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**THE ERASURE OF MONOSEXISM: AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT IN BISEXUAL WOMEN**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Counseling

By

Emma Leonard

December 2021

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# **THE ERASURE OF MONOSEXISM: AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN BISEXUAL WOMEN**

Counseling, Leadership, and Special Education

Missouri State University, December 2021

Master of Science

Emma Leonard

## **ABSTRACT**

Research has shown that bisexual individuals experience poorer mental health outcomes, resulting in depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidal ideation, than their gay or straight counterparts (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010; Taylor, Power, & Smith, 2020). These poor mental health outcomes suggest bisexual individuals may be experiencing hardships these other groups are not. This qualitative study sought to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of bisexual women aged 18-25. The researcher sought to gain an understanding of self-identified resiliency factors by the women as it pertains to their sexual/affectional orientation. Detailed interviews were the primary data collection method and were conducted with four women who identify as bisexual. Thematic coding was utilized to identify themes among the participants. The research explored with people who identify as bisexual what they identify as helpful or hindering in terms of identity development and acceptance. Themes identified included supportive factors, exploration/education, hindering factors, religion, assumptions that the participants were straight, as well as others. Recommendations are included for parents, teachers, and mental healthcare professionals that will aid in serving this population.

**KEYWORDS:** bisexual women, bisexual identity development, women, resiliency, lived experiences

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A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
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December 2021

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. 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.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would first like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Anderson, for the tremendous amount of support and encouragement she provided to me during the process of writing this paper. She encouraged me to see my capabilities more realistically which gave me the confidence to complete this research. She helped me see that I can do hard things. I'd also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Behrend and Dr. Lettieri, for their part in this study. It would not be possible without their feedback and for that I am grateful. I'd like to thank Amy Chenoweth and Robin Farris for their consistent encouragement, mentorship, and for always being a listening ear I can count on. Lastly, I'd like to thank my family for the emotional and financial support they have provided me during my time in graduate school and completing this research. It would not have been possible to complete this work without the help of the individuals listed here, thank you all so much.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

There is a growing amount of research to suggest that people who identify as bisexual have poor mental health, but the research suggests that bisexual people suffer even poorer mental health than their gay or lesbian counterparts (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010; Taylor, Power, & Smith, 2020). The bisexual community experiences hardships that in some ways may be similar to gay and lesbian people, but in many ways their struggles are unique. Throughout research on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) issues, the bisexual population is often a small portion of participants, or excluded altogether. According to research conducted at the Williams Institute at University of California, Los Angeles, or UCLA, approximately 9 million Americans identify as LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual), and half of those adults identify as bisexual (Gates, 2011). Understanding that the bisexual community is not small, simply overlooked, is an important part of this research. Bisexual people are often subject to bisexual erasure or bisexual invisibility, which is perpetuated by a heteronormative, monosexist society.

It is the hope that researchers and readers will gain a better understanding of the unique lived experiences of bisexual women and what factors have helped and hindered them throughout their lives, particularly in relationship to their identity development and explorations. In addition, a second research question is to gain an understanding of self-identified resiliency factors by the participants as it relates to their identity development as bisexual women.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The researcher of this study, through observation and experience as an insider of the LGBTQ community, noticed that identifying as bisexual appears to be more common than many assume. While working as a counselor in training the researcher also recognized firsthand the poor mental health outcomes for LGBTQ youth and adults, which further sparked interest in investigating this area of research. The difference in certain individuals' outcomes is ultimately what led to the present study investigating lived experiences and resiliency factors. The researcher noticed that some individuals identifying in the LGBTQ community have overcome a multitude of hardships such as unaccepting families, violence, or bullying and continue to thrive with little or no mental health impacts. Others appear to experience far less in comparison, such as minimal comments from family or friends about one's identity and yet they experience less resilience and poorer mental health outcomes such as depression or anxiety. Through these observations the researcher became curious about what factors influence the lived experiences of these individuals in terms of their sexual identity, but in particular bisexual women.

In order to avoid researcher bias as an insider to the LGBTQ community, cross checks of the interview questions and the resulting data were completed. In addition, throughout the interviews the researcher was aware that the participants may have different experiences than one another and made an effort to remove expectations about what the participants might say about their experiences as bisexual women.

## **Glossary**

- Bisexual: “A person whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is towards people of the same and other genders, or towards people regardless of their gender. Some people may use bisexual and pansexual interchangeably” (UC Davis, 2020).
- Cisgender: a gender identity that matches the person's assigned sex at birth (Human

- Rights Campaign, n.d.; UC Davis, 2020).
- Coming Out: “The process in which a person first acknowledges, accepts and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others” (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).
  - “Coming out is the process of voluntarily sharing one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity with others. This process is unique for each individual and there is no right or wrong way to come out” (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Gay: a sexual and affectional orientation towards one’s same gender (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Gender: “A social construct used to classify a person as a man, woman, or some other identity. Fundamentally different from the sex one is assigned at birth” (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Gender Identity: one’s inner concept of themselves, how they perceive themselves as a man, woman, both or neither and may be the same or different from sex assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).
  - Heteronormativity: “Attitudes and behaviors that incorrectly assume gender is binary, ignoring genders besides women and men, and that people should and will align with conventional expectations of society for gender identity, gender expression, and sexual and romantic attraction” (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Heterosexism: the assumption that all people are, or should be, heterosexual (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Lesbian: Typically used by women, used to identify that their sexual and affectional orientation is towards other women (UC Davis, 2020).
  - LGBTQ: an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or sometimes used as questioning. Other variations include LGBTQ+ and LGBTQIA, which includes intersex and asexual (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Microaggressions: “Brief and subtle behaviors, whether intentional or not, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages of commonly oppressed identities” (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Monosexism: the misconception that people are only attracted to one gender (Roberts, Horne, & Hoyt, 2015; UC Davis, 2020).
  - Nonbinary/Non-binary: “A gender identity and experience that embraces a full universe of expressions and ways of being that resonate for an individual, moving beyond the male/female gender binary” (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Queer: often used to describe a spectrum of identities, previously used as a slur but has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.), often still seen as ‘hateful’ when used by those not in the community (UC Davis, 2020).
  - Sexual Fluidity: “Sexual fluidity is defined as a capacity for situation dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, which allows individuals to experience changes in same-sex or other-sex desire, over both short-term and long-term time periods” (Diamond, 2016).
  - Sexual Orientation: emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.; UC Davis, 2020).

## CHAPTER 2

### Culture

**Introduction.** What *is* the LGBTQ community, who is included? As mentioned in the glossary, LGBTQ is an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning. There are several other adaptations of this acronym which include Asexual, Intersex, and more. Common ways this acronym is currently seen are as LGBTQ, LGBT+, LGBTQ+, or LGBTQIA. It is often followed by the word ‘community’ indicating this group of people is similar in some way. Arguably, this similarity may be primarily the resistance and rejection they may face from dominant discourse or a “standard” of cisgender, heteronormative social norms. In other words, the LGBTQ community may only be a community because of what they are not, rather than what they have in common.

**History of Rights.** In order to understand the context of the proposed research study, one will need some background information about bisexual individuals. Chapter 2 will discuss LGBTQ culture as well as bisexual culture. This includes information on LGBTQ history, generational differences, and an overview of the research on sexuality. In addition, it is important to understand bisexual identity development and how it differs from gay and lesbian identity development that can be understood through identity development models. Important to identity development are constructs like label integration, community representation, and resiliency factors. Finally, an understanding of adolescent development and how attachment and parenting styles influence a child’s development are important to gain context for the stories the reader will hear about in the research as well as recommendations made in chapter five.

Bisexuality is not a new concept, in fact the first mention of the word was in 1793,

though at that time it was used to identify someone who possessed characteristics of both female and male, especially in terms of reproductive organs (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition has evolved over time and now words like nonbinary and intersex have replaced this original definition of bisexual. As mentioned in the glossary, bisexual is now commonly understood as a sexual or affectional orientation meaning one is attracted to the same or other genders, or the attraction to others regardless of gender (UC Davis, 2020).

Many people point to the events of Stonewall in 1969 and even more recent events such as the reversal of DOMA in 2015, a law that according to an article published by Cornell Law School defined marriage as being between a man and a woman, to claim that LGBTQ issues are “resolved” (2020). However, studies about mental health outcomes for LGBTQ populations are a reminder that there is still progress that can be made for the wellbeing of LGBTQ individuals. The Stonewall Inn was a popular gay bar in Manhattan and on the evening of July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1969, police officers raided the bar on a false liquor license charge (Walsh, 2019). The events that followed have helped shape the LGBTQ rights movement into what it is today. Up until this point LGBTQ rights activists had been rather passive and quiet in terms of how they made themselves known (Walsh, 2019). This uprising changed the way the LGBTQ community advocated for themselves and continues to have an influence today. The LGBTQ community has come a long way since Stonewall in 1969, but this research suggests there is still more to do. For example, more recently in 2016, Pulse, a popular gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida endured a mass shooting that left 49 individuals dead and several others injured (Morris, n.d.). Although the shooting in Orlando was not ruled a hate crime (Fitzsimons, 2018), the lasting trauma on those involved was that of a hate crime.

It was not until 1973 that “homosexuality” was removed from the Diagnostic Statistical

Manual (DSM) as a psychological disorder (Drescher, 2015). Although it is no longer recognized as a mental disorder in this sense, there are still advocates for conversion or reparative therapy. Conversion therapy is a therapy aimed to “treat” same-sex attraction and has been considered ineffective and dangerous (Drescher et al., 2016). Despite the mounting research support that conversion therapy is unethical and ineffective, there are only seven US states that have full bans on conversion therapy for minors (Drescher et al., 2016). While other states have some restrictions or limitations, many LGBTQ youth are still subject to the harmful practice.

In addition to this, it was not until 2015 that gay marriage became legal in all 50 United States according to Georgetown Law (2021). Georgetown Law’s timeline of same-sex marriage legalization points out that up until 2015 same-sex marriage was legal in some states, others allowed civil unions, and others prohibited it altogether (2021). According to the Human Rights Campaign (2021), in February of 2021 The Equality Act was passed by the U.S House of Representatives. Human Rights Campaign (2021) states The Equality Act provides protections for members of the LGBTQ community from things like workplace and housing discrimination. In addition, rules barring transgender individuals from serving in the military were revised as of April 2021 and now states transgender individuals cannot be discharged based solely on their gender identity (Wamsley, 2021).

These events help give context to the need for the present study. Although there have been strides made to better protect the LGBTQ population, there is still much to be done. By researching bisexual women’s experiences, the gap in the literature may become slightly smaller and suggestions can be made on how to better protect and care for people who identify as bisexual or another LGBTQ identity.

