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Personal, Relational and Community Aspects of Bisexual Identity in Emerging, Early and Middle Adult Cohorts

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This study offered exploratory comparisons of personal, relational and community aspects of bisexual identity for women and men in emerging adulthood relative to those in early and middle adult cohorts. In this sample of 576 bisexual individuals, the pattern of findings for some aspects of bisexual identity (e.g., relationship commitment, bisexual community involvement) was consistent with the developmental perspective that characterizes emerging adulthood as a period of identity exploration and low commitment relative to increasing identity commitment across early and middle adulthood. For other aspects of bisexual identity (e.g., self-described sexual orientation, outness and sexual behavior), gender appeared to play a role, either on its own or in conjunction with life stage cohort.

KEYWORDS *bisexuality, bisexual youth, emerging adults, sexual orientation, sexual identity, romantic relationships, sexuality, life stage development, early adulthood, middle adulthood*

Despite growing attention to identity issues in lesbian and gay populations, there remains a dearth of literature focused on bisexual identity (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Phillips, Ingram, Smith, & Mindes, 2003). Specifically, the literature on lesbian and gay identity has delineated personal (e.g., self-identified orientation, outness), relational (e.g., romantic attractions and relationships) and community (e.g., connection with sexual minority

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communities) aspects of sexual identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Morales, 1989; Troiden, 1989). For example, romantic attractions and relationships are thought to be important in sexual identity formation and, in turn, in coming out as a sexual minority person (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Similarly, awareness of and connection with sexual minority community groups have been conceptualized as important to identity development, as these communities can facilitate self-definition and self-acceptance and provide support and validation to sexual minority community members (Cass, 1979; Morales, 1989; Troiden, 1989).

Although personal, relational and community aspects of sexual identity have been discussed extensively for lesbian and gay people, attention is needed to these aspects of bisexual identity and how they may vary with developmental stages throughout life for bisexual individuals. Particularly, developmental conceptualizations suggest that emerging adulthood is a period of greater identity and relational exploration and lower commitment relative to early and middle adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Levinson, 1986; Nelson & Barry, 2005). The current study offers exploratory comparisons of bisexual individuals from emerging, early and middle adulthood cohorts on personal, relational and community aspects of bisexual identity.

To facilitate the present discussion of identity, we adopt the following conceptualization and terminology of sexual identity and its components (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002): *Sexual identity* is defined as the self-acknowledged collection of sexual behaviors, values, needs, preferences and so on that make up an individual's sexuality. Sexual identity includes *sexual orientation*, which reflects sexual, affectional and relational orientations toward others as related to their gender or sex characteristics (e.g., same-, other-, pan-sexual orientation). *Sexual orientation identity*, in turn, reflects the internal (e.g., self-identified orientation) and external (e.g., outness to others) claiming of sexual orientation at the individual or personal level and sense of group connection and membership at the collective or community level. Thus, in the present examination of bisexual identity across life stage cohorts, the relational aspects of sexual orientation are reflected in assessment of romantic attractions, behaviors and relationships; the personal and community aspects of sexual orientation identity are reflected in assessment of self-identified sexual orientation, outness and community connection. These aspects of bisexual identity are compared across emerging, early and middle adult cohorts.

Emerging Adulthood and Distinctions from Early and Middle Adulthood

The ages of 18 to 25 are posited to represent a distinctly formative period of development termed *emerging adulthood* that is characterized by

demographic flux (e.g., residential status, school attendance), role ambivalence (e.g., perceptions of self-sufficiency) and identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults are youth who have left their adolescent roles but are yet to commit to adult roles or to consider themselves adults (Arnett, 2000; Nelson & Barry, 2005). Emerging adulthood is marked by uncertainty and the sense that many different routes in life are available; individuals in this life stage may be inclined to experiment with social roles and identities in the course of establishing a life structure and considering various possible identity and role commitments (Erikson, 1968; Levinson et al., 1979).

Emerging adulthood is particularly important for identity formation in that this is “the period of life that offers the most opportunity for identity exploration in the areas of love, work, and worldviews” (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Of particular relevance to sexual identity is that emerging adulthood is a time of experimentation with dating and relationships, entering intimate and nonmarital relations, and beginning to treat romantic relationships as serious quests for emotional and physical intimacy rather than as recreational activities (Arnett, 2000; Nelson & Barry, 2005). In emerging adulthood, individuals begin to consider their own identities in the context of romantic relationships, asking: “Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?” (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Because romantic attraction and relationships are important aspects of sexual identity, the task of self-definition through relationship definition may make the emerging adulthood stage a particularly salient time of intense exploration, interpersonal growth, and identity formation for bisexual people who experience attraction to more than one gender. Within this context of personal exploration and experimentation, emerging adults are also likely to have more self- than other-oriented goals (Arnett, 2000; Nelson & Barry, 2005) that suggests potentially low commitment in community aspects of bisexual identity.

The identity exploration and experimentation that characterize emerging adulthood distinguish this stage from the increasing commitment and stability that characterize the subsequent developmental stages of early adulthood and middle adulthood (Berk, 2007; Levinson et al., 1979). *Early adulthood* is typically defined as an age range spanning from the mid-twenties to early forties, whereas middle adulthood encompasses ages from the early forties to mid-sixties. Early adulthood is marked by the peak years of the life cycle, in which individuals establish a niche in society and often form stable relationships and occupations (Levinson, 1986). Beyond developing a more concrete sense of self, individuals in early adulthood may also incur stress related to relationship commitments, parenthood and financial obligations. Levinson (1986) described this period as a time when individuals make important choices regarding family, work and lifestyles without “the maturity or life experience to choose wisely” (p. 5). In contrast to the peak of early adulthood, *middle adulthood* is marked by a decrease in biological

capacities and increasing sense of personal responsibility for future generations; individuals in this stage are thought to feel responsible for their own work and the work of others as they prepare to transition away from past social roles (i.e., parenthood, employee; Levinson, 1986). Thus, emerging adulthood is marked by tumultuous self-discovery, identity exploration and low identity commitment, whereas early and middle adulthood are conceptualized as times of greater stability, personal identity and role commitment and collective responsibility and commitment.

