseling Ldrshp and Special Ed

901 S National Ave Springfield MO 65897-0027

**Approval Date:** 6/11/2015

**Expiration Date of Approval:** 6/09/2016

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Expedited Category:** 6.Voice/image research recordings

**Study #:** 15-0490

**Study Title:** Beyond the Three-Category Model: An Exploration of Sexual Orientation in Women Aged 18 and Older

This submission has been approved by the above IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal.

### **Investigator's Responsibilities:**

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented (use the procedures found at <http://orc.missouristate.edu>). Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB following the adverse event procedures at the same website.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

CC:

Julie Wrocklage, Counseling Ldrshp And Special Ed

Other Investigator

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D. Informed Consent Form

**Title of Project:** Beyond the Three-Category Model: An Exploration of Sexual Orientation in Women Aged 18 and Older

The purpose of the present study is to increase our understanding of the nature of sexuality in women 18 and older whose experiences do not fit within the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model of sexual orientation. Specifically, this study will explore the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of women who would describe their sexual orientation as ‘unlabeled’, ‘mostly heterosexual,’ or ‘mostly homosexual’ when given the option, and/or women who report experiencing sexual fluidity. Research will be conducted through audio interviews with women aged 18 and older.

**Investigators:** The student investigator for this project is Julie Wrocklage, a Master’s level student at Missouri State University majoring in Mental Health Counseling. Julie is conducting this research for her thesis under the advisement of Dr. Leslie Anderson, Professor of Counseling at Missouri State University.

**Research Procedure:** A two-part audio interview of 2-3 hours in total will be conducted. Questions will be asked about your sexuality primarily focusing on sexual attractions and sexual identity. Your interview will be assigned a pseudonym, and the researcher will transcribe and analyze the data for themes related to how participants have experienced their sexuality and specifically sexual orientation and/or sexual fluidity.

**Benefits / Risks:** The primary benefit to you is the opportunity to play an integral role in advancing our knowledge of women’s sexuality. This is necessary to improve sexuality education in schools, train counselors and psychologists effectively to address sexual concerns with clients, promote healthy conversation about sexuality as an aspect of identity, and reduce stigma surrounding same-sex sexuality in the United States. There are no major risks to you if you choose to participate. However, if discussion of this topic were to cause any form of emotional distress, you will be provided with referrals for counseling. It is important that you understand that your interview will be used in the production of a thesis at Missouri State University, though no personally identifying information will be revealed. You would also have the option of reading the preliminary description of our interview before it is utilized in the final project.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this project is voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from the project at any time by contacting Julie Wrocklage at 314-420-7340 or Wrocklage25@live.missouristate.edu or her advisor Dr. Leslie Anderson at 417-836-6519 or alanderson@missouristate.edu.

I, (please print) \_\_\_\_\_ grant permission for my interview (audio) to be recorded and transcribed and for its contents, as well as any other related materials, to be used in a thesis presented to student’s thesis committee at Missouri State University, and in any publications that might result from these research findings. I

understand that the thesis and any other published forms of this research will protect my identity and will report findings using only pseudonyms. I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the benefits and risks associated with it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

---

(Signature of participant)(Date)

---

(Printed Name of participant)

---

(Signature of Investigator)(Date)

## Appendix E. Interview Questions

- Demographic info to collect (have them fill out a form):
  - Age, sex, gender, race, ethnic Background, religion/spirituality, education, occupation, socioeconomic status (childhood and present), marital/partnership status, children, sexual abuse, sexually active in last month:
- What is your interest in this study?

### **1) What factors contribute towards the participant describing her orientation as a) unlabeled, b) mostly heterosexual, or c) mostly homosexual?**

- Tell me about your sexual orientation
- How do you describe your sexual orientation within yourself, even if it's different from what you might tell other people? If you don't apply a label to your sexual orientation please say so. To your family? To your friends?
  - What are your feelings relating to the way you choose to identify? Thoughts? Reasoning?
  - What is your comfort level with your sexual orientation? How long have you felt this way?
  - How many people and who have you shared your sexual orientation with?
  - How central is your sexuality to your identity
  - Are sexual orientation labels important?

### **2) How will participants perceive the three-category model of sexual orientation (with the 3 labels heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual) as representative of their lived experiences of a) sexual attractions, b) sexual behaviors, c) sexual fantasies, and d) sexual identity?**

- What is your perception and understanding of the three-category (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) model of sexual orientation?
  - How well has this three-category model fit for you across your lifespan?
  - Tell me more about what has or hasn't fit.
  - What's the impact on you, not having a clear-cut label recognized by society to describe your experience?

### **3) To what extent does the partner's gender play a role in determining the participants' experience of sexual attraction? What other factors play a role in determining the participants' experience of sexual attraction, and to what extent?**

- Do you find that in a given year you've experience sexual thoughts/feelings/expression towards females and males?

- Have you ever experienced attraction to the person, not the gender?
- How do emotional, romantic, cognitive, and social factors play a role in determining your experience of attraction?

**4) Through what sources and in what context will participants describe learning about their sexuality and what impact did this have on sexual identity development and experience of sexual desire?**

- When did you first begin to think about, become aware of your sexuality?
- Learning about sexuality
  - How do you think your family relationships have affected your sexuality?
  - How has your environment or society influenced the development and experience of your sexuality and vice versa?
  - What do you think the significant relationships in your life have contributed to your sexuality?
  - What is the impact (if any) your religiosity or spirituality has had on your sexuality or vice versa?
  - How have your social surroundings influenced the development and experience of your sexuality?
  - Do you feel connected to the LGBTQ community in your area?
- Impact on sexual identity development and experiences of sexual desire:
  - Do you express your sexual feelings? How? With whom?
  - Do you think about your sexuality as being for a particular purpose?
  - Do you have desires that are hard to express/difficult to acknowledge/that you don't or can't tell others? Are there fears or concerns that keep you from acting on them?
  - Are there connections for you between being female and your sexuality?
    - What does being female mean to you, especially as it concerns your sexuality? How has being female affected your sexuality?

**5) How will participants describe experiencing continuity and stability in their sexual orientation over time? How will participants describe experiencing change in their sexual orientation over time (i.e. sexual fluidity)?**

- Was there any time when you underwent a life change that had some effect or influence on your sexuality? Are there significant events in your life that changed your relationship to your sexuality?
- Was there ever a time when you had a major change in your sexuality, and that led to some change or effect or influence in your life in general?
- Do you feel confident that your sexuality will remain as you experience it presently or do you think it will change? Has it changed so far?
- What are your goals in a sexual context?
- In what ways are you open to experience?