**Generational Acceptance.** The idea that in 2021 LGBTQ people are just now being

given rights like housing non-discrimination and the ability to serve in the military, speaks to what the LGBTQ community has had to overcome in the past and is still working to overcome now. Not to mention, the LGBTQ community is only a community because of what this group of people is *not*, which is heterosexual and cisgender. As society and government accepts the LGBTQ community as legitimate, it is assumed that generational changes contribute to this shift. It is suggested that generations play a role in acceptance and timing of when someone who identifies themselves in the LGBTQ community decides to come out, or announce their personal orientation to others (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011). Taking into consideration social context, Baby Boomers may have developed their LGBTQ identity later in life due to this generation strictly following “traditional” gender roles and in many cases remaining “closeted” (Johnston, 2017). In addition to this, Gen X may have been influenced by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and now Millennial and Gen Z live in a time where LGBTQ identities are generally more widely accepted (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011). It is important to take into consideration one’s generation to get a better understanding of what the societal mindset was when that person was going through identity development.

In addition to societal and generational acceptance increasing, something else that has changed over time is words and how they are used. An example of this is the word “queer.” In its original form the word queer meant something peculiar, strange, or odd (University of Pittsburgh, n.d.). For groups like Baby Boomers and Gen X the term queer was once generally understood as offensive and insulting and was not used to describe oneself when referring to their sexual orientation (Marinucci, 2019). Since this time, Millennials and others have reclaimed the word queer and it is more widely used in the LGBTQ community as an umbrella term. Many use the term queer to simply identify themselves in the community without specifically labelling

their sexuality, as if to say “I’m not straight” (Marinucci, 2019). For example, a woman who primarily dates other women, but does not prefer to use the term lesbian, may use the term queer in its place to identify themselves. In addition organizations may use the term for events, such as “Queer Artist Showcase” as opposed to “LGBTQ Artist Showcase.” In this sense the word queer can often be used as a synonym for LGBTQ.

Other words, such as homosexual, have changed as well. While the word was once considered appropriate language to identify people, that is generally no longer the case. Throughout the LBGTQ community ‘homosexual’ is seen as old fashioned, outdated, and clinical and many people prefer to use terms like gay, LBGTQ, and queer. Although many do not identify themselves as ‘homosexual,’ the term may still be used in medical or scientific environments.

As generations adjust and information changes so does language. By understanding the flexibility of language one can begin to understand the LGBTQ community better as well. The older generations who suffered discrimination differently than today's youth may not see eye to eye on language use and other aspects of identifying within the LGBTQ population, but understanding the context of where one was during their identity development can help one better understand how to help those populations now.

**Sexuality.** As previously mentioned, the concept of bisexuality is not new by any means. Doctors in the mid to late 1800s were researching the concept of bisexuality as well as Sigmund Freud, who believed bisexuality stemmed from “undetermined gender development in the womb” (Morris, n.d.). According to Miranda Rosenblum (2017), writer for GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), bisexual activist, Brenda Howard, largely contributed to the coordination of a march on the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, eventually earning



her the title the “Mother of Pride.” This information points to the fact that people have been identifying as bisexual for longer than some might initially think.

Alfred Kinsey was another prominent scientist trying to understand sexuality and proposed sexuality as a scale, which included bisexuality. The first Kinsey Scale, also called the Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale, was developed in 1948 by Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, and Clyde Martin (Kinsey Institute Indiana University, n.d.). This scale showed people’s sexuality may not always be strictly heterosexual or strictly homosexual and further showed that sexuality may vary over time. To determine one's place on the Kinsey scale, the researchers interviewed participants' sexual history to give them a rating of 0-6 or X. A rating of zero being exclusively heterosexual, a rating of six being exclusively homosexual, and an X rating being no socio-sexual contacts (Kinsey Institute Indiana University, n.d.).

Although the Kinsey scale was an important beginning, it is now believed that sexuality is more nuanced than the Kinsey scale explains when things like asexuality, a lack of sexual attraction to anyone, same or opposite sex is taken into consideration. The Kinsey scale opened the doors for the possibility of identities like bisexual and pansexual and yet it is still a dichotomous scale which reiterates the monosexist idea that one is generally swaying between two poles: heterosexual or homosexual. Other scales have been developed to help understand and explain human sexuality, one of which is the Klein Grid which attempts to account for the past, present and future, but is again a dichotomous scale (Kinsey Institute Indiana University, n.d.).

Although many of these scales present sexuality as more than the heteronormative assumption, the issue is that they continue to promote a dichotomous concept that sexuality is generally “one OR the other.” Sexual fluidity has recently become much more widely understood although it has been around for much longer (Diamond, 2016). As one looks at identity

development and considers it in the context of a dichotomous society it becomes clear as to why it appears to take bisexual people longer to come out (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011). Longitudinal research (Diamond, 2008) has shown that bisexuality is not a transitional identity, as some previously thought, and is now considered a stable identity. Popular models used today to help explain gender, gender identity, and orientation are the genderbread person and the gender unicorn (see Appendix A). These models account for sex assigned at birth, gender expression, physical and emotional attraction (Killerman, 2017; Trans Student Education Resources, 2015). Each of these models and research from Kinsey to the gender unicorn has helped shape understanding of gender, sexuality, and sexual fluidity.

### **Bisexual Identity Development**

**Label Integration.** Terms like bisexual, pansexual, asexual, multisexual, and fluid can often be misunderstood by those unfamiliar with the LGBTQ population and may seem confusing or unnecessary. However, for someone who does not feel the identity of bisexual fits them, but definitely does not identify as lesbian or gay, and still enjoys companionship in a romantic and sexual partner, the term fluid or pansexual might fit better for them. The ability to accurately identify how one labels themselves helps people find community and support (Sanscartier & MacDonald, 2019).

This has proven to be especially important for individuals that identify as bisexual, fluid, or pansexual, as opposed to lesbian or gay. Because of the dichotomous binary thinking of society, people that identify as a more fluid or nonbinary sexuality, such as those mentioned above, often find themselves being discriminated against not only by heterosexual people, but by those in the LGBTQ community who identify as lesbian or gay (Roberts, Horne, & Hoyt, 2015).

Even within community, Roberts, Horne, and Hoyt (2015) point out that bisexual individuals hear comments from gay and lesbian individuals such as

- “Just pick one already.”
- “You’re just confused right now.”
- “It’s a phase.”
- “Curiosity is normal, you’re still straight.”

These words and many others spoken to people who identify as a more fluid sexuality promote the idea that a side must be chosen or that being flexible with sexuality is not possible. Often people that identify as bisexual or another fluid identity feel outcast by more than just the heterosexual population. A twitter user described their identity this way: “Being bi feels like being the straightest gay person and the gayest straight person” (Lupiz, 2020). This is a unique factor that this subset of the LGBTQ community faces. Despite the attitudes towards bisexual people from straight or gay individuals, there is growing research that suggests the bisexual identity is valid and stable as opposed to a transition identity (Diamond, 2008).

Before one can begin to understand how to help bisexual and other sexually/romantically fluid people, there needs to be an understanding of terms, how these individuals develop their identity in comparison to other groups, and how and why this subgroup of LGBTQ people is often overlooked.

Bisexual is traditionally defined as being attracted to both men and women, however, over time many people that use bisexual to identify themselves have expanded this definition to include attraction/affection towards transgender, intersex, and nonbinary people. As this paper is written, the term bisexual can usually be accepted as a term that means one is attracted to anyone, regardless of biological sex or gender identity. On the popular Canadian TV show

Schitt's Creek, character David explains his sexuality with a metaphor: "I do drink red wine. But I also drink white wine... And I've been known to sample the occasional rosé. And a couple summers back, I tried a merlot that used to be a chardonnay... I like the wine and not the label." (Levy et al., 2015).

Currently among the LGBTQ community there is a growing sense that terms like pansexual, meaning one is attracted to others regardless of biological sex or gender identity, are no longer necessary because bisexual encompasses this definition for a lot of people (Morris, n.d.). However, it is important to realize that not all people who identify as bisexual use this newer, more flexible definition. Although not everyone in the community accepts the term bisexual this way, for the purpose of this study the broader more encompassing definition will be assumed.

**Representation.** A problem that perpetuates bisexual people feeling as though they don't have a space is lack of representation. The term "LGBTQ community" does not offer the opportunity for each subgroup to be uniquely identified. Bisexual people have often been grouped together with lesbian and gay groups or forgotten altogether and there is a need to separate these populations from one another when discussing the challenges they face. Bisexual individuals experience unique struggles that often don't apply to heterosexual or lesbian/gay groups. These groups have been lumped together as what is "different" or outside of the expectations for a cisgender, heteronormative society.

This creates a lack of representation for the bisexual portion of the LGBTQ population within various social spheres. When considering celebrities, movies, and other media, what examples of LGBTQ representation are there? One might be able to list a handful of lesbian or gay characters in movies or real celebrities or public figures. Movies or shows containing a queer

character are often listed as “LGBTQ” in their description, but the presence of one or two gay characters does not fully represent the entire spectrum of LGBTQ. This perpetuates the concept that everyone under the umbrella of LGBTQ is the same when bisexual individuals have vastly different lives and challenges they face than the rest of the LGBTQ population.

The concept of community connection has proven to be an important factor in mental health for members of the LGBTQ community and other marginalized groups (Sanscartier & MacDonald, 2019). Although LGBTQ groups are a starting point for community connection, there is an opportunity for more specialized support. Individuals who identify as bisexual often can feel ostracized by those who identify as heterosexual and gay/lesbian groups due to the lack of accurate representation for bisexual persons.

**Bisexual Identity Development Models.** For the purpose of this study, it’s necessary to discuss identity development models. Although such models can often seem restrictive and linear, using a model as a framework as it applies to the participants will help give a better understanding of the participant’s life. Several identity development models pertaining to the LGB (lesbian, gay and bisexual) community exist. However, not all of these models that explain gay and lesbian identity development translate well to the unique development of bisexual persons. One well known model is presented by Cass (1979) and includes six stages which are listed as: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride and Identity Synthesis. This model explains sexual identity development exclusively through the lens of sexuality, and does not account for other aspects of identity. Although this model seems to apply relatively well to lesbian and gay identities, the model does not translate seamlessly to bisexuals. Problems with Cass’ model for bisexual individuals include that in stages three and four, Tolerance and Acceptance, Cass states that the person rejects

heterosexuality. Although someone who is bisexual or a similar flexible identity does not identify as heterosexual, it is possible they may be in what appears to be a heterosexual relationship while maintaining their bisexual identity. In this sense, they cannot reject heterosexuality because they are still participating in it in some capacity. Conversely, if someone identifying as bisexual is in a same sex relationship this does not mean that they have fully rejected heterosexuality either, it is that at this time they may not be participating in it but maintain the idea that their sexual and affectional orientation remains open to other genders. This flexibility is what seems to set apart the bisexual identity from gay or lesbian identities and it is also often what creates confusion for those not identifying as bisexual.

Another well known model was developed by Troiden (1993), and includes four stages, Sensitization, Identity Confusion, Identity Assumption, and Commitment. Similar to Cass's model, Troiden's (1993) model originally excludes bisexuals through suggesting the rejection of any heterosexual identity through a lack of heterosexual arousal. Troiden's model also suggests that in stage two, Identity Confusion, one will experience same sex activity or arousal (Troiden, 1993). This is problematic simply because of the growing idea that sexual orientation is about more than just sex. The idea that affection plays an important role in orientation is growing and although sexual relationships can and still do contribute to one's orientation, it is not the only factor. It is quite possible that some people may identify as a non-heterosexual orientation without having any romantic or sexual encounters to the contrary (Diamond, 2008). In addition to this, Troiden (1993) also suggests that in his third stage, Identity Assumption, one will partake in sexual experimentation. While this may be true for some people, as mentioned previously it is not necessarily a requirement of knowing one's own sexuality. The sexual explorations Cass and Troiden refer to function as an assumption of the heteronormative binary. Diamond (2008) points

out that bisexual identities are stable and valid without sexual “experimentation.” What has been labelled as “sexual orientation” is about much more than just sex, it is about various types of connections with others including romantic, spiritual, and mental connections.