Although a developmental perspective conceptualizes emerging adulthood as a period of low identity commitment relative to early and middle adulthood, attention to shifts in larger social contexts suggests potentially countervailing forces. For example, although sexual minority orientations and identities, including bisexuality, have become more visible over time (e.g., Grossman, D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000; Keppel, 2006; Savin-Williams, 2008), older bisexual cohorts may have experienced a virtual invisibility of bisexuality in culture, media and social contexts during most of their life. Keppel (2006) suggested that as a consequence of such experiences of invisibility, older bisexual cohorts may lack supportive social networks (e.g., sexual minority or bisexual communities), perceive greater risks associated with 'outness' (e.g., loss of employment, family issues and health care rights for partners) and struggle with coming out. From this perspective, it follows that bisexual persons in early and middle adulthood may be less out and less likely to be involved with bisexual or sexual minority communities than are emerging adults. These countervailing developmental and social context expectations—that emerging adults would have lower or higher commitment to personal, relational and community aspects of bisexual identity relative to older cohorts—remain largely speculative and warrant empirical exploration.

Gender and Bisexuality

Attention to gender is also important in exploring bisexual identity across life stage cohorts because some differences in the experiences of women and men may have implications for personal, relational and community aspects of sexual identity. For example, based on a review of the literature, Brown (2002) surmised that women may be more comfortable with identifying as bisexual and more reflective and comfortable with ambiguity in their coming-out process whereas men may be less comfortable with identifying as bisexual and come out more abruptly and with less reflection. Such differences in self-identification and coming out may be shaped by a view of same-sex attractions as a threat to masculinity and related social status, by societal perceptions that men are either gay or straight (in contrast to views that women's sexuality is more flexible) and by societal stigmatization of

bisexual men as AIDS vectors (Brown, 2002; Burleson, 2005; Dodge, Reece, & Gebhard, 2008). Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest more overall negative attitudes toward bisexual men than women (Eliason, 2001).

Some gender differences in relational identity variables—including contexts for meeting same-sex partners, exploration of same-sex attractions, and same-sex sexual behaviors—also have been observed. In this regard, Baumeister (2000) suggested that women have greater “erotic plasticity” (p. 348) such that women’s sexual responses and behaviors are more malleable and shaped by cultural, social and situational factors than are men’s responses; such erotic plasticity may have implications for relational aspects of identity for bisexual women and men. For instance, Burleson (2005) found that many bisexual women, but not men, in other-sex relationships were allowed or encouraged by romantic partners to explore their same-sex attractions. Furthermore, many bisexual men met male partners through cruising, sex parties or the Internet, whereas most women met female partners through friends, work or polyamory community events. Bisexual men also had significantly more same-gender sex than did bisexual women. In addition, findings with sexual minority youth suggest gender differences in the centrality of sexual behavior to same-sex attractions and self-labeling. For instance, in their sample of emerging adults, Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) found that women were more likely to describe their first same-sex attractions and self-labeling as emotionally oriented whereas men were more likely to provide sexually oriented descriptions. In this sample, men were also more likely to engage in same-sex sexual behavior prior to self-labeling as sexual minority whereas women were more likely to self-label first and then engage in same-sex sexual behavior.

With regard to community identity and connection, bisexual men and women may experience strain in finding support within the lesbian and gay community, but for different reasons. For example, bisexual men in Burleson’s (2005) sample reported that their sexual orientation was not taken seriously by some gay men who perceived bisexual men as gay but in denial (as reflected in the saying “bi now, gay later”). Women may experience disconnection from some lesbian communities because of the view that relationships with men reinforce patriarchy and subjugation of women (Brown, 2002; Burleson, 2005; Israel & Mohr, 2004). Taken together, this literature suggests that gendered contexts might shape differences in personal, relational, and community aspects of bisexual identity.

CURRENT STUDY

Based on the literature reviewed here, the current study provides exploratory comparisons of bisexual individuals in emerging, early and middle adult cohorts on personal identity variables (i.e., self-identified orientation and

level of outness), relational identity variables (i.e., relationship commitment status, polyamory, same- and other-sex attractions and sexual behaviors) and community identity variables (i.e., involvement in sexual minority and bisexual communities). Moreover, given prior literature suggesting potential variations in women and men's experiences of aspects of bisexual identity (e.g., Brown, 2002; Burleson, 2005), gender and its interaction with life stage cohort will also be explored. Due to the limited literature on personal, relational and community aspects of bisexual identity across life stages, no directional hypotheses are made. Overall, developmental conceptualizations of the life stages suggest that emerging adulthood would be a period of low commitment to personal, relational and community aspects of bisexual identity, with a pattern of increasing commitment across early and middle adulthood; the social context perspective suggests the countervailing pattern that emerging adults might be more committed to these aspects of bisexual identity given greater visibility of bisexuality and bisexual communities in their social contexts.

METHOD

Procedures

Participants were recruited via online resources such as electronic listserves, discussion boards and virtual communities for bisexual or sexual minority individuals. The study was advertised as an examination of the life experiences of bisexual individuals. Participants were directed to an online survey that began with an informed consent page. To participate in the study, respondents had to first affirm that they (1) identified as bisexual, (2) were age 18 years older, and (3) resided in the United States. If respondents affirmed that they met these inclusion criteria and agreed to participate after reading the informed consent, they were prompted to complete the survey.

The Internet has been a useful tool for collecting data from lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) samples (Moradi et al., 2009). Specifically, sexual minority listserves and online message boards may be good recruitment venues because LGB people tend to view the Internet as a safe place to connect with other sexual minority individuals (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005). Furthermore, even if such persons are not 'out' broadly, they may feel comfortable being 'out' online because the Internet provides a shield of anonymity; thus, the Internet is a viable resource for recruiting these under-represented individuals (Mustanski, 2001). Online surveys also are shown to yield similar responses as traditional pen-and-paper methods while being more cost-efficient (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004; Hiskey & Troop, 2002). In recent years, numerous studies have utilized online methods as their primary means to recruit sexual minority participants (e.g., Carballo-Diequez, Miner, Dolezal, Rosser, & Jacoby, 2006; Fernández et al., 2005; Wang & Ross, 2002). In the current study, to reduce the risk of nonbisexual

people participating, the survey link was distributed only to groups or networks that included bisexual individuals or bisexuality issues. Additionally, four validity questions asking participants to mark a particular response (e.g., Please mark “strongly agree”) were included within the survey to ensure that participants were responding attentively.

