

**RESEARCH  
PERSPECTIVES  
ON BISEXUAL  
WOMEN'S  
FRIENDSHIPS**

**Young Women's Sexual  
Experiences Within  
Same-Sex Friendships:  
Discovering  
and Defining Bisexual  
and Bi-Curious Identity**

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**SUMMARY.** Though not frequently studied for their role in sexual orientation identity development, sexual experiences within same-sex friendships may offer an opportunity for bisexual and bi-curious women to explore and define their sexual orientation. This study examined sexual self-defining memories and narratives about sexual orientation development in bisexual and bi-curious young women. Participants were 48 female college students of various ethnic backgrounds. They were selected for the study based on their primary sexual orientation identification and because they included a sexual experience with a same-sex friend as their event narrative. The event narratives were classified based on age (childhood versus adolescence) and type of same-sex friend sexual experience (sexual attraction versus sexual behavior). Themes of discovery, closeness, conflict, and defining identity emerged. Findings suggest that sexual experiences with same-sex friends can serve an important role in the emergence and definition of bisexual and bi-curious identity. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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We all slept over at my house one night. Eating pizza, watching movies, etc. Katie had just gotten her tongue pierced. We were all sitting around talking about what it would be like to kiss someone with a tongue ring. However it came up, Katie agreed to kiss everyone so they would know. But that wouldn't be fair because then Katie kissed four girls and we all kissed one. We all ended up kissing each other. Every slumber party we had after that turned into something sexual. Swimming naked, kissing, rubbing, etc. Those were my first experiences with other women. The experiences were soft, enjoyable, comfortable and intimate. *Captioned:* "Slumber parties with my four best girl friends." (20-year-old Caucasian woman, Ashley)

Exploring and constructing one's sexual identity is a fundamental developmental task throughout adolescence and young adulthood that informs later management of physical and emotional intimacy in rela-

tionships with others (Arnett, 2000; Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Erikson, 1968). For adolescents and young adults in general, this time can be characterized by recognizing one's sexual attractions, acting on these attractions, and beginning to develop a sexual identity. For sexual minorities specifically, this frequently involves the discovery of attraction to and initial sexual experiences with the same-sex (Rust, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1995).

For sexual minorities, the discovery of same-sex feelings can cause confusion because heterosexuality is institutionalized and imposed from an early age (Rich, 1980). Because heterosexuality is the "norm," coming to identify as a sexual minority can be difficult due to societal disapproval of same-sex sexual behavior. In hopes to alleviate some of this tension, many researchers have turned their attention toward understanding sexual-minority identity development in general, and lesbian and gay male identity development in particular (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). While many studies on sexual-minority identity development attempt to include bisexuals in their sample, the number is usually so small that few, if any, analyses are done with bisexuals alone; instead, they are often combined with gay and lesbian participants despite research highlighting unique aspects of bisexual identity development.

In general, bisexual identity development is considered distinct from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian identity development such that the process is viewed as more dynamic and open-ended (Fox, 1995; Zinik, 1985). Moreover, bisexual identity development in women is especially characterized by flexibility, fluidity, and complexity (Diamond, 2000, 2003; Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005; Rust, 1993). Bower, Gurevich, and Mathieson (2002) found tension in bisexual women between resisting a label of bisexuality, while simultaneously striving, "for credibility in a cultural context in which bisexuality occupies an ambiguous position" (p. 25). Additionally, in discussions with bisexual women about choosing a definition of bisexuality for the self, Berenson (2002) found that her participants preferred to speak about bisexuality using a "continuum narrative," one that eliminates barriers and restrictions, further orienting bisexuality as a fluid and complex identity.