For the purpose of this study a model of bisexual development put forth by Tom Brown (2002) will serve as a theoretical foundation. Brown’s model is adapted from a model constructed by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) which includes four stages: 1) Initial Confusion, 2) Finding and Applying the Label, 3) Settling into the Identity and 4) Continued Uncertainty. In the first stage of Initial Confusion one recognizes that they are attracted to more than just the assumed heteronormative gender that would depict that they are strictly heterosexual. Brown states that it is typical for bisexuals to first have a presumed heterosexual orientation and thus they must “discover” in some sense the possibility of a non-heterosexual orientation (Brown, 2002). In the second stage, Finding and Applying the Label, one learns about what it means to be bisexual and how it applies to themselves. In this stage one might also receive support from other bisexual people (Brown, 2002). In the third stage, Settling into the Identity, one accepts the label and cares less about what others think, which may include being publicly “out,” meaning friends, family, and potentially coworkers or other community members are aware of their non-heterosexual identity (Brown, 2002). Finally, in Continued Uncertainty the person may feel periodic confusion about their sexuality while still continuing to identify as bisexual or another fluid identity (Brown, 2002).

Brown suggests the final stage be changed to ‘Identity Maintenance.’ Although some bisexual people may experience continued uncertainty, Brown reports this is more likely associated with other factors. Factors contributing to uncertainty may be invalidation, lack of social support, an absence of romantic experiences with more than one gender or gender identity

or a lack of representative role models (Brown, 2002). Identity Maintenance is not a goal oriented stage, meaning a person will continue exhibiting behaviors and thoughts that maintain the label of bisexual; therefore, they could remain at this stage forever (Brown, 2002). Identity Maintenance may include some feelings of uncertainty or ambivalence about one's identity as bisexual but is primarily identified by ways a person maintains their bisexual identity. Maintaining one's identity may be achieved through a supportive environment, or unsupportive if the individual is experiencing ambivalence, community connection, and "beliefs about the malleability or permanence of one's sexuality" (Brown, 2002, p 80).

**Resiliency Factors.** Resiliency can be defined as the ability to spring back from and successfully adapt to adversity or major stress (Corey & Corey, 2013). Since lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who experience family rejection experience higher rates of depression, illegal drug use, and suicide attempts (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009) an exploration of resiliency factors is important. As previously mentioned, bisexual people often experience poorer mental health than their lesbian, gay or straight counterparts (Taylor, Power, & Smith, 2020). This may suggest they are experiencing hardships these counterparts are not or are experiencing them to a greater extent. People who experience more adversity have greater opportunities to experience either resilience or vulnerability and adverse effects such as poorer mental health outcomes like depression or anxiety. Those people identifying in the LGBTQ community are likely to have several "opportunities" for resilience throughout their lifetime due to the stigma and disapproval still associated with the LGBTQ community. Although one's family or friends may be accepting and supportive, a person identifying within the LGBTQ umbrella may experience discrimination in the workplace, when purchasing/renting a home or apartment, while out in public places or many other scenarios. Collectively, these instances of discrimination or



disapproval put an LGBTQ person in a position of threat where they must either be resilient or risk negative effects such as depression or life dissatisfaction. Research suggests that factors like personality and childhood upbringing factor into one's resilience throughout life (Corey & Corey, 2013).

Participants in a research study (Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010) indicated some things they believe improved their mental wellbeing in relation to resilience and their bisexual identity. Some of the identified factors were supportive friends and particularly friends who identify as bisexual as well (Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). However, some participants in this study also noted feeling anxiety at the thought of disclosing their bisexual identity to their straight friends and/or their gay and lesbian friends (Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). Forming a strong connection with other members of the LGBTQ community may be important due to a feeling of common fate, which may include similar struggles or similar political goals (Sanscartier & MacDonald, 2019). Research also suggests that parental rejection of LGBTQ children often leaves the child without a supportive attachment figure, making facing discrimination more difficult and lowering the likelihood they will be resilient (Levy, Russon, & Diamond, 2016). Research also found that youth that received an abundance of support from their families were less likely to experience suicidal ideation, less likely to attempt suicide (Diamond & Shpigel, 2014), and reported higher self-esteem than their peers who received little acceptance from family members (Levy, Russon, & L.M. Diamond, 2016). These findings suggest that the attachment bond formed throughout childhood through parenting styles has the potential to make an impact on LGBTQ youth mental health outcomes.

## **Adolescent Development**

**Attachment.** The theory of attachment styles, first put forth by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1991), explains how a person relates to others, but particularly one's primary caregivers. The researchers studied how children responded to separation from and reunion to the primary caregiver to understand the relationship better. In addition, the researchers wanted to understand the role of the parent or caregiver in how the child explores and learns their place in the world through the caregivers' responses to the child's reactions (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The four main attachment styles are secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized. When referring to avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized attachment, the term insecure attachment is often used. Other names for each style may be used, but the descriptions stay generally the same. Generally, a person with secure attachment style, arguably the most desirable, "experiences intimacy, emotional security, and physical safety" in relation to the caretaker (Corey & Corey, 2013, p. 45), meaning they feel 'secure' in their bond with their caregiver and that bond is not conditioned nor is it subject to who they are or what they do. This is promoted by responsiveness of the primary caretaker to the child's needs. An individual with secure attachment experiences low anxiety and low avoidance (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The secure attachment attributes make it easier for securely attached adults to form and maintain healthy relationships with others around them throughout their lifetime. Alternatively, someone characterized as having a disorganized attachment experiences high anxiety and high avoidance (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), which one can conclude often makes forming and maintaining healthy relationships more difficult. Those with an insecure attachment style will experience disconnection, mistrust, and their relationships later in life may be a struggle (Corey & Corey, 2013). The lack of responsiveness or the intermittent responsiveness of the primary caretaker leads to these struggles. Although efforts can be made to adjust one's attachment style later in life, the

attachment created in infancy will serve as a default in relationships throughout one's life (Corey & Corey, 2013). "Children who receive love from parents or other attachment figures generally have little difficulty accepting themselves, whereas children who feel unloved and rejected may find it very difficult to accept themselves" (Corey & Corey, 2013, p. 46).

When applied to the context of raising a child who identifies in the LGBTQ community, it becomes clear how attachment style might impact their wellbeing throughout adolescent development and later in life as they navigate the challenges of identifying as an LGBTQ identity. Although not all members of the LGBTQ community experience an insecure attachment style, it is suggested that those that do are less likely to effectively cope with discrimination (Mohr, 2016). According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), it has also been shown that rejection in the home leads to higher rates of mental illness and suicidal ideation (NAMI, n.d.).

It was found that LGB (lesbian, gay and bisexual) people who were high in avoidance experienced greater anger and fear upon experiencing discrimination (Mohr, 2016). This is significant because it can help caregivers have a better understanding of how their responsiveness can impact their child's resilience later on. When caregivers are unresponsive or inconsistently responsive to a child's needs is when insecure attachment styles often develop. Understanding how a parent, caregiver, or teacher responds to a child in various situations and how it impacts the child later on in life is integral to giving children better tools to navigate identity development with resilience.

Insecure attachment styles, such as avoidant or disorganized, may impact individuals in more specific ways. For example, community connection, i.e. strong relationships with other LGBTQ community members, may be hindered by attachment avoidance, an attribute of those

with avoidant or disorganized attachment styles. Someone who has high attachment avoidance may also be more likely to conceal their identity altogether, making community connection even less likely (Sanscartier & MacDonald, 2019). The information here about attachment styles will help give context to the stories the reader will hear from participants in Chapter 4 and 5.

**Parenting Style.** Like attachment styles, parenting styles can also play a large role in one's life in adulthood in terms of communication, self-assurance and resilience. Parenting styles may offer an explanation for different attachment styles (Zeinali et al., 2011). There are three widely accepted parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive (Baumrind, 1966). Often a fourth is included by dividing the permissive style into two categories, often called permissive- indulgent and permissive- indifferent or simply permissive and neglectful (Ebrahimi, Amiri, Mohamdlou, & Rezapur, 2017). Each parenting style is determined by their levels of acceptance and demandingness which in turn indicates warmth and acceptance of the child (Zeinali et al., 2011). Authoritative parents have high levels of acceptance and demandingness, authoritarian parents have high levels of demandingness and lower levels of acceptance, permissive parents have high acceptance but low demandingness, and lastly neglectful parents have low acceptance and low demandingness (Ebrahimi, Amiri, Mohamdlou, & Rezapur, 2017). Additionally, authoritative parents can be further characterized as rational, one who explains their reasoning and enforces adult perspectives while recognizing the child's interest or opinion (Baumrind, 1966). It is widely accepted that authoritative parenting provides the best outcomes for children and is often associated with secure attachment style (Baumrind, 1966; Ebrahimi, Amiri, Mohamdlou, & Rezapur, 2017). Insecure attachments are often associated with authoritarian parenting as well as permissive parenting (Ebrahimi, Amiri, Mohamdlou, & Rezapur, 2017).

Unfortunately, parents can invalidate their children's feelings without realizing it and the child can grow up doubting themselves or having a lack of confidence. Zeinali et al., (2011) suggests there is a connection between parenting style and a child's ability to self-regulate. Throughout research they found that authoritative parenting was associated with high levels of self-regulation, higher academic performance and overall better adjustment than children raised with other types of parenting (Zeinali et al., 2011). Children with neglectful or permissive parenting were more likely to experience alcohol and substance abuse (Zeinali et al., 2011). To gain a better understanding of the difference in parental responses to children and the impact it makes see the following example:

A big spider jumps out of nowhere and seven year old John starts to shriek. The spider has scared him, he did not know it was there and he knows spiders can be dangerous and potentially hurt him. He panics and begins to cry fearing the spider. John's mom comes over, squishes the spider and says "All gone, no big deal!" John continues to be upset and his mom says "John, it's fine. The spider is gone, settle down." What John may internalize from this situation is that he overreacted by crying at the sight of the spider and that his distress is not worthy of attention. He may also internalize embarrassment or shame from fearing what his mom made out to be no big deal. Had John's mom instead said something like "Wow John, that spider came out of nowhere! It seems like that scared you, are you okay?" John might have internalized that being fearful is okay and that adults can help him when he is scared. More importantly he would internalize that he and his feelings are worthy of attention. This could also help John know that when he has strong feelings he can talk about them with others in order to feel better, aiding in his communication skills and ultimately increase his capacity for self-regulation.

Although this may seem like a minor event in the grand scheme of John's life, over time if his parents continue to respond with concern and support as in the second response example, he has a better chance of growing up knowing how to appropriately express his feelings. In addition to this he will be able to better articulate his feelings and be surer of himself when given the chance to express how he feels. This example can translate to children or teens when coming out. If a child is given the opportunity to explore that they might not be straight or cisgender, if or when they decide to come out they can be surer of themselves and express themselves more clearly if given the tools in other scenarios.