Participants

Data from 576 participants were analyzed in the current study. These data were drawn from a larger data set ($N = 699$) on the life experiences of bisexual individuals (Brewster & Moradi, 2010); participants were selected for inclusion if they had data for most of the variables of interest. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 ($M = 32.13$, $SD = 11.24$, $Mdn = 29.00$) and were divided into three groups based on prior definitions of life stage ages (Arnett, 2000; Levinson et al., 1979; Nelson & Barry, 2005): emerging adults ranging from 18 to 25 ($n = 207$; $M = 21.39$, $SD = 2.47$, $Mdn = 21.00$), young adults ranging from 26 to 40 ($n = 240$, $M = 32.28$, $SD = 4.45$, $Mdn = 32.00$), and middle adults ranging from age 41 to 65 years ($n = 129$, $M = 49.07$, $SD = 6.70$, $Mdn = 47.00$). In terms of gender, about 59% of participants identified as female, 40% as male and 1% as transgender (two male-to-female and seven female-to-male participants). Approximately 78% of the sample identified as White, 10% as multiracial, 5% as Latino/a American, 4% as Black/African American, 2% as Asian American, 1% as other race/ethnicities and 1% as Native American. In terms of level of education, roughly 35% of participants reported having a college degree, 33% having some college education, 22% having a professional degree, 9% having a high school degree, 1% having some high school education and less than 1% having no high school education. With regard to social class, roughly 51% of participants described themselves as middle class, 25% as working class, 19% as upper middle class, 4% as lower class and 1% as upper class.

Measures

Personal identity variables. Participants were asked to rate their sexual orientation with the following item, “Please select your sexual orientation using the BEST descriptor.” Possible orientations were (1) exclusively lesbian/gay, (2) mostly lesbian/gay, (3) bisexual, (4) mostly heterosexual, and (5) exclusively heterosexual. Respondents who described their orientation as mostly lesbian or gay (10% of the sample) or mostly heterosexual (14% of the sample) were included in the current study because scholars have noted that bisexuality is a spectrum and that bisexual individuals may not experience equal attraction to both genders (e.g., Rust, 2000). None of the participants identified as exclusively lesbian/gay or heterosexual.

The 10-item Outness Inventory (OI; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) was used to assess the degree to which respondents' sexual orientation is known or talked about within different social spheres of their life. The measure asks participants to rate on a 7-point continuum (1 = *person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status* to 7 = *person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about*) how open they are about their sexual orientation to members of their social network (e.g., friends, coworkers, family). For the current study, we added the item "new lesbian/gay friends" to parallel an item examining outness with "new straight friends" resulting in a total of 11 OI items. Item ratings are averaged to yield an overall score, with higher scores indicating greater levels of outness. Balsam and Mohr (2007) found a Cronbach's alpha of .89 for OI items with their sample of bisexual individuals. In terms of validity, prior studies have found that OI scores correlate positively with involvement in lesbian and gay communities for LGB individuals (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Moreover, validity evidence specific to bisexual individuals was reported by Balsam and Mohr (2007) who found that outness was correlated negatively with a measure of desire to keep sexual orientation private. Cronbach's alpha for OI items with the current sample was .87.

Relational identity variables. Participants were asked to rate their physical and emotional attraction to members of the same and other sex (i.e., "How much are you physically attracted to members of your own [the other] sex? How much are you emotionally attracted to members of your own [the other] sex?"). Attraction to the target groups was rated on a 5-point rating scale: 1 (*low*), 3 = (*moderate*), and 5 (*high*).

Participants were also asked about the gender specificity of their sexual experiences (i.e., "Have you had sex with persons of your own gender, the other gender, or both genders?"). Response options included 0 (*never had sex*), 1 (*my own gender only*), 2 (*my own gender mostly*), 3 (*both genders equally*), 4 (*other gender mostly*), and 5 (*other gender only*).

Last, participants were asked about their romantic relationships. Specifically, they described their current relationship status as (1) single, (2) casually dating, (3) long-term dating, or (4) married/partnered. They were also asked if they identified as polyamorous (yes or no).

Community identity variables. Participants were asked to describe how connected or involved they were with (1) LGBTQ and (2) bisexual communities using a 5-point continuum from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

RESULTS

Descriptive information and correlations among the variables of interest are reported in Tables 1, 2 and 3, respectively. To examine the relations of life stage cohort, gender and their interaction with the variables of interest,

TABLE 1 Descriptive Data for Variables of Interest for All Participants

Variables	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal identity variables				
Self-identified sexual orientation			3.04	.49
1 = Exclusively lesbian/gay	—	—		
2 = Mostly lesbian/gay	57	10		
3 = Bisexual	437	76		
4 = Mostly heterosexual	79	14		
5 = Heterosexual	—	—		
Outness (1 = <i>not out</i> , 7 = <i>very out</i>)			3.19	1.39
Relational identity variables				
Same-sex physical attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			4.11	.95
Same-sex emotional attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			3.86	1.14
Other-sex physical attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			3.92	1.02
Other-sex emotional attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			3.89	1.06
Sexual behavior				
Never had sex	44	8		
(1 = <i>own gender only</i> , 5 = <i>other gender only</i>)			3.41	1.00
Polyamorous				
1 = Yes	222	39		
2 = No	354	61		
Relationship status				
1 = Single	162	28		
2 = Casually dating	62	11		
3 = Long-term dating	123	21		
4 = Married/partnered	229	40		
Community identity variables				
Connected/involved with LGBT community			2.54	1.14
(1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>extremely</i>)				
Connected/involved with bisexual community			1.88	1.00
(1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>extremely</i>)				

LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

log-linear analyses and follow-up chi-square tests were conducted when the categories of the dependent variable were of interest (e.g., sexual orientation category). Log-linear analysis is an extension of chi-square test that is used to examine relationships among more than two categorical variables; similar to Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), it fits a linear model to the data to predict the number of cases expected in a given category (Field, 2000). In the present log-linear analyses, second-order effects of interest are the relationship of (1) the criterion variable with gender and (2) the criterion variable with life stage cohort; highest-order effects reflected an interaction of gender by life stage cohort in relation to the criterion variable. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), ANOVAs, and follow-up pairwise comparisons were conducted when level (from low to high) of the dependent variable was of interest (e.g., level of same-sex attraction). The nine individuals who identified as transgender were grouped according to the gender with which they identified (e.g., male-to-female transgender grouped with women).