Because of strict notions of dichotomous sexual identity, bisexual identity inhabits a liminal position, from which its mere existence is questioned by "outsiders" (Rust, 2002). As a result, bisexual identity has to be "invented" (Bradford, 2004). Interestingly though, for bisexual women, the boundaries around bisexual identity are not as strictly

policed, restricted, or even well-defined (Berenson, 2002) as other identities (Amestoy, 2001). Likewise, bisexual women have been shown to be very heterogeneous in the expression of their sexual identities (Kinnish et al., 2005; Rust, 2001; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 2001) and to resist a rigid set of rules regarding who gains membership (Berenson, 2002), resulting in a more open and flexible identity category (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). This is especially important as we begin to study the circumstances surrounding *emergent* bisexual identities, where same-sex curiosity and exploration is a likely first step. While there has been a limited, but growing, research body on bisexual identity development, there has been even less research on questioning and unlabeled (non-heterosexual) individuals, and no research to date on people who identify as bi-curious, a potential precursor to adopting a bisexual identity. In this study, we are interested in the various forms of bisexual and bi-curious identities and we are examining them in the context of sexual experiences in same-sex friendships. We chose to consider women in particular because young women are more likely to have bisexual-based identities (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

### **YOUNG WOMEN'S FRIENDSHIPS**

Along with sexual orientation identity development, adolescence and young adulthood is characterized by increasing importance of peer relationships (e.g., Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Research indicates that same-sex friendships make up the majority of adolescents' social networks (Diamond & Dubé, 2002), and that, for women, these relationships are characterized by intimacy and emotional sharing (Camarena, Sarigiana, & Petersen, 1990) and shifting dyads of "best friends" (Griffin, 2000). However, mainstream research on sexuality has privileged cross-sex friendships, ignored the possibilities of same-sex desire between young women, and emphasized fundamental differences between same-sex friendships and romantic relationships (Griffin, 2002).

Casting doubt on the traditional view that same-sex platonic friendships are fundamentally different from heterosexual romantic relationships, Diamond's (2002) study of passionate friendships found that sexual-minority women report emotionally intimate, passionate, and intense friendships that resemble romantic relationships. Additionally, she found that these same-sex friendships frequently included physical intimacy and occasionally included sexual attraction and sexual exploration.

Despite having established that same-sex friendships are increasingly important during adolescence, and preliminary indications that same-sex friendships are the site of emotionally intense and potential sexual/romantic relationships, very little research has examined how bi-curious, bisexual, or even lesbian women use same-sex friendships to explore same-sex attractions and their sexual identities. Therefore, young women's same-sex friendships provide an arena that, if explored, may yield a better understanding of sexual-minority identity development and, in particular, women's bi-curious and bisexual identity development.

Because sexual and romantic attraction and behavior in same-sex friendships has received little attention, it is worthwhile to review research on sexual attraction and exploration in cross-sex friendships with heterosexual adolescents and young adults. Several researchers have investigated sexual attraction and behavior in cross-sex friendships, exploring the prevalence of sexual attraction (Kaplan & Keys, 1997), sexual tension (Monsour, Harris, & Kurzweil, 1994), and sexual or physical contact (Monsour, 1992). In these studies, sexual attraction and physical contact between cross-sex friends was common (Kaplan & Keys), but 20 percent of men and 10 percent of women reported sexual tension within a cross-sex friendship (Monsour et al.). Monsour found that physical contact was viewed by women and sexual contact was viewed by men as expressions of intimacy in cross-sex friendships. Overall, these findings suggest that cross-sex "platonic" friendships can be sites of sexual and romantic attraction as well as physical or sexual intimacy for heterosexual youth. Because sexual attraction and exploration occurs among cross-sex friendships for heterosexual youth, it is likely that adolescents who simultaneously experience same-sex attractions might choose to explore their emerging bi-curious or bisexual identities during adolescence and young adulthood within same-sex friendships.

One study that has specifically reviewed sexual explorations among young women with same-sex attractions found that friendship was a frequent site for sexual and romantic involvement (Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison, 2001). In their online survey study of same-sex attracted Australian youth between 14 and 21 years old, Dempsey et al. found that female participants, in particular, were more likely than male participants to have explored their same-sex attractions with female friends. Having a relationship based on friendship has also been identified as important in lesbian dating and courtship. Rose, Zand, and Cini (1993) discussed a lesbian romance script that depicts emotional intimacy and sexual at-

traction as being intertwined in two women's attraction to each other. Additionally, in a study of lesbian relationship formation, Rose and Zand (2002) found that 74 percent of lesbians reported having been friends with a woman, on at least one occasion, before becoming romantically involved with her.