In a video posted by Phil Borgess (2019), Gabor Maté discusses how people will often choose attachment over authenticity, regardless of the consequences to themselves. Maté explains that children receive messages from their parents about who they can and can't be and what is or is not acceptable. Even when parents don't intend to send a conditional message, it may feel like a forced choice to the child. When forced to choose between being or doing something that is not acceptable but would be authentic to the child or ensuring they meet attachment needs they will ultimately choose to suppress their authenticity. Furthermore, Maté explains that if a person continuously suppresses their authenticity eventually this person will have an identity crisis, a realization that they don't know who they are (Borgess, 2019). Translate this concept to the context of sexual identity and family rejection, and the negative outcomes for LGBTQ youth become clearer. Children who grow up in homes where they consistently hear homophobic comments begin to internalize those thoughts and beliefs. A person who might feel that they are gay begins to see themselves disgusting, sinful, wrong, or any other negative attributes people often apply to the LGBTQ community. This concept, called internalized homophobia, can be detrimental and contributes greatly to mental health issues among the

LGBTQ population (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). A person feeling rejected in their own home, before they have even come out, may feel it is impossible to be authentic. This is something many LGBTQ youth struggle with, but through allowing children the space to themselves, parents and others can avoid unnecessary harm. When children learn there are conditions to their attachments they will learn to suppress what is necessary to continue to receive love, no matter the negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation or drug abuse (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

Parents and other adults are also, with or without realizing it, helping children develop their morals as explained by Kohlberg's moral development model (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Kohlberg suggested that there are three main stages of moral development; preconventional, conventional, and postconventional, each of which contains their own sub-stages (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). In the preconventional stage, children see actions as good or bad and in terms of what will result in a reward or punishment (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). When children are in this stage it is the parent's morals and values that determine the child's desired or ideal behavior. When put in the context of LGBTQ issues, parents that teach their children, actively or passively, things like "being gay is wrong," it can create a moral dilemma for kids who feel they might not be straight.

In the conventional stage "maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable... regardless of immediate or obvious consequences" (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p 55). This can mean that even if what a child learned in the preconventional stage is something they no longer agree with, it is important to maintain the behaviors that represent those beliefs. In the context of LGBTQ topics, this may mean a child that has a sense they may not be straight or cisgender, does not disclose this to the family so as to

stay within the familial expectations regardless of the internal harm this may be doing.

In the postconventional stage a person begins to individuate from the family, group, or other authority and adjust any morals or values to be more abstract and relating to their own understanding of ethics, as opposed to solely concrete thoughts (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Although Kohlberg and Hersh's model provides significant information, Carol Gilligan also proposed a model of moral development which observed the differences between male and female morality which the former did not account for (Gilligan, 1982). Through her research Gilligan (1982) suggested that males tend to make moral decisions through "justice reasoning" and females tend to make moral decisions through "care reasoning." Gilligan suggested that care reasoning involved considering the responsibility to others whereas justice reasoning focuses on the responsibility to oneself (1982). In the final stage of Gilligan's moral development, the acts of caring for oneself and caring for others are intertwined as they impact one another (Gilligan 1982).

For people who grow up in homes with rules, principals and morals they later discover they do not agree with, the final stage in either model of development may be daunting. For someone who was taught the LGBTQ community is wrong and immoral, it may still be difficult to accept oneself, as the negative messages they were given as a child about the LGBTQ community were lasting. According to Gilligan, females in this situation begin to consider the consequences to themselves and others by choosing to come out or not (1982). Children who grow up in homes where they consistently hear homophobic comments begin to internalize those thoughts and beliefs about themselves. This internalized homophobia contributes to poor mental health outcomes in LGBTQ individuals such as higher rates of depression and anxiety as well as other issues (Ryan, Legate, Weinstein, & Rahman, 2017). As one can imagine, parents, teachers



and other adults can have a lasting impact at the preconventional stage when it comes to individuating and finding authenticity.

LGBTQ youth have many struggles to endure when it comes to discrimination and feeling unwelcome. Bisexual individuals in particular have a subset of issues that their gay or lesbian counterparts do not experience due to the specific microaggressions made to them about their identity, often suggesting it is invalid. Understanding the history of the LGBTQ community in terms of generations and societal acceptance is important to gain a better understanding of how to move forward helping bisexual youth. Recommendations for bisexual youth today may be different than recommendations for elder bisexual people as their upbringing and context for coming out was and is different. As discussed, bisexual identity development differs from gay and lesbian identity development. This is integral to understanding bisexual people as the recommendations for change may be different based on the differences in development. In addition to this, understanding how representation impacts stereotypes and the identity development process as it may delay it when representation is lacking or is not a true portrayal of the identity. Lastly, understanding adolescent development as it pertains to attachment and parenting styles and how this may impact a child's authenticity is important to the research for readers to understand future recommendations.

## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design

Research on lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) populations has indicated that mental health outcomes for these groups are poor, particularly in terms of rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and substance use (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010; Taylor, Power, & Smith, 2020). What the research still lacks is a better understanding of the bisexual population and what helps or hinders mental health outcomes. Throughout research for Chapter 2, it was noticed that research investigating mental health of LGB people often had small numbers of bisexual participants when compared to the number of lesbian and gay participants and this was found across several different studies (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010; Taylor, Power, & Smith, 2020).

In order to answer the two research questions: 1. What will women aged 18-25, who identify as bisexual, describe as their experience related to this aspect of their identity and 2. What will these women identify as resiliency factors, a qualitative methodology was used in the research study. To understand the lived experiences of the participants, the research followed a phenomenological approach to explore bisexual women's experiences in relation to their identity and resilience factors. The key question in phenomenological research is defined by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012, p 12) as "what is the experience of an activity or concept from the particular participants' perspective?" Although a case study model might have been appropriate as well, research from the Williams Institute at UCLA indicates that bisexual women are not outliers, rather they are in the majority of the LGBTQ population, therefore interviewing multiple people

will be more beneficial (Gates, 2011). Other research approaches that focus heavily on culture, such as ethnography and ethology, were ruled out simply because culture is not the main focus of the research question.

Interviews were the primary instrument in this research and were conducted through structured interview questions. In order to determine patterns and phenomena across the participants, structured interviews are a recommended research modality (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). Purposive sampling was the primary form of recruiting participants. Purposive sampling is “the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). Participants were identified and selected via online recruitment through purposeful, snowball sampling and word of mouth recruitment as the researcher had connections to these groups. A call for participants was posted to the researcher’s social media page containing a link to the questionnaire. In addition, the researcher had access to an all-female social media group whose members consist of current Missouri State University students and alumni where it is not uncommon to see “call for participation” posts. Potential participants filled out a ten-item questionnaire to ensure they fit the requirements for participation (see Appendix B).

## **Participants**

Interest in participation was high as 34 responses were recorded for the demographics survey. Of those 34, 6 were dismissed for not meeting criteria or not completing the survey in its entirety. Sixteen people were contacted for interviews and of those several were dismissed for living out of state, many were unavailable in the timeframe the interviews were being scheduled, and some did not respond to the researcher's message for scheduling an interview. Six

participants were scheduled for interviews and four participants completed the interviews each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Interviews consisted of eight main questions, some containing sub questions, and were aimed at understanding the lived experience of the individual as it pertains to their affectional orientation, self-discovery, and resilience (see Appendix B). Interviews were conducted in a private counseling clinic office. Participants were notified of informed consent and confidentiality prior to participation as well as any possible risks associated with their participation and were asked to sign a consent to participate document (see Appendix C). Prior to beginning recordings or transcriptions, participants were asked to pick a pseudonym for themselves which are the names that appear in this writing.

## **Methods**

After interviews were completed, data analysis of the interviews was conducted through listening to recordings and reviewing transcripts made by an automated transcription service. Themes and categories were created in order to group content together, a process known as classifying (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). After analysis was completed participants were asked to complete a “member check” where they reviewed their interview material with the researcher for accuracy and clarity. A cross check of the themes was also completed by an external reviewer. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and Use Committee/Biosafety Committee on August 17, 2021 and received Approval FY2022-47 (see Appendix D).

## CHAPTER 4

### Introduction

Thematic coding yielded several themes among the participants which are listed in Table 1. Summarizations of the interviews with each individual participant were created to explain their experience in a concise format. Main themes for each participant are also listed individually in each participant's section of this chapter. Table 1 was made to identify the frequency of each

Table 1. *Frequency of Coded Themes.*

Theme Name	Frequency of Theme				
	Total Occurrences	Crystal age 21	Jane age 21	Lily age 21	Celeste age 22
Supportive	45	5	14	9	17
Exploration/ Exposure/ Education	36	5	15	6	10
Hindering/ Unsupportive	30	6	12	9	5
Religious Influence	24	5	11	7	1
Straight Assumptions	21	10	5	2	4
Fear of Rejection/ Uncertainty	17	8	7	2	0
Homophobia/ Biphobia	15	4	4	7	0
Self-Acceptance/ Assurance	11	3	2	2	4
Dismissive/ Minimizing	9	4	2	4	0
College Experiences	8	1	4	3	0
Resilience	7	1	2	2	2
Representation	5	0	1	0	4

theme overall and for each participant. In discussion with participants some themes were clearly identified as the only factor the participant was currently discussing such as when a participant clearly defined something as supportive to their identity. In other instances, themes overlapped one another. For example, mentions of religion or religious influence were coded for and was sometimes mentioned as a positive factor or a negative factor. There were also instances where it

was unclear if it was supportive or unsupportive. The table below lists the frequency at which the themes were identified for each individual participant and in total across all four interviews.

### **Participant # 1 Crystal**

At the time of her interview, Crystal identified as bisexual and stated that pansexual and bisexual feel like synonymous terms to her. She identified she cares more about personality and values than she does about what “body parts” someone has. Crystal stated she has identified as bisexual since she dated her first girlfriend in her freshman year of high school about eight years ago.

Crystal stated that prior to dating her first girlfriend she identified as straight. At the time of the interview she was out to friends but not really out to family. Crystal explained that she has not had any sort of “formal” discussion with her family to sit them down and tell them how she feels, but she has not made efforts to hide who she is either.

Crystal discussed that her family tends to continue to assume that she is straight and she recognizes this through small comments made by them such as “when will you bring a boyfriend home?” Crystal expressed apprehension and uncertainty when it comes to discussing her sexual identity with her family. Crystal referenced her grandfather’s political beliefs he often discusses on Facebook that she stated she disagrees with as well as his religious views and an experience with her dad when he once saw her kiss a girl when she was in high school. In reference to that incident with her dad Crystal stated “that was a mess.”

Some factors Crystal identified as supportive to her identity as bisexual are friends who don’t treat her differently. When she discussed coming out to her friends, she noted that some of them were shocked, but she stated that she does not see this as disapproval but more likely due to

being “dramatic freshman.” Crystal also identified that her friends have never looked at her differently because of this part of her identity. In addition, she talked about when her friends connect with her through her bisexual identity and gave the example of recently a friend bought her a pair of pride earrings and stated it made them think of her.