TABLE 2 Descriptive Data for Variables of Interest by Life Stage Cohort

Variables	Emerging Adulthood				Early Adulthood				Middle Adulthood			
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal identity variables												
Self-identified sexual orientation			3.00	.48			3.08	.49			3.02	.49
1 = Exclusively lesbian/gay	—	—			—	—			—	—		
2 = Mostly lesbian/gay	23	11			20	8			14	11		
3 = Bisexual	159	77			181	76			97	76		
4 = Mostly heterosexual	24	12			38	16			17	13		
5 = Heterosexual	—	—			—	—			—	—		
Outness (1 = <i>not out</i> , 7 = <i>very out</i>)			3.08	1.15			3.31	1.49			3.13	1.54
Relational identity variables												
Same-sex physical attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			4.32	.87			4.00	1.00			4.05	.97
Same-sex emotional attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			4.01	1.09			3.86	1.12			3.61	1.21
Other-sex physical attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			3.91	1.00			3.94	1.05			3.88	1.02
Other-sex emotional attraction (1 = <i>low</i> , 5 = <i>high</i>)			4.00	.99			3.74	1.12			3.99	1.02
Sexual behavior												
Never had sex	40	19			3	1			1	1		
(1 = <i>own gender only</i> , 5 = <i>other gender only</i>)			3.43	1.18			3.44	.94			3.32	.84
Polyamorous												
1 = Yes	51	25			98	41			73	57		
2 = No	156	75			142	59			56	43		
Relationship status												
1 = Single	96	46			43	18			23	18		
2 = Casually dating	29	14			29	12			4	3		
3 = Long-term dating	54	26			51	21			18	14		
4 = Married/partnered	28	14			117	49			84	65		
Community identity variables												
Connected/involved with LGBT community			2.43	1.13			2.60	1.15			2.60	1.16
(1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>extremely</i>)												
Connected/involved with bisexual community			1.71	.86			1.90	1.04			2.13	1.06
(1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>extremely</i>)												

LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

TABLE 3 Intercorrelations among Variables of Interest

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Life stage cohort	—											
2. Gender	.33***	—										
Personal identity variables												
3. Outness	.02	-.16***	—									
4. Sexual orientation	.02	.01	-.25***	—								
Relational variables												
5. Relationship status	.38***	.07	.01	.11*	—							
6. Polyamorous	-.25***	-.06	-.10*	.01	-.26***	—						
7. Same-sex physical attraction	-.12**	-.20***	.16***	-.36***	-.09*	.05	—					
8. Other-sex physical attraction	-.01	.08	-.10*	.33***	.01	-.05	-.05	—				
9. Same-sex emotional attraction	-.13**	-.32***	.23***	-.24***	-.15***	.04	.36***	-.04	—			
10. Other-sex emotional attraction	-.02	.11**	-.13**	.19***	.05	-.12**	.14**	.45***	-.16***	—		
11. Sexual behavior	-.04	-.14**	-.14**	.31***	.16***	-.05	-.17***	.13**	-.09*	.16***	—	
Community variables												
12. Involvement in LGBT community	.06	-.15***	.51***	-.16***	.02	-.02	.07	-.12**	.20***	-.17***	-.12**	—
13. Involvement in bisexual community	.16***	-.06	.30***	-.02	.08	-.12***	-.02	-.02	.08	-.05	-.04	.53***

Note. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

Participants who reported that they never had sex were excluded from analyses involving sexual behavior. *N* ranged from 528 to 576 due to missing data. Please refer to Table 1 for variable coding key.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Personal Identity Variables

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A three-way log-linear analysis was conducted with Gender, Life Stage Cohort and Sexual Orientation (mostly lesbian/gay, bisexual, mostly heterosexual). The likelihood ratio of this model was $\chi^2(0) = 0$, $p = 1$, and the analysis indicated that a second-order effect was significant, $\chi^2(8) = 84.45$, $p < .001$, but the highest-order interaction of Life Stage Cohort \times Gender \times Sexual Orientation was not significant. To further decompose this finding, follow-up Pearson chi-square tests were conducted on the second-order effects of interest (i.e., Gender \times Sexual Orientation, Life Stage Cohort \times Sexual Orientation). These tests revealed that Gender had a small association with Sexual Orientation, $\chi^2(2) = 14.47$, $p < .01$, $V = .16$; a greater proportion of men than women identified their orientation as mostly lesbian/gay (men = 14%, women = 7%) and mostly heterosexual (men = 18%, women = 11%), whereas a greater proportion of women than men identified as bisexual (men = 68%, women = 82%). Life Stage Cohort was not related significantly to Sexual Orientation. Thus, Gender but not Life Stage Cohort was associated with self-identified Sexual Orientation, with a greater proportion of women than men describing their sexual orientation as bisexual.

OUTNESS

An ANOVA was conducted in which Life Stage Cohort, Gender, and their interaction were examined with level of outness as the dependent variable. There was a small main effect of Gender, $F(1, 570) = 22.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$, which was qualified by a small Gender \times Life Stage Cohort interaction, $F(2, 570) = 8.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$; however, there was no significant main effect for Life Stage Cohort. Pairwise comparisons to interpret the significant Gender \times Life Stage Cohort interaction effect indicated that emerging adult women ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.10$) reported lower levels of outness than women in early adulthood ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.44$, $t[570] = -2.88$, $p < .01$) and women in middle adulthood ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.38$, $t[570] = -4.13$, $p < .001$); the latter two cohorts also differed significantly, $t(570) = -2.20$, $p < .05$. Men's level of outness did not differ significantly across emerging adulthood ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.32$), early adulthood ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.52$) and middle adulthood ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.43$). Women also reported greater outness than men in early (women: $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.43$; men: $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.52$; $t[570] = 2.94$, $p < .01$), and middle (women: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.38$; men: $M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.43$; $t[570] = 5.27$, $p < .001$) adult cohorts, but women's and men's outness did not differ significantly in emerging adulthood (see Figure 1). Thus, emerging adult women in this sample reported lower outness than did women in early and middle adult cohorts, whereas men across life stage cohorts reported similar levels of outness.