Examining traditional scripts of feminine sexuality help clarify why female friends offer a likely arena for sexual-minority women in general, and bi-curious and bisexual women in particular, to question and explore their sexual orientation. First, as a result of traditional scripts of femininity and female sexuality (e.g., Fine, 1988), women are likely to internalize expectations of the relational dimensions of their sexual encounters and define attraction as involving components of emotional closeness. For bisexual and bi-curious women, the increasing intimacy of their same-sex friendships during adolescence would provide a desired component of their sexual attraction and romantic relationship scripts. Furthermore, Dempsey et al. (2001) propose that same-sex attracted young women are likely to have initial same-sex sexual experiences within friendships because of the emphasis on emotional and relational aspects of sexuality for women. This apparently made sexual exploration with friends more congruous to their socialized notions of appropriate sexual activity. Thus, the connections between sexuality and emotional closeness for women may lead bisexual and bi-curious women to explore same-sex attractions within close same-sex friendships rather than within other types of relationships.

Sexual attraction and exploration with same-sex friends is not without potential risks and conflicts. Female participants in Dempsey et al.'s (2001) study indicated that sexual involvement with or desire for same-sex friends was emotionally risky, such that a friend's negative reactions or non-reciprocated feelings of attraction may lead to the dissolution of the friendship. Similarly, in studies of attraction in cross-sex friendships, results indicate that when feelings of physical/sexual attraction and romantic attraction are asymmetrical, it can cause tension within the friendship dyad (Reeder, 2000). Other research has shown that, while perhaps interested in a romantic relationship, women are more likely than men to indicate that having sex with a male friend could ruin a friendship (Bell, 1981). Additionally, there are repercussions of becoming romantically involved with a cross-sex friend, such as also ending the friendship when the relationship ends (Rubin, 1985; Werking, 1997). Female participants in Dempsey et al.'s study indicated confusion about what feelings of same-sex attraction and same-sex sexual experiences meant for their romantic and relational futures,

as well as their sexual orientation identity. Thus, both worries about potential conflict with friends and confusion about one's own sexual identity surfaced among female youth who were exploring their same-sex sexual attractions.

Overall, studies of sexual attraction and exploration within cross-sex friendships for heterosexual women and same-sex friendships for sexual-minority women have indicated that sexual attraction and sexual contact can and does occur within friendships. Research has suggested that same-sex friendships can provide an emotionally close relationship within which women may explore their same-sex attractions, but also that this exploration carries both risks of conflict within the friendship and within the individual questioning her sexual orientation for the first time. Despite this potentially central role of friends in initial same-sex sexual exploration, studies of and information about the role of same-sex friendships in women's sexual-minority identity development are lacking (see Diamond, 2002 and Lamb, 2004 for exceptions).

### *PRESENT STUDY*

The goal of the present study was to explore through written narratives the role of sexual experiences with same-sex friends in discovering and defining a bisexual or bi-curious sexual orientation identity for young women. Since peer relationships are increasingly important during adolescence, we anticipated that same-sex friendships would be viable sites of sexual attraction and exploration for bisexual and bi-curious women. Because these first same-sex attractions and experiences with friends are likely not expected by the adolescent, we anticipated that young women would report confusion when reminiscing about these events and that these events would materialize within narratives of sexual orientation development. Also, as same-sex sexual attraction and sexual exploration is considered a preliminary stage in sexual-minority orientation identity development, we anticipated that same-sex sexual experiences with friends would operate as integral episodes in bisexual and bi-curious young women's sexual identity development.