Unsupportive or hindering factors toward her identity Crystal recognized were feeling a need to “tone it down” at family events in terms of clothing worn or topics discussed, uncertainty of family reactions, and her grandfather’s religious stance toward relationships that are not heteronormative. She states her grandfather’s mindset in relation to his religion and relationships is along the lines of “a Godly household is a man and a woman.”

When discussing her dad’s potential reaction to her coming out Crystal stated “I don’t have a question like if he would still love me. I don’t think, like, disowning is on the table or anything, but I think he would definitely kind of look at me differently to start with, but I think that if he knew that I was happy he’d adjust eventually.” Crystal’s main themes from her interview were

- Assumptions that she is straight
- Uncertainty and anxiety among certain family members’ reactions
- Self-assurance and self-acceptance about her identity as bisexual
- Exploration and exposure primarily began in high school
- Religious messages that reiterate the assumption that she is straight

## **Participant #2 Lily**

In her interview, Lily stated she identified as bisexual, which to her means she dates men and women and later explained that she is dating a transgender woman. Lily stated that she has identified this way since she was 15 years old which would be about six years. At the time of her

interview Lily was out to some friends and family but not necessarily everyone in her life. She explained this by saying “I’m not really out of the closet but the door’s wide open... If you ask, I’ll be honest... I don’t really feel the need to be proud of it, I guess.”

She went on to explain her coming out experience with her mom and stated that her mom had very little reaction, treating it as “no big deal” and moving on. Lily described that this felt dismissive and stated that she was expecting something bigger from her mom, either that she would be upset or that she’d express pride that Lily could talk about how she felt. Lily explained that while she believes her mom was probably trying to normalize it or gauge how seriously to take her, the message she got from this interaction was “not very affirming” of who she is. Lily also explained that while she is out to one of her sisters, she is “hesitant” to come out to her two other sisters and stated that their views tend to be more “conservative” and that “it hasn’t really been relevant. And I just don’t want anything to harm that relationship.”

Lily also pointed out that she has friends who identify in the community as well and explained that her friends have often had calm and “supportive” reactions to her coming out. She explains that with friends it has felt like “no big deal.” She made a distinction here that while her friends’ reactions seem similar to her mom’s, the way her friends react does not feel dismissive or negative.

Some factors Lily identified as supportive to her identity as bisexual are growing up attending an Episcopalian church she felt that it was welcoming and generally accepting of the LGBTQ community. She stated that her mom’s reaction when she has brought home partners has been helpful in addition to various people in her life “not having issues” with her coming out. She also pointed out that coming to college and meeting a new group of friends after previously having some unsupportive friends has enhanced her self-acceptance.



Lily identified multiple hindering or unsupportive factors throughout her life contributing to self-doubt or questioning her identity. Lily explained that although she grew up attending an Episcopalian church, in middle school she began attending a Presbyterian church with some of her friends. Through this church she received messages “loud and clear” that being gay was a sin and “homosexual thoughts are lustful” and “not acceptable.” Lily explained that this message from the Presbyterian church she was attending at a younger age created some self-doubt; she recalled thinking “am I actually bisexual or am I making this up for attention?”

She recalled an interaction with a youth group leader who offered to pray with her to “rid myself of the bisexuality.” She also recalled a conversation in fifth grade where a fellow student stated “it’s impossible for a girl to have a penis.” Lily recalled responding that it was possible and began discussing sex reassignment surgery and transgender identities. Lily stated that she was sent to the principal for discussing the topic in what to her seemed like a matter of fact manner.

When discussing messages received about LGBTQ topics growing up Lily stated that aside from her parents “all other stimulus” implied that the subject was “taboo.” She also recalled that certain friends and church members were “strongly opposed” to her coming out. Lily’s main themes from her interview were

- Religious messages contributing to self-doubt in one church
- Religious messages that promote acceptance of LGBTQ in a different church
- Assumptions that she is straight
- Exploration and exposure primarily began in middle school & high school, strengthened & increased in college

### **Participant #3 Jane**

At the time of her interview, Jane identified as bisexual and stated “I don’t give a heck about gender.” She stated that although the terms bisexual and pansexual seem interchangeable to her, she chooses to use bisexual because she stated it is generally more easily understood by others, whereas “pansexual has a negative connotation with it.” She has known that she felt this way since she was 12 years old and stated that she only openly began to identify this way in the last two years. Prior to 12 years old she assumed she was straight.

Jane stated that she is only out to friends at this time and is not out to any of her family. Throughout her coming out experience she stated that many of her friends were shocked and stated “It was shocking to them because there’s like this connotation that like Christians, like must be heterosexual...” She also mentioned that although many of her friends have been supportive, she has felt a “dissonance” with some of her friends from church after coming out. She makes a point to say that, to her, this feels like misunderstanding, not homophobia. Jane stated her family assumes she is straight or is uninterested in dating at this time which she identifies through comments from her family such as “Jane, you never bring anybody to family events...”

Jane identified several things she feels are supportive in terms of her identity as bisexual. A big factor for her is the friends she’s made in her current church she attends, people she calls “church family” who have helped her make sense of her sexual identity in the context of her religion. She stated her current church is “a safe place to follow Jesus.” Along the lines of finding her church family, Jane mentioned that moving 200 miles away from her hometown to attend college made a big difference in terms of exploring her sexuality. She also mentioned several friends that are supportive of her and her identity. In particular, she discussed a longtime friend from her hometown who has had a similar experience to her in terms of her sexuality.

Another friend from her hometown, a male, served as her confidant throughout her middle school and high school years. Jane stated that this friend is gay and although he was out in high school, they attended school dances together and “had each other’s back.” Jane also pointed out that being on social media and seeing that there are many others in the world like her and people who are “fighting for this” has helped her feel supported.

Unsupportive or hindering factors Jane identified were her religious experiences growing up and Jane explained that as a kid she was taught that “God says to love everybody” and stated that this was confusing to her because she was also told that non-straight relationships were wrong. She recalled questioning this to her family and never receiving a clear answer. Jane also identified that her family “would not accept” her and that her hometown has not felt like a safe space to be out in. In addition, Jane explained a feeling that she’ll be expected to “prove” her sexuality to certain people and seeing others in her hometown be “harassed” and “ridiculed” for their LGBTQ identities as hindering factors toward her identity as bisexual.

Jane made a point to say that although her religious experience as a kid was difficult and confusing, there is a positive outcome from it. “... As much as my... religion hindered me growing up or injured my mind growing up, it also still made me question and I’m- therefore I’m thankful for it to be... a supportive thing.” Jane’s main themes throughout her interview were

- Religious messages that were confusing/don’t support her identity
- Religious messages that support her identity
- Safety concerns among people in her hometown & family
- Assumptions that she is straight or generally uninterested in dating
- Exploration and exposure primarily through friends beginning in middle school and strengthening greatly in college

#### **Participant #4 Celeste**

Celeste stated in her interview that she identifies as bisexual or pansexual depending on the company she is in. She explained that she feels pansexual tends to get more questions and feels bisexual is generally better understood, particularly by “older family members.” Overall, she explained her sexuality can be understood as “I don’t really care who you are, if I like you I like you.” She has identified this way for about eight or nine years or since she was about 13 years old. Prior to that she stated she assumed she was likely straight but stated that it still felt “off.” Family members also made this assumption through small comments and she recalled when she was younger her grandma would pinch her knee and when her knee reflexively moved she’d say “that means you’re boy crazy.”

Celeste stated that she came out to her family when she was about 14 or 15 and stated that her mom approached her about the topic by asking if she liked women. She clarified with her mom that yes, she likes women but she is bisexual. Celeste stated that although she had identified as bisexual since she was 13, she did not come out to her family until later and said “I didn’t really feel the need to tell my family because I knew they’d be cool with it...”

Supportive factors Celeste identified were largely related to the reactions she got when coming out. She explained that her immediate family, her parents and two brothers, each had calm and relaxed responses. She explained that this was not upsetting to her as it’s the way she hoped they would react, as if it was “another part of the day.” She also mentioned that after coming out her parents made a point to mention that it was okay for her to bring girlfriends home.

In addition to family reactions, Celeste mentioned media representation as something she finds supportive to see. In particular, she mentioned Marvel and DC comics and movies that include LGBTQ characters as well as seeing representation at Comic Con events. Along these

lines, she identified that knowing and seeing others like her is helpful to her identity and mentioned that one of her brothers identifies as gay. Celeste stated “that’s definitely been nice to have someone within the family who fully understands it.”

When asked about hindering or unsupportive factors relating to her sexuality and identity development Celeste stated, “I haven’t had too much hinder it.” However, she identified that comments alluding to the assumption that she is straight are not helpful and questioning towards bisexual identities from others within the LGBTQ community can be “really frustrating.” Celeste also discussed a friend’s coming out experience when they were younger and stated that her friend’s family’s reaction was “disaffirming to the extreme” stating that the girl’s dad did not speak to her for a “full month.” After learning about this she discussed it with her parents, who were shocked and “very against” the family’s reaction. Celeste explained that this reaction from her parents confirmed what she thought that her parents would not care if she came out. Celeste’s main interview themes were

- Assumption growing up that she is straight
- Calm reactions seen as supportive and normalizing
- Exploration and exposure in middle school
- Self-acceptance and self-assurance about her identity as bisexual

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Introduction**

In order to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of bisexual women, four participants were interviewed in person in regards to their sexual and affectional orientation as well as factors contributing to their resilience. All but one participant identified as female with the exception of Celeste who identified as non-binary and all participants used she/her pronouns.

### **Context**

This research was conducted in Springfield, Missouri, where religion, in particular Christianity, is a predominant identifier. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), 77% of Missouri adults surveyed identify as Christian. Each of the participants mentioned the impacts of religion on their identities and others in the LGBTQ community and thus the context of the region where the research was conducted should be considered when reviewing this study. In addition, recognizing political context is important as well. As mentioned in Chapter 2, it was only six years ago that marriage was legalized across the United States for same sex couples. Just this year in June 2021 the Supreme Court sided with a Catholic adoption agency to prevent same sex couples from adopting through their agency (Totenberg, 2021). In Missouri specifically, the MONA, Missouri Nondiscrimination Act, which according to the ACLU of Missouri (2018) would include sexual orientation and gender identity in discrimination policies has not been passed since first being introduced in 1998. Missouri also recently placed a ban on transgender individuals from participating in female sports teams in school grades K-12 according to an article published online by KY3 News (Associated Press, 2021). These instances point to the

ongoing hurdles the LGBTQ community is facing. These place and time references are important to understanding the context of this research as they may imply different or more severe struggles the participants face when compared to other areas of the country.

Chapter 2 also discussed the evolution of certain words, particularly the word queer. While this has become a reclaimed word by the LGBTQ community, some words still hold stigma. Three of the participants that were interviewed mentioned the word pansexual and stated that if it were not for certain negative connotations with the word, they might identify as pansexual instead of bisexual. Participant #4, Celeste, explained that she tends to use bisexual, particularly with older relatives “because it’s a term they’re more familiar with.” She said, “Granted, bisexuality tends to get questioned a lot too, but I feel like pansexuality invites even more questioning...” Participant #3, Jane, also stated “I chose the word [bisexual] specifically because it’s more understandable to the... layperson... pansexual typically has a negative connotation with it sadly...” Participant #1, Crystal, also stated in reference to the word pansexual “I feel like it kind of has like a weird stigma with it...” Each of these individuals have, in their own way, identified that although their own definition of their sexuality includes more than just the binary men and women, they choose not to identify as pansexual to avoid more questioning from others or the negativity associated with the word.