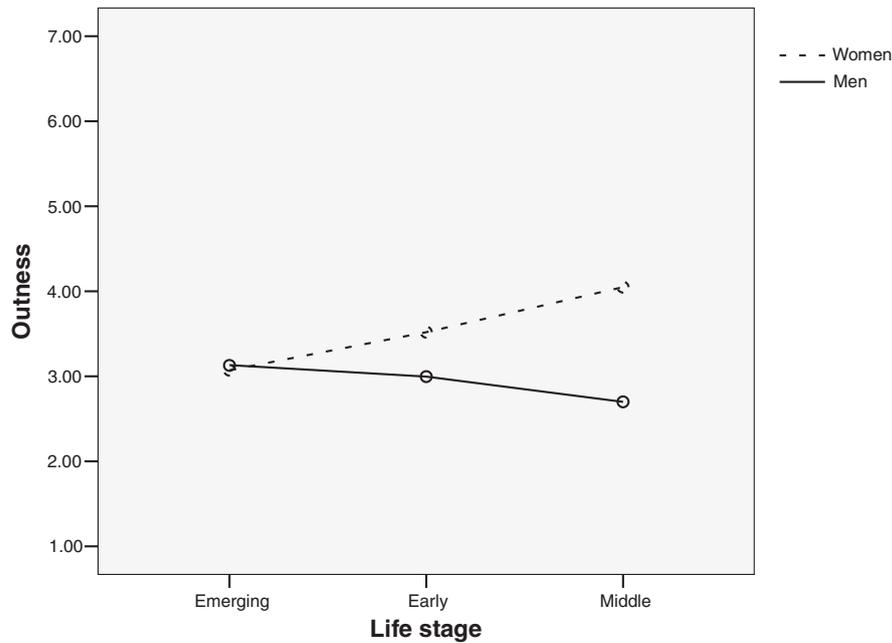


FIGURE 1 Outness interaction effect.

Relational Identity Variables

RELATIONSHIP STATUS

A three-way log-linear analysis was conducted with Gender, Life Stage Cohort, and Relationship Status (single, casually dating, long-term dating, married/partnered). The likelihood ratio of this model was $\chi^2(0) = 0, p = 1$, and the analysis indicated that a second-order effect was significant, $\chi^2 [11] = 202.81, p < .001$, but the highest-order interaction of Life Stage Cohort \times Gender \times Relationship Status was not significant. To further decompose this finding, follow-up Pearson chi-square tests were conducted on the second-order effects of interest (i.e., Gender \times Relationship Status, Life Stage Cohort \times Relationship Status). These tests indicated that there was a medium association between Life Stage Cohort and Relationship Status, $\chi^2(6) = 114.78, p < .001, V = .32$, with a pattern of increasing relationship commitment across the life stage cohorts such that most emerging adults were single or casually dating whereas most early and middle adults were married/partnered (see Table 2). There was also a small association between Gender and Relationship Status, $\chi^2(3) = 22.23, p < .001, V = .20$. Specifically, among women, 28% were single, 12% were casually dating, 27% were in a long-term relationship and 33% were married/partnered; among men, 29% were single, 9% were casually dating, 14% were in a long-term relationship and 49% were married/partnered. Thus, a higher proportion of women than men described

themselves to be in long-term relationships whereas a higher proportion of men than women described themselves as married/partnered, and there was a pattern of increasing relationship commitment across life stage cohorts.

IDENTIFICATION AS POLYAMOROUS

A three-way log-linear analysis was conducted with Gender, Life Stage Cohort, and identification as Polyamorous (yes or no). The likelihood ratio of this model was $\chi^2(0) = 0$, $p = 1$, and the analysis indicated that a second-order effect was significant, $\chi^2(5) = 102.37$, $p < .001$. To further decompose this finding, follow-up Pearson chi-square tests were conducted on the second-order effects of interest (i.e., Gender \times Polyamory, Life Stage Cohort \times Polyamory). Follow-up Pearson chi-square tests indicated no significant association between Gender and Polyamory, but there was a medium association between Life Stage Cohort and Polyamory, $\chi^2(2) = 35.17$, $p < .001$, $V = .25$. As indicated in Table 2, there was a pattern of increasing identification as polyamorous across emerging, early and middle adult cohorts.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ATTRACTION

To examine same- and other-sex attractions by participant gender and life stage cohort, MANOVAs were conducted because same-sex physical and emotional attraction were correlated ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) and other-sex physical and emotional attraction were correlated ($r = .45$, $p < .001$).

Same-sex attraction. In the first MANOVA, Life Stage Cohort, Gender, and their interaction were examined with same-sex physical and emotional attraction as the dependent variables. Results from the overall MANOVA indicated that the Gender, $F(2, 569) = 28.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, and Gender \times Life Stage Cohort interaction, $F(4, 1140) = 3.25$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, effects were significant, but the main effect of Life Stage Cohort was not.¹ Follow-up univariate analyses for same-sex physical attraction yielded a significant Gender main effect, $F(1, 570) = 14.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$, but no significant interaction effect; women reported higher levels of same-sex physical attraction than men (women: $M = 4.26$, $SD = .84$; men: $M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.06$). For same-sex emotional attraction, the Gender main effect, $F(1, 570) = 55.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, and the Gender \times Life Stage Cohort interaction effects, $F(2, 570) = 4.08$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, were significant. Pairwise comparisons were used to interpret the significant Gender \times Life Stage Cohort interaction effect for same-sex emotional attraction indicated that among men, those in the emerging adult cohort ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.28$) reported higher same-sex emotional attraction than did those in the middle adult cohort, $M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.18$, $t(570) = 2.37$, $p < .05$; the early adult cohort ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.21$) did not differ from the two other cohorts. Among women, level

of same-sex emotional attraction did not differ significantly across emerging adulthood ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.01$), early adulthood ($M = 4.13, SD = .95$) and middle adulthood ($M = 4.41, SD = .84$). Women also reported significantly greater same-sex attraction than men in emerging (women: $M = 4.11, SD = 1.01$; men: $M = 3.69, SD = 1.28$; $t[570] = 2.35, p < .05$), early (women: $M = 4.13, SD = .95$; men: $M = 3.46, SD = 1.21$; $t[570] = 4.79, p < .001$), and middle (women: $M = 4.42, SD = .84$; men: $M = 3.24, SD = 1.18$; $t[570] = 5.79, p < .001$) adult cohorts. Thus, women generally reported greater same-sex physical and emotional attraction than men. Furthermore, the youngest cohort of men reported greater same-sex emotional attraction than did the oldest cohort of men, whereas women across life stage cohorts reported similar levels of same-sex emotional attraction (see Figure 2).