While sexual experiences with same-sex friends have similar implications for lesbian-identified women and certainly occur among heterosexual women, we decided to restrict our study to bisexual or bi-curious women for several reasons. First, there is little to no research attention given to bisexual and/or bi-curious women. Second, bisexual and bi-curious women have been shown to express especially complex and fluid



identities and experiences, with later onset and a shorter duration than lesbians (Rust, 1993). As a result, we anticipate that their stories will be characterized by richer meaning-making, catapulting many into greater (recent or even current) questioning and confusion surrounding their experiences with their friends. We included bi-curious women because developing a sustainable, strict bisexual identity is rare; specifically, same-sex attraction and behaviors among women do not always result in assuming a bisexual identity (Rust, 2002).

To better understand the role of sexual attraction and exploration within young women's same-sex friendships, this study examined sexual self-defining memories and narratives about sexual orientation development by bisexual and bi-curious women that discussed a sexual attraction to or sexual experience with a same-sex friend. Self-defining memories are highly significant personal memories that evoke strong emotions, are vivid, and can act as a representative or central memory in a set of related memories (Blagov & Singer, 2004). These memories typically revolve around concerns and conflicts that are personally important. Self-defining memories are useful in the study of identity, as they are organized into life stories, which are narratives of self that integrate important memories and provide for the sense of a unique self by giving meaning, unity, and purpose to one's personal past, perceived present, and anticipated future (McAdams, 2001). The use of self-defining memories and narratives for inquiries of sexual identity are particularly useful because of their ability to capture the complex and dynamic nature of sexual identity.

## **METHOD**

### ***Preliminary Coding***

The initial sample of participants who completed the survey consisted of 417 undergraduate college students. Participants were first excluded based on gender (159 men) and then sexual orientation (163 women primarily identified as "exclusively straight/heterosexual" or "exclusively gay/lesbian/homosexual"). This yielded a sample of 95 bisexual or bi-curious women.

Participants were further excluded based on the content of their self-defining memories and responses to two open-ended questions about sexual orientation development. Fifteen percent ( $n = 14$ ) of the overall sample of bisexual and bi-curious women reported a sexual ex-

perience with a same-sex friend as a sexual self-defining memory and an additional 36 percent ( $n = 34$ ) reported a sexual experience with a female friend when specifically asked about sexual orientation development. Twelve of the 14 women who reported a sexual self-defining memory about a same-sex friend additionally reported on the same or on a different friendship experience in their sexual orientation response. Overall, 50 percent ( $n = 48$ ) of the initial sample of 95 bisexual and bi-curious women reported that one or more sexual experiences with a female friend helped with their sexual self-definition or at least was important in their sexual orientation development. Thus, 47 women who did not write about sexual experiences with same-sex friends were excluded.

### *Final Sample*

The final sample consisted of 48 bisexual or bi-curious women whose sexual self-defining memory or sexual orientation response included content about a sexual experience with a same-sex friend. As with many college samples, participants were mostly young (age ranged from 18 to 22;  $M = 19$ ) and mostly White. Twelve participants were first-year students, twenty-one sophomores, seven juniors, and eight seniors. Participants' racial backgrounds included White/Caucasian ( $n = 34$ ), Asian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 8$ ), Mexican-American/Latina ( $n = 4$ ), and Bi-racial ( $n = 2$ ).

For their primary sexual orientation identity, 7 women indicated "bisexual," 2 indicated "curious," 5 indicated "questioning," 25 indicated "mostly straight/heterosexual with some bisexual tendencies," 5 indicated "I prefer not to label myself," and 4 marked "other." All of the 9 participants who chose "I prefer not to label myself" or "other" on this item also indicated identifying as "bisexual" and/or "curious" when able to list multiple sexual orientation identities.

### *Procedure*

All participants were college students enrolled in a lower division psychology course at a public university in northern California, and participated to fulfill a course requirement. Participants were given information about the survey and chose to participate in this study through an online educational experiment system. The title of the study was, "Sexual Identity Study" and participants were instructed to complete the survey via a secure, online survey website (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>).