### **Brown’s Bisexual Identity Development Model**

The first research question, what will women aged 18-25, who identify as bisexual, describe as their experience related to this aspect of their identity, can be answered through the lens of Brown’s bisexual identity development model. Brown’s model has four stages: Initial Confusion, Finding and Applying the Label, Settling into the Identity, and Identity Maintenance.

In stage one of Initial Confusion, Brown points out that is not uncommon for individuals to have an assumed straight identity prior to “discovering” their bisexual identity (Brown, 2002). All four of the participants of this study identified that prior to identifying as bisexual they, and often others, assumed they were straight. Participants also identified ways that some people continue to assume a heterosexual identity. Often participants identified this through subtle comments made primarily by family members.

Crystal referenced a comment her grandpa often makes saying “he’s always like ‘so when are you bringing a boyfriend around? You know I’ve got applications.’” Crystal explained here that through his comments her grandpa continues to assume she is straight when she has never told him if she is heterosexual or not. He continues to operate under the heteronormative assumption that she will bring home a boyfriend one day.

Jane discussed her family’s view on her dating life stating “they just naturally assumed like, ‘Oh she’s not gonna date until she finds like Mr. Perfect Christian... like John the Baptist’ ... And I’m like, I might find Jane the Baptist.” It seems here that Jane’s family has an image of who she might bring home which relates to her religion. As a bisexual woman who is also Christian, this example shows Jane’s struggle to be seen authentically as who she is instead of who people expect her to be. Although Jane is out to friends at college, she clearly stated she is not out to her family members back home. This example refers back to Gabor Maté’s attachment versus authenticity.

In Lily’s interview she discussed her current relationship which people tend to assume is a “traditional” opposite sex relationship. In her words,

“There hasn’t really been a whole lot of opportunity for them [family members and friends] to show support. Because currently, I have a girlfriend, but it’s a little



bit complicated because she is male to female trans. And so she's not super comfortable with being out. So, pretty much everybody that knows her knows her by he/him pronouns and by the dead name. And so I've just never really had an opportunity to be like 'hey this is a girlfriend I have,' and people to either be like 'yeah, that's great' or 'I don't like that.'”

What Lily has identified here is her family and friend's inability to be supportive due to heteronormative assumptions. If Lily's friends and family weren't working under the assumptions that Lily is heterosexual and that her girlfriend is cisgender there may be less complications for Lily's situation and she could be more open and authentic about who she is and who her girlfriend really is. Celeste also identified moments her family assumed she was straight.

“Growing up like it- I mean it was pretty much just they expected me to end up with a boy. That's- that's what they always joked about. That's all the jokes I heard, like a specific instance would be like my granny, whenever she'd get my knee she'd be like 'Oh, that means you're boy crazy,' things like that. Just the little comments throughout that always made it seem that way... it would be a boy, which is probably why it never processed that that's not exactly how it goes.”

These comments and experiences the participants describe fit into Brown's first stage of Initial Confusion. Each participant also identified when they began feeling they might not be straight and when they began identifying openly as bisexual. In the second stage of Finding and Applying the Label, the individual discovers what it means to be bisexual and may experience support from other bisexual people (Brown, 2002). Jane described that she had a friend at a young age that identified as bisexual, which helped her discover her own identity as bisexual as well. Other participants explained similar experiences of transitioning from the assumption they

were straight to discovering bisexual as an option and then applying it to themselves.

In the third stage, Settling into the Identity, the individual begins to accept the label and care less what others think, which often can include being publicly “out” to friends or family (Brown, 2002). Although not all the participants in this study were out to everyone in their lives, they showed signs congruent with this stage of Brown’s model by expressing self-assurance and self-acceptance. When discussing the negative comments a bisexual person can get from within the LGBTQ community, Celeste stated “I haven’t found it too discouraging because you’re not the one who’s identifying as it, so I really don’t- I don’t care what you have to think.”

Crystal also expressed a feeling of self-assurance when it comes to her bisexual identity. “I’ve never felt super different... it was just always there and it never really changed.” She also stated “I feel very secure in myself, like I’m bisexual and biracial, like if you have a problem with that I guess that’s something you need to discuss with yourself. You’re not going to have that conversation with me [laughter].” Jane discussed her self-acceptance in the context of her religion and her upbringing.

“I grew up in a very conservative Christian town... graduating class of 32, like very very small. And then I came to Springfield for college... I still identify as Christian and as I grew my faith and I found a church that was so much more loving and accepting of all and less close minded than I grew up in I was like, ‘oh wow, it’s okay to be this way’... So that’s when I started like accepting myself and I found a lot of self-love through that.”

Lily stated “Over the years I’ve gotten a lot of affirmations that, yes, this is how I feel” in reference to her bisexual identity. Lily also discussed how her religious experiences influenced her self-acceptance. She stated

“I grew up going to the Episcopalian Church with my family, which is generally very, very accepting of the LGBTQ and women priests... like priests are allowed to like get married and have children and women can be priests and it's a lot more progressive. But when I got into middle school and into high school I started to go to church with my friends, which was a Presbyterian Church and the message that was very loud and clear from them was that being gay was a sin and that you were going to hell. That homosexual thoughts were lustful... they were just not acceptable... So, I kind of became a lot more closeted than I initially was... I went from a high level of acceptance to very, very low and I just kind of stayed there for several years until I went off to college and I kind of left that behind and those beliefs behind, and I met some new people who are way more accepting and I'm back up here and I'm feeling a lot better about it.”

Each of these examples, while all unique, point to some level of self-acceptance and self-assurance in their identities as bisexual women. Finally, Brown's last stage, Identity Maintenance, can be characterized by ways the individual maintains their bisexual identity through things like supportive environment, community connection, and “beliefs about the malleability or permanence of one's sexuality” (Brown, 2002, p 80). One way the participants in this study identified Identity Maintenance was through community connection. Each participant described having friends who also identify in the LGBTQ community as supportive to them. Celeste also discussed having a brother who identifies as gay as being supportive. In addition, Celeste and Crystal both explicitly identified their partners as supportive to their identities.

Although several of the participants discussed their view of the word pansexual, Celeste also discussed her recent exploration of the word queer. Celeste stated:

“I go with non-binary and it's actually one of my coworkers- they go with queer because it just kind of encapsulates it all. They don't have to go over the fact that they're not really gender conforming and they don't have to define their sexuality... I've been thinking about that lately and testing it to see how I feel about it.”

This exploration of the word or identity queer would fall into the malleability of one's sexuality which Brown describes as part of Identity Maintenance (Brown, 2002). Although Celeste still identifies as bisexual, she's exploring how the word queer encompasses more of her identity.

## **Resilience**

The second research question, what will bisexual women, age 18-24, identify as resiliency factors will be explored here. Resiliency can be defined as the ability to spring back from and successfully adapt to adversity or major stress (Corey & Corey, 2013). When asked about resilience, the participants tended to decline that they felt they had been resilient in terms of their sexual and affectional orientation. Crystal in particular noticed that she had avoided situations that might have required her resilience. Similarly, Jane and Celeste denied feeling they'd been resilient. Lily identified resilience in terms of her orientation as it related to a sexual assault she experienced and a previous relationship she considered abusive. However, outside of these instances, Lily too had not found herself to be resilient specifically to in terms of her bisexual identity.

Although the participants did not readily identify ways they had been resilient, some comments or instances did stand out to the researcher. In particular, the number of heteronormative assumptions the participants mentioned points to resilience. The buildup of the comments made by others points to some level of stress put on the participants. The comments made by others assuming that the participant was straight led to self-doubt in some of the participants and the ability to not internalize these remarks points to "springing back" from the stress. Another way participants showed resilience was in religious settings. In particular Lily

and Jane both expressed adverse experiences in churches growing up and throughout that stress, although they may have suppressed their identities, they maintained them internally. Despite that the participants generally did not feel resilient in terms of their bisexual identities, there were resiliency factors that were observed by the researcher such as overcoming comments made by others and disapproval in religious settings.

### **Recommendations from Participants**

One of the interview questions participants were asked stated: If you could give future parents of children who identify like you some (one piece of) advice what would it be? Participant answers to this question varied in specifics, however the main recommendations from them can be categorized as unconditional love and education.

Lily explained that she'd like to see kids get more education about LGBTQ topics and she encouraged parents to love their children regardless of how they identify. "Just teach children, teach your children about the LGBTQ community with openness and understanding and compassion and make sure that they know no matter what they identify as that you will still support them and love them and it's okay."

Crystal's recommendation was largely about acceptance and unconditional love. She stated:

"I guess, at the end of the day, if you know that no matter what they look like, what their relationships look like, you know, obviously not if they're like a bank robber or something- you might need to talk to him about that, have a little intervention [laughter], but you know, if their relationships look different or the clothes that they wear look different... at the end of the day, you know that you love them then you need to accept it... Show them that you support them. Even if it's not something that you're in love with, but you love them so you gotta love all the little pieces of them too."

Jane felt strongly about educating children at a younger age and encouraging them to question things. She stated “Just discuss. Discuss everything, like at a young age just start... you know, there’s so many kids books that are being published now... starting the conversation when they’re young with books and pictures and making them never feel afraid to, you know, have the conversation to question things.” She also discussed how parents can accept their children without agreeing with what they’re doing. “Rather than being black and white, I want their parents to raise some gray. Like, I want [them] to be neutral and stuff, accept the black, accept the white, but just stand neutral... accept others for their opinions being different.”

Celeste also discussed exploration and education in her recommendation to parents: “I would tell them that they need to just encourage their kids to look at all pathways... just let them explore.” Celeste explained that parents can do this by avoiding the assumption that their child is straight. She stated “It’s like I was saying with the little comments and kind of being more mindful of those little comments because it’s just insinuating that that’s how it is.”

### **Researcher Recommendations**

When discussing her family’s acceptance of her, Crystal referenced the fact that she is biracial and that initially her grandparents were not very happy or accepting of her mom’s choice to date a black man. Crystal explained that she believes the fact that her parents had a biracial child opened her grandparents up to be more accepting of her dad’s racial identity as well as hers. In reference to her grandpa she stated, “Growth has come a very very long way. But, it’s just, you know we can’t throw a- we can’t throw a biracial kid or a gay kid in every family and fix everything all of a sudden.” Crystal makes a good point that sometimes people change or become flexible in their beliefs because they find out a family member identifies a certain way,

challenging what they previously thought about them. However, that's not the case for everyone as there are certainly many people who aren't related to or close to someone who identifies in the LGBTQ community. The question then becomes how do we encourage parents, teachers, clinicians, and others to be open to the idea that their assumptions and rejection of others may be harming those people who they are not related to.