Other-sex attraction. A second MANOVA was conducted in which Life Stage Cohort, Gender, and their interaction were examined with other-sex physical and emotional attraction as dependent variables. Results from the overall MANOVA indicated that the Gender, $F(2, 569) = 4.70, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$, and Life Stage Cohort, $F(4, 1138) = 2.80, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$, main effects were significant, but their interaction was not. Follow-up univariate analyses for other-sex physical attraction indicated that the Life Stage Cohort main effect was not significant, but there was a significant Gender effect, $F(1, 570) = 4.02, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$; men reported greater other-sex physical attraction than women (men: $M = 4.02, SD = .98$; women: $M = 3.85,$

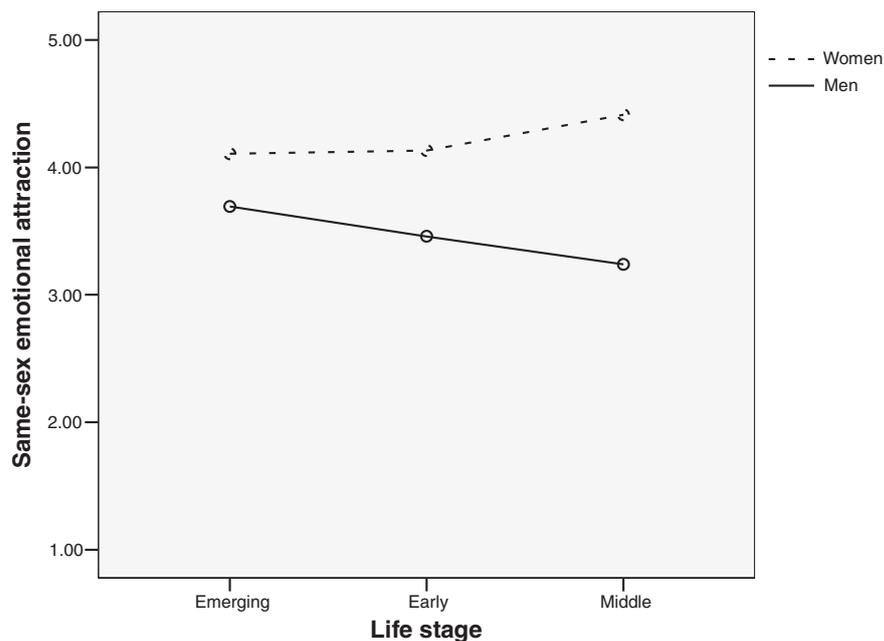


FIGURE 2 Interaction effect for same-sex emotional attraction.

$SD = 1.05$). For other-sex emotional attraction, the Gender, $F(1, 570) = 8.85$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and Life Stage Cohort, $F(2, 570) = 3.06$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, main effects both were significant. Men reported greater other-sex emotional attraction than women (men: $M = 4.04$, $SD = .99$; women: $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.09$). Furthermore, pairwise comparisons indicated that relative to the early adult cohort ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.12$), level of other-sex emotional attraction was higher in the emerging adult cohort ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .99$, $t[570] = 2.66$, $p < .01$) and in the middle adult cohort ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.02$, $t[570] = 2.20$, $p < .05$). Thus, other-sex emotional attraction was higher in the emerging and middle adult cohorts than in the early adult cohort. Moreover, men generally reported greater other-sex physical and emotional attraction than women.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

An ANOVA was conducted in which Life Stage Cohort, Gender, and their interaction were examined with sexual behavior as the dependent variable (where 1 = *sex with my gender only* to 5 = *sex with other gender only*; participants who reported that they had never had sex were excluded from these analyses). Gender had a small significant main effect, $F(1, 525) = 9.93$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with women ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.01$) reporting more other-gender sexual behavior than men ($M = 3.24$, $SD = .96$); but Life Stage Cohort and the Gender \times Life Stage Cohort interaction effects were not significant.

Community Identity Variables

A MANOVA was conducted to examine involvement in sexual minority and bisexual communities ($r = .53$, $p < .001$) by Life Stage Cohort, Gender, and their interaction. Results from the overall MANOVA indicated that the Gender, $F(2, 564) = 9.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, and Life Stage Cohort, $F(4, 1130) = 4.94$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$, main effects were significant, but their interaction was not.²

Follow-up univariate analyses for sexual minority community involvement indicated small but significant main effects for Gender, $F(1, 565) = 19.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, and Life Stage Cohort, $F(2, 565) = 3.20$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Women ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.16$) were more involved with sexual minority communities than were men ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.09$). Furthermore, the overall Life Stage Cohort effect was significant, but the pairwise comparisons did not yield specific significant differences among life stage cohorts. Follow-up univariate analyses yielded similar results for bisexual community involvement, such that small but significant main effects emerged for Gender, $F(1, 565) = 8.09$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$, and Life Stage Cohort, $F(2, 565) = 10.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Women ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.07$) were more involved

with the bisexual community than men ($M = 1.82$, $SD = .88$). Furthermore, pairwise comparisons indicated that emerging adults ($M = 1.71$, $SD = .86$) were less involved in the bisexual community than early adults ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.04$, $t[565] = -2.12$, $p < .05$) and middle adults ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.06$, $t[565] = -3.86$, $p < .001$); the latter two cohorts also differed significantly from each other, $t(565) = -2.13$, $p < .05$. Thus, women reported more involvement in sexual minority and bisexual communities than men, and there was an overall pattern of increasing involvement in bisexual communities from the youngest to the oldest cohort.

DISCUSSION

The current study offers exploratory comparisons of personal, relational and community aspects of bisexual identity for women and men in emerging adulthood relative to those in early and middle adult cohorts. Overall, the pattern of findings for some aspects of bisexual identity was consistent with the general developmental perspective that characterizes emerging adulthood as a period of identity exploration and low commitment and posits increasing identity commitment across early and middle adulthood. For other aspects of bisexual identity, gender appeared to play a role, either on its own or in conjunction with life stage cohort. Thus, the data offered a picture of developmentally consistent life stage cohort differences on some aspects of bisexual identity and gender variability on most aspects of bisexual identity.

Developmentally consistent life stage cohort differences emerged for relationship commitment and community connection, which we conceptualized as relational and community aspects of bisexual identity, respectively. Specifically, there was a pattern of increasing relationship commitment across life stage cohorts, with a greater proportion of the youngest cohort describing themselves as single versus married/partnered and a greater proportion of the two older cohorts describing themselves as married/partnered versus single. This pattern may be associated with the parallel finding of increasing identification as polyamorous across the three cohorts. Specifically, a smaller proportion of emerging adults compared to the early and middle adult cohorts identified as polyamorous. This pattern may reflect the notion that *polyamory* implies relationship commitment (although to more than one person; e.g., Barker, 2005) which is less characteristic for emerging adults, the majority of whom were single or dating casually. Thus, the lower proportion of emerging adults in married/partnered relationships and in polyamorous relationships may be consistent with the developmental perspective that emerging adulthood is a period of relationship and relational identity exploration, with a pattern of increasing commitment in early and middle adult life stages (Arnett, 2000; Levinson, 1986; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & Mckee, 1976; Ornstein, Cron, & Slocum, 1989).

Also consistent with the developmental perspective were findings regarding community identity. Specifically, there was a pattern of increasing involvement in sexual minority and bisexual communities from the youngest to the oldest cohorts. For sexual minority community connection, the specific life stage cohort comparisons did not reach significance, although the overall pattern was significant. For bisexual community involvement, emerging adults reported significantly lower involvement, followed by early and middle adult cohorts. Thus, the overall pattern of findings for community identity was consistent with the developmental perspective of movement from self-focused identity and goal orientation in emerging adulthood to more other orientation in later life stages (Levinson, 1986; Nelson & Barry, 2005; Ornstein et al., 1989; Super, 1980).

In addition to these developmentally consistent life stage cohort patterns for relationship commitment and community connection, gender played a role—alone, in conjunction, or in interaction with life stage cohort—in most of the identity variables examined in the current study (all but polyamory). Specifically, with regard to personal aspects of bisexual identity, the data suggested similarities across life stage cohorts in self-identified sexual orientation, but women were more likely than men to describe their orientation as bisexual. As theorized by many sexuality scholars, there may be societal expectations for men to fall cleanly into a gay or straight orientation whereas women's sexuality is afforded more flexibility (e.g., Baumeister, 2000; Burlinson, 2005; Diamond, 2000). Some men may also be wary of describing their orientation as bisexual due to negative societal associations of male bisexuality with the spread of AIDS (Eliason, 2001). Thus, women may be more comfortable than men in describing their orientation as bisexual. Indeed, longitudinal data point to the stability of self-identified bisexual orientation in women (Diamond, 2008).

For level of outness (conceptualized as external expression of personal identity), a gender by life stage cohort interaction yielded a developmentally consistent pattern for women such that women in the emerging adult cohort reported the lowest level of outness, followed by women in early and middle adult cohorts. By contrast, for men, level of outness was similar across life stage cohorts. This pattern contrasts with speculation that bisexual adults in older life stage cohorts would be more closeted than younger bisexual adults due to changing social contexts and visibility of bisexuality over time (Kepel, 2006). One possible reason for emerging adult women being 'less out' than women in older cohorts is that bisexual women of older cohorts may experience less dismissal of their bisexual orientation as 'just a phase' if they have identified as such for many years. Furthermore, popular caricatures of young bisexual women as immature, attention seeking and hypersexual might be particularly salient for the emerging adult cohort (Ault, 1996). Indeed, young bisexual women are frequently objectified in the media as promiscuous and emotionally unstable (e.g., the reality show *A Shot at Love*

with *Tila Tequila*, Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*). Emerging adult bisexual women may avoid coming out to deidentify with these negative societal stereotypes (Ault, 1996; O'Connor, 1997). Admittedly, popular depictions of bisexual women of older cohorts and bisexual men in general are nearly nonexistent, but the explicitly negative depictions of young bisexual women may seem less salient for these other groups.

There were also some gender differences in the relational aspects of identity examined in the current study. Women and men did not differ in identification as polyamorous, but a higher proportion of women than men described themselves as dating long term whereas a higher proportion of men than women described themselves as married/partnered. However, this finding should be interpreted with the caution that the distinction between dating long term and married/partnered may have been ambiguous for some participants. For instance, some participants may have interpreted *married/partnered* to imply legal status, which is restricted to very few locations in the United States. Thus, in future research, it might be useful to specify whether researchers are interested in legal or personally defined commitment status. We were interested in the latter in light of the restricted access to legal commitment for same-sex couples.

Some interesting gender variability also emerged in same-sex and other-sex attraction, and some of these effects were accompanied by Life Stage Cohort main effects or interactions. Women reported greater same-sex physical and emotional attraction than men whereas men reported greater other-sex physical and emotional attraction than women. Thus, there was an overall pattern of women and men reporting more physical and emotional attraction toward women. This pattern may reflect actual differences in women and men's attraction. Indeed, in a sample of undergraduate students, Lipka and Arad (1997) found that men's reports of same- and other attraction were negatively correlated whereas women's reports were uncorrelated. This unidimensionality versus bidimensionality in men and women's same and other-sex attraction may reflect differences in private and public acknowledgement of these attractions which could be shaped by differential societal tolerance of same-sex attraction and intimacy between women and between men (Baumeister, 2000). Specifically, there might be some societal leniency toward women's same-sex attraction and even fetishizing of sexuality between young and feminine women. By contrast, expression of same-sex attraction between men conflicts with traditional masculinity norms of restricted emotionality and heterosexual self-presentation (Burlison, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003; Parent & Moradi, 2009). Moreover, a man's declaration of intimate attractions (physical or emotional) to other men often sparks assumptions that he is gay, such that, bisexual identity is frequently either ignored or denied for men (Brown, 2002; Burlison, 2005).