This begins with the assumption that individuals are straight until otherwise notified. Throughout the interviews with participants many things stood out as unsupportive factors to their identities but one that was noted for each participant was the assumption by others that they are straight. Like Celeste recommended, it's the straight assumptions that over time build up and inadvertently discourage kids from exploring who they might be other than straight. The "little comments" the participants mentioned, while they might seem like fleeting comments, have clearly stood out to all four participants. This information shows that what seems like a nonissue to many people can have a lasting effect that builds up over time for the individual the comments are directed at. By assuming others are straight people begin putting others in boxes that they did not ask to be in, which limits their ability to express themselves fully and comfortably. Although some people may be able to be resilient when met with assumptions like this from teachers or coworkers, people they briefly interact with, with family or close friends this becomes harder to overcome. As discussed in Chapter 2, the attachments we have with family, particularly parents or caretakers, unintentionally make it difficult to be authentic when it appears that what would be authentic is unwelcome, a concept Gabor Maté discusses as authenticity versus attachment (Borgess, 2019). Crystal referenced this in her interview saying "That's so much easier like with strangers than people that have been in your life the whole time." It's relatively easy to brush off or be resilient in the face of comments by strangers than it is to do the same with family who we

are emotionally invested with. This concept of authenticity versus attachment Gabor Maté presents, emphasizes how necessary it is to avoid heteronormative assumptions in order to avoid the need for resilience.

Throughout the interviews, participants referenced reactions from friends or family and something that stood out was a theme of dismissal or minimizing the situation. When one of the participants would explain their coming out experience they often discussed that friends or family treated it as “no big deal” or rather than having a supportive or “good” reaction they described what appeared to be a lack of a bad reaction or a lack of rejection. This distinction was important as some participants identified this as supportive to their identity that their friends or family “didn’t care.” Particularly in Lily’s case she described that her friends and her mom were “very supportive” of her identity. When she discussed her mom’s reaction she explained that it felt dismissive that her mom seemed to brush it off. However, with her friends, particularly friends who also identify in the LGBTQ community, she described similar reactions and explained that these did not feel dismissive. This distinction appears to be a difference between normalized versus pathologized. With her mom the subject did not feel like a normal topic to discuss but with friends who identify in similar ways as her, a casual attitude may have been more appropriate. Lily recognized that her mom’s intentions were likely good in that she was probably trying to normalize the situation for her, but it did not have the intended effect.

This example points out something that we as health care workers, mental health clinicians, teachers, and parents or caretakers can take into consideration when discussing LGBTQ topics with others. Although the idea is to normalize the concept, that can’t be achieved at the moment when an individual comes out, there has to be effort prior to that for it to be normalized in that moment. Normalizing can be done through education and exploration in



youth, which can be achieved through books, media, and conversations about different identities. In Celeste's case it appears her family had accomplished some level of normalizing the topic prior to her coming out as she stated "I didn't really feel the need to tell my family because I knew they'd be cool with it." This distinction is important for individuals to remember as they navigate interacting with others who may or may not identify as bisexual or another LGBTQ identity.

Protective factors identified in Chapter 2 were community connection and representation, which participants also identified as supportive to their bisexual identities. Many participants discussed friends, family, and partners who also identify as bisexual or another non-straight identity as supportive in that they can discuss the struggles they experience pertaining to their bisexual identity more openly with these people because there is an assumption they can understand the situation better than someone who identifies as straight. Thus, promoting community connection may be a helpful recommendation for anyone supporting someone with a bisexual identity. This might be done through seeking out groups or clubs for LGBTQ people or bisexual individuals in particular as well as other community resources. If these resources are difficult to find or nonexistent it may mean they need to be created in that individual's area which may be the recommendation instead. Reaching out to community centers, schools, or mental health organizations is one way someone could begin getting a group or club started or find information about existing resources.

In addition, accurate representation appears to be an important factor in self exploration. If someone feels they are "different," particularly in a negative or unacceptable way, in terms of their sexual or affectional identity but never really sees any examples of how they could be instead it's hard to explore the options. Media representation is often stereotypical and not an

accurate representation of all the types of people there are. Bisexual individuals are often depicted as confused or sexually promiscuous. However, this is not the case for many people that identify as bisexual as Diamond (2008) points out, bisexuality is a stable and valid identity. A broader representation of more accurate portrayals of individual differences may help youth explore other identities as possibilities for themselves.

## **Limitations**

The most notable limitation with this study is the small number of four participants. This small number, while it makes for rich individual data, brings into question the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the participants' age range was very close as three participants were 21 and one was 22 years old at the time of the interviews. Participants being close in age suggests their development is relatively similar which can be seen as a strength. However, the close age range, again, makes generalizing the results difficult.

Other limitations may be the religious influence in the part of the country the research took place. Each of the participants mentioned religion in some capacity, some more than others. The religious influence on these participants gives valuable information on how religion impacts their bisexual identity in 2021. The religious influence on these participants may not be as strong for other individuals throughout the United States, but without further research one cannot be certain.

Researcher bias also has the potential to be a limitation of this study. As an insider to the LGBTQ community, the researcher took steps to avoid bias such as conducting cross checks of the data with an external reviewer and maintaining an open mindset about the possibility of various finding. Despite these efforts to avoid researcher bias, the possibility still remains that

the researcher's positionality may have influenced the data presented.

## **Future Research**

Future research related to bisexual identity development and resiliency factors may consider looking at a larger and more diverse group in terms of age, race, and location. Just as research is lacking for bisexual women, it is lacking for the bisexual community as a whole and therefore future research may focus more specifically on men and other gender identities. Lastly, after coding the present study and evaluating all the data, the factor of avoidance appeared to be relevant although it was not explored directly. After reviewing the data collectively, many of the participants indicated they felt they hadn't been resilient. However, this appeared to be not because their lives had been devoid of adversity but rather, they had avoided situations where resilience might be required. This may be an indication of where the participants were developmentally. A few of the participants avoided various things like certain situations, people, conversations or even words. Crystal in particular stated that she did not feel she had been resilient in terms of her bisexual identity, but stated this was because she had not *had* to be resilient. This appeared to be less because of supportive family and friends making her environment safe and more closely related to her avoidance of uncomfortable situations that may require her to be resilient. This observation may also be linked to Gilligan's theory of moral development in women. Gilligan's suggestion that women's moral development involves the interdependence of care for oneself and others may play a considerable role in these participants' decisions about who they've come out to. These findings indicate more research and investigation is necessary to better understand the avoidance behaviors noticed in these participants and the potential relationship to female moral development.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

While much research is still necessary to better understand bisexual individuals in terms of identity development and resiliency factors, this study begins to fill the gap identified in the literature. According to an article published by the Williams Institute at UCLA (Gates, 2011), bisexual people make up half of the 9 million Americans that identify as LGB (lesbian, gay, or bisexual) and their mental health outcomes appear to be poor in terms of rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidal ideation (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010; Taylor, Power, & Smith, 2020). Given the size of the bisexual population and the mental health implications, more research in this area is needed as it has the potential to benefit many people.

The present study appears to align with Brown's model of bisexual identity development as each participant identified factors from at least three of the four stages. Resiliency factors identified directly by participants and through researcher observation such as community connection, supportive friends, accurate representation, and childhood upbringing aligned with the literature (Corey & Corey, 2013; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). With the information from this study mental health clinicians, health care workers, parents, teachers, and others in the community can begin to make adjustments in how we work and interact with one another, particularly with youth, to make the experience of identity development and exploration more tolerable or even something positive or healthy for bisexual individuals. With more research in this area there is a growing chance we can decrease the amount of poor mental health outcomes for this group and begin to normalize bisexual identities.