In addition, in terms of sexual behavior, the sample's average was near the midpoint of the response continuum, suggesting that participants had

had sex with both genders equally, but women's responses were significantly closer to the *other gender mostly* anchor than were men's responses. This finding is consistent with Burleson's (2005) finding that bisexual men reported more same-gender sexual behavior than bisexual women. Such a pattern might be surprising given the present finding that women reported greater levels of same-sex physical and emotional attraction than men. However, personal definitions of *sex* seem important to consider in reconciling these two patterns. Based on prior literature that sexual minority women's sexuality includes a broad range of behaviors (e.g., Fassinger & Arseneau, 2008; Moradi et al., 2009; Rose, 2000), we did not specify a definition of *sex* and were interested in participants' personally defined sexual behavior. However, sexuality research and popular conceptualization of sex tend to construe penile intercourse as its defining feature (e.g., see Moradi et al., 2009; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Thus, it is possible that women and men in the current study were more likely to view intercourse with men (rather than sexual behaviors with women) as sex. This possibility may underlie women's higher reports of other-gender sexual behavior than men despite their higher reports of same-sex emotional and physical attraction than men.

In addition to these gender effects, levels of same- and other-sex physical attraction were similar across life stage cohorts in the sample. But, some life stage cohort differences emerged in same- and other-sex emotional attraction. Specifically, there was a pattern of dipping other-sex emotional attraction in the early adult cohort relative to the emerging and middle adult cohorts. Furthermore, among women, level of same-sex emotional attraction was similar across life stage cohorts; however, among men the youngest cohort reported greater same-sex emotional attraction than did the oldest cohort. These life stage cohort differences in same- and other-sex emotional attraction suggest the need for longitudinal research to explore potential underlying developmental processes. Furthermore, the distinctive patterns of life stage cohort findings for physical and emotional attraction are consistent with the need to conceptualize and assess these dimensions of attraction separately in future research (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Worthington & Navarro, 2003).

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of the current study must be interpreted in light of a number of limitations and directions for future research. We have noted some limitations and directions for future exploration throughout the discussion; however, some of these issues warrant further consideration. As noted previously (e.g., Moradi et al., 2009; Mustanski, 2001; Riggle et al., 2005), Internet recruitment offers a number of advantages in research with sexual minority populations (e.g., access to large numbers of potential participants, reducing oversaturation of local venues, facilitating participation of individuals who

are not comfortable “coming out” to researchers in-person), but Internet samples limit participation to individuals who have computer and Internet access. Thus, findings of Internet samples may not be generalizable to broader populations.

Relatedly, most of the current study’s participants were college educated and identified as middle class and White. Thus, the current findings must be interpreted with caution when considering their applicability to populations outside of these generalizability limits. Cultural variability in conceptualizations of sexual orientation and bisexuality are important to consider, and research is needed to evaluate the replicability of the current findings with racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse populations. Such efforts can also inform future research and theory about bisexuality and its intersections with other sociodemographic identities. To this end, consistent assessment of sexual orientation, including bisexuality, in large-scale population studies can offer descriptive information about demographic diversity in the broader bisexual population.

Moreover, it is important to consider potential measurement issues in bisexuality research in general and in the current study. As noted previously, personal definitions of *relationship status* (e.g., dating long term, married/partnered) and *sexual behavior* vary. When personally defined constructs are of interest, assessments such as those used in the current study might be appropriate. But, in cases where predetermined conceptualizations of constructs are of interest (e.g., legal marriage or civil union, specific sexual behaviors), then more specific assessments are necessary to capture the dimensions of interest. Similarly, bisexual individuals’ reasons for community involvement may vary and include social (e.g., dating) and political (e.g., civil right activism) motivations (Stearns & Sabini, 1997). This distinction between social and political aspects of community involvement may be useful to explore in future research. Given that many of the variables of interest in the current study were basic personal descriptors (e.g., age, gender, relationship status), we used single face valid items to assess these participant characteristics. However, the use of single items with limited prior psychometric evaluation is a limitation to consider in interpreting results involving some of the more complex variables, such as community involvement.

Another measurement issue is that many instruments designed for use in sexual minority research did not originate in bisexual populations’ experiences. For instance, the Outness Inventory is a frequently used measure in sexual minority research and contains items that ask about the respondent’s “sexual orientation status.” This terminology is intended to be inclusive of bisexual individuals but may unintentionally collapse outness as sexual minority in general (i.e., not heterosexual) with outness as bisexual in particular (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Thus, exploration of patterns of relations involving outness about one’s sexual minority status in general versus outness as bisexual in particular seems important. Although this may

be less of a concern in the current study given that the entire survey focused on bisexuality, this distinction may be important to consider in studies that sample the broader sexual minority population. We underscore the need for further conceptual and empirical advancements in measurement of key constructs with bisexual populations.

The current data also point to interesting directions for future research on bisexual women and men's experiences of marginalization and inclusion in sexual minority communities. Overall, the data suggested a pattern that relative to men, women were more likely to describe their sexual orientation as bisexual, were more out and were more involved in sexual minority and bisexual communities. Further research is needed to explore underlying reasons for these patterns. It is possible that these gender differences reflect greater social acceptance of bisexuality in women than in men (Eliason, 2001). These differences may also reflect the distinctive manifestations of stigma to which bisexual women and men are exposed (e.g., bisexual men perceived as gay but in denial, stigmatized as AIDS/HIV vectors; bisexual women perceived as colluders with patriarchal subjugation of women; Brown, 2002; Burlinson, 2005; Dodge et al., 2008). Although the current study provides some information about personal, relational and community aspects of bisexual identity in women and men across life stage cohorts, more research is clearly needed to elucidate bisexual women and men's experiences and the social contexts that shape these experiences.

NOTES

1. Pillai's Criterion was used as a more conservative F-approximation because Box's M was significant (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006).
2. Pillai's Criterion was used as a more conservative F-approximation because Box's M was significant (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006).

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