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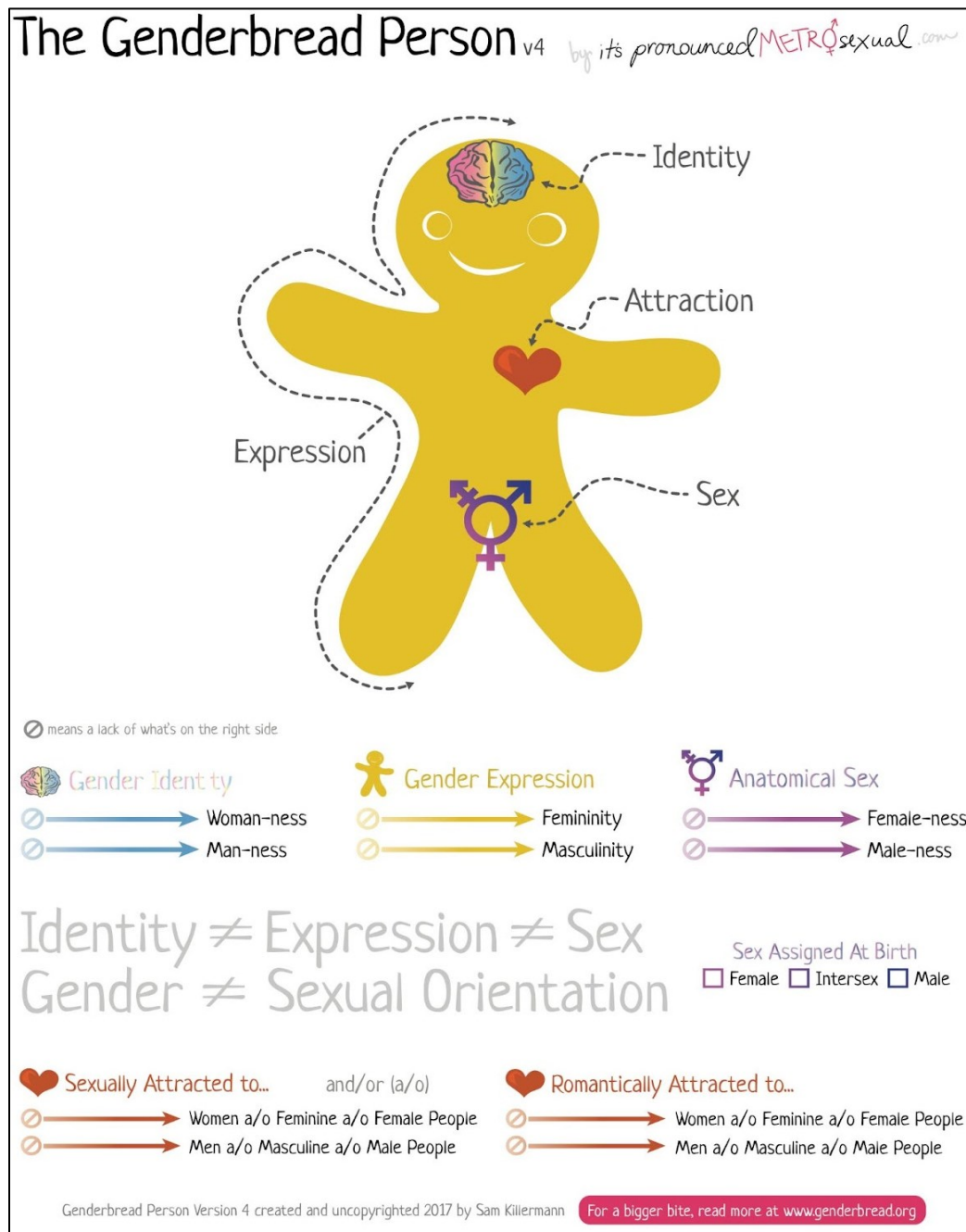
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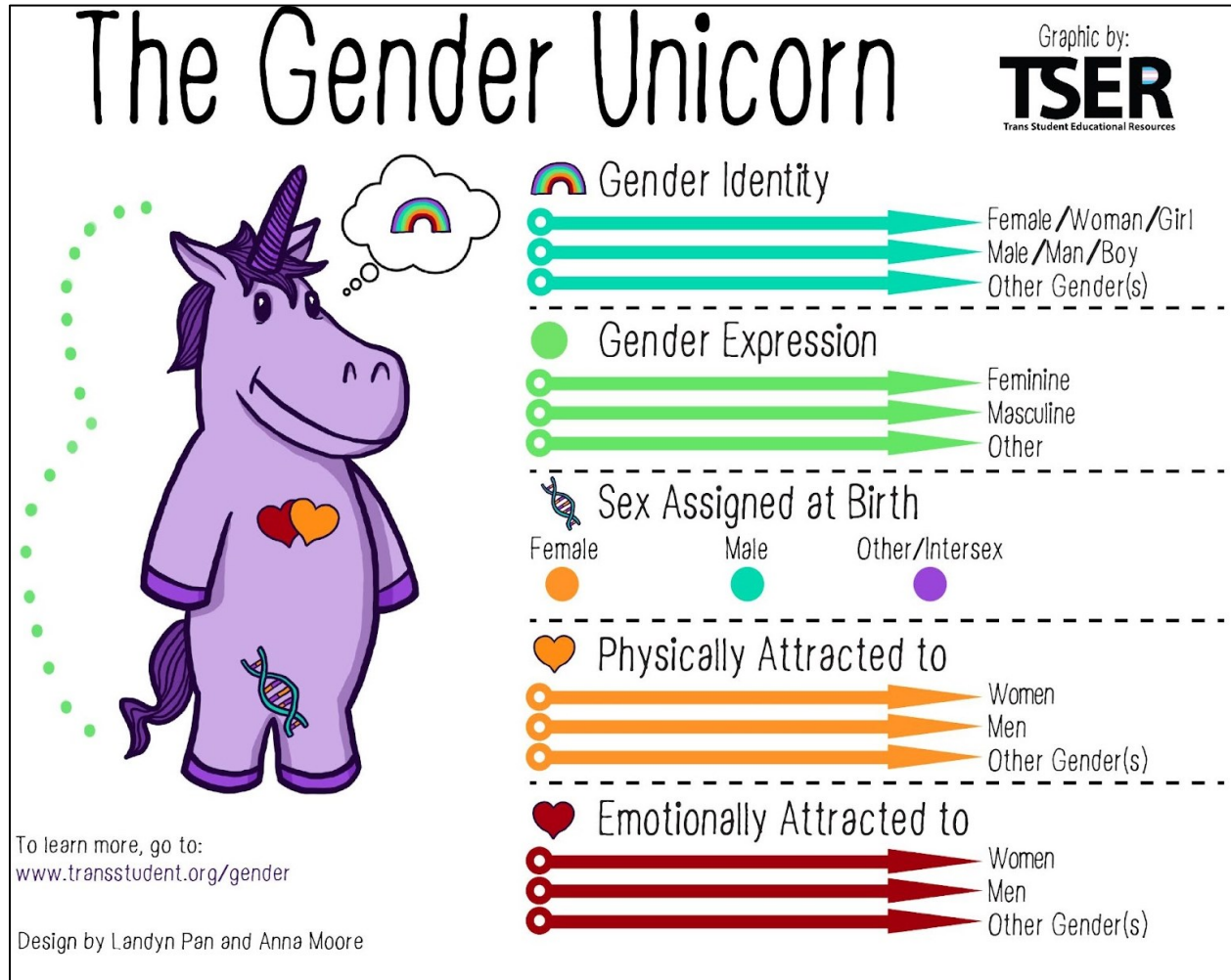
## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Models of Sexuality

#### Appendix A-1. Genderbread Person.



Appendix A-2. Gender Unicorn.



## **Appendix B. Interview Materials**

### **Appendix B-1. Demographics Survey.**

Demographics Survey:

This short demographics survey is intended to help identify potential participants to be selected for more in depth interviews estimated to last approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

This study will seek to better understand the lived experiences and self identified resiliency factors of bisexual women ages 18-25. For the purpose of this study the word bisexual is defined as “a person whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is towards people of the same and other genders, or towards people regardless of their gender. Some people may use bisexual and pansexual interchangeably” (UC Davis, 2020).

If you believe you may fit this criteria please fill out the following demographics information.

For multiple choice, please choose the answer that best fits you.

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_
2. Phone number \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
4. With which racial or ethnic group do you most identify?
  1. African or African/American
  2. American Indian/ Native American
  3. Asian, Pacific Islander or Asian/American
  4. Caucasian
  5. Hispanic
  6. Multiracial (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  7. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

5. How do you identify?
1. Female
  2. Male
  3. Transgender Female
  4. Transgender Male
  5. Nonbinary
  6. other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
6. What pronouns do you use?
1. she/her/hers
  2. he/him/his
  3. they/them/theirs
  4. other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your affectional/ sexual orientation?
1. Lesbian
  2. Gay
  3. Bisexual
  4. Pansexual
  5. Queer
  6. Other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
8. Please briefly describe how you define the word you chose in the previous question.
- 
9. Are you 'out?'
1. yes, fully out

2. yes, only to some people
3. no, no one knows
4. Other (please explain)\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B-2. Interview Questions.**

### Interview Questions:

1. (I know you included this in the survey but) Please tell me the word you chose to identify yourself and what it means to you?
  1. How long have you identified in this way?
  2. Have there been other identity labels you've had/used along the way?
  3. When you use this term how adequately does it fit?
    - 1 being not accurately at all, I wish there was a better term
    - 5 being fairly accurate, but not great
    - 10 being very accurate, nearly exactly how I feel
2. Describe your coming out experience.
  1. Was it a "discovery" or light switch moment or something you felt you always knew? (Tell me more about that.)
  2. How did friends and family receive the news?
3. Growing up, what were the messages you received about romantic partners?
  1. How did you receive these messages? (at home, media, family members, etc)
  2. As a child/teen were you allowed/encouraged to explore your options as it pertains to romantic partners?
4. What was your experience/exposure to the LGBTQ community like as a child/teen?
  1. How did that occur? (sources of information)
  2. What is an affirming or disaffirming message?
    - (were you told what it was in an accepting manner, told it was wrong/sinful, etc)
5. In terms of your sexuality, I'd like to talk about factors that were supportive or hindering,

which would you like to talk about first?

What did you find supportive? What did you find hindering?

6. Do you believe you've been resilient in terms of your affectional and sexual identity development?
  1. When and in what ways?
7. If you could give future parents of children who identify like you some (one piece of?) advice what would it be?
8. Is there anything else I haven't asked that feels important to tell me?



## **Appendix C. Consent to Participate**

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study Missouri State University Graduate College**

### **The Erasure of Monosexism: An Exploration of Bisexual Women's Identity Development**

**Dr. Leslie Anderson & Emma Leonard**

#### **Introduction**

You have been asked to participate in a research study. Before you agree to participate in this study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the study and the procedures involved. The investigator will also explain the project to you in detail. If you have any questions about the study or your role in it, be sure to ask the investigator. If you have more questions later, Emma Leonard, the person mainly responsible for the interviews, will answer them for you. You may contact the investigator(s) at: Emma17@live.missouristate.edu and ALAnderson@missouristate.edu.

You will need to sign this form giving us your permission to be involved in the study. Taking part in this study is entirely your choice. If you decide to take part but later change your mind, you may stop at any time. If you decide to stop, you do not have to give a reason and there will be no negative consequences for ending your participation.

#### **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences and resiliency factors of bisexual women.

#### **Description of Procedures**

If you agree to be part of this study, you will be asked to complete an interview expected to last between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews will be held in person in Park Central Office Building, which is part of the downtown portion of Missouri State Campus. Interview questions

will pertain to your sexual orientation, childhood upbringing, resilience, and experience/exposure to the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community. After interviews are completed and data analysis has been conducted, you will be asked to complete a brief member check, which involves reviewing the findings with the researcher to ensure accuracy. The member check is expected to take 15 to 30 minutes and may be completed in person or virtually.

### **What are the risks?**

The risk associated with the study is expected to be minimal however, some participants may experience psychological discomfort. If you wish, you will be given referrals for local counseling resources.

### **What happens if I get sick or hurt from participating in this study?**

You understand that if you are injured or require medical treatment, you may seek treatment from your primary care provider or, if eligible, from Taylor Health Services. If you have paid a student-health fee, you will not be billed by Taylor Health Services for services covered by that fee. If you have not paid the fee, you will be charged for services rendered by Taylor Health Services. The Missouri State University is not responsible for the cost of any care required as a result of your participation in this study.

### **What are the benefits?**

It is a possibility that you may benefit from the ability to discuss and explore your identity development and resiliency factors in a non-judgemental space. It is expected that recommendations that are created as a result of the study may help improve understanding of bisexual individuals by parents, educators, and mental health professionals.

### **Will I receive compensation?**

No compensation will be given for your participation.

### **Can I withdraw from this study?**

If you consent to participate in this study, you are free to stop your participation in the study at any time without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

The results of this study are confidential and only the investigators will have access to the information which will be kept in a locked office at the University. Prior to your interview you will be given a pseudonym and participant number. Your name or personal identifying information will not be used in any published reports of this research. All information gathered during this study will be destroyed 6 years after research is completed.

The researcher seeks to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research. You should understand, however, there are rare instances when the researcher is required to share personally-identifiable information (e.g., according to policy, contract, regulation). For example, in response to a complaint about the research, officials at Missouri State University, designees of the sponsor(s), and/or regulatory and oversight government agencies may access research data. You also should understand that the researcher is required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g., child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases).

Your in person interview will be audio recorded. In addition, a transcription service will be used to create typed records of the interview. In order to separate identifying information from your interview questions and answers, a first recording will be made to identify yourself and your participant number. The recording will be stopped and a new one started where only your participant number will be stated. The same process will be completed for the transcription service. These records will be kept separately so that identifying information cannot be easily

linked to a participant.

**Consent to Participate**

If you want to participate in this study, The Erasure of Monosexism: An Exploration of Bisexual Women's Identity Development, you will be asked to sign below:

I have read and understand the information in this form. I have been encouraged to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. By signing this form, I agree voluntarily to participate in this study. I know that I can withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this form for my own records.

Participant Name Printed \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D. IRB Approval

Date: 10-29-2021

IRB #: IRB-FY2022-47

Title: Erasure of Monosexism: An Exploration of Bisexual Women's Identity Development

Creation Date: 7-28-2021

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Leslie Anderson

Review Board: MSU

Sponsor:

### Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	<b>Approved</b>
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### Key Study Contacts

Member	Leslie Anderson	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	alanderson@missouristate.edu
Member	Leslie Anderson	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	alanderson@missouristate.edu
Member	Emma Leonard	Role	Investigator	Contact	emma17@live.missouristate.edu