The procedure, including consent, debriefing, and credit allocation, took place entirely online. After giving consent, participants completed a demographics section and then reported on one open-ended sexual self-defining memory. The participants next completed two open-ended questions about sexual orientation development. Following these questions, participants completed several additional measures of sexual attitudes and experiences not analyzed here. The entire questionnaire took approximately 90 minutes to complete.

### *Measures*

*Sexual Self-Defining Memory.* The sexual self-defining memory questions were prefaced with a description of the features of a self-defining memory. Participants were asked to "think of a self-defining memory that has helped define you as a sexual person." A sexual self-defining memory was described as a memory that was vivid, highly memorable, personally important, and at least one year old. These instructions were originally adapted from Singer and Moffit (1991-1992, pg. 242) and based on the prompt used by Thorne and McLean (2002). Participants were asked to provide a caption for the event and to report their age at the time and who was involved in the event. They were then asked to describe the memory "with enough detail as if to help an imagined friend see and feel as you did," including where they were, whom they were with, what happened, how they and others reacted. They were then asked "what does this memory mean to you now?" For the Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire, see Appendix.

*Sexual Orientation Development.* The second set of narrative responses came from two questions specifically about sexual orientation that the participant answered directly following the sexual self-defining memory. The first question asked, "Have you thought much about and/or questioned your sexual orientation? If yes, when do you first remember thinking about your sexual orientation? If no, why do you think you have never thought about this?" The second question asked, "What has been important in developing your sexual orientation? Please be as specific as possible." Participants were provided with unlimited text space to answer these questions.

### *Analysis*

We used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Charmaz, 1983). This methodology stresses the inductive development of analytic

categories; thus, the analysis involved reading these selections closely for emergent themes. This method of analysis was chosen because it optimizes the use of qualitative data through thematic analysis while also attending to the meaning participants give to their own experiences. Additionally, during the process of theme identification and interpretation, we were aware of both the context within which the narratives were given (online with a course credit incentive) and the influence of the thoughts and feelings we bring to the text (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Therefore, we recognize the impact of broad and specific research contexts on the participants, and understand that choices surrounding inclusion of information and interpretation of this information is influenced by our own subjectivity as psychological researchers. Both authors coded event narratives; discrepant narratives were discussed to reach a consensus. Excerpts were selected for presentation as representative illustrations of the thematic patterns we observed across the event narratives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Age and Event Type*

Preliminary analyses classified the event narratives about sexual experiences with same-sex friends on two main axes, age and event type. The first axis of classification was age at the time of the event. Events reported within the narratives occurred either during childhood (event occurred before the age of 12) or adolescence (event occurred when the participant was 12-20 years old). While participants were not directly asked to report age at the time of event in their responses to the sexual orientation development questions, all participants indicated either their age or their grade in school at the time of the event within their event narrative. The second classification axis was the type of sexual event reported; event narratives involved either sexual attraction to or sexual behavior with a same-sex friend. When both sexual attraction and behavior were reported in the event narrative, the event was placed in the sexual behavior category ( $n = 2$ ). The number of event narratives that fell within each of the four possible classification groups are as follows: childhood/sexual attraction ( $n = 1$ ), childhood/sexual behavior ( $n = 9$ ), adolescence/sexual attraction ( $n = 19$ ), and adolescence/sexual behavior ( $n = 19$ ).

Reported events were more likely to have occurred during adolescence than childhood,  $\chi^2(1) = 18.75, N = 48, p < .001$ . Event narratives about sexual behavior were more common than narratives about sexual attraction during childhood,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.40, N = 10, p = .01$ ; events that occurred during adolescence were equally likely to be about sexual attraction and sexual behavior ( $p > .05$ ). Event narratives about sexual attraction were more likely to have occurred during adolescence than childhood,  $\chi^2(1) = 16.20, N = 20, p < .001$ ; event narratives about sexual behavior were equally likely to have occurred during childhood as during adolescence ( $p > .05$ ).

### *Event Narratives: Emergent Themes*

Using a grounded theory approach, the event narratives were analyzed for prominent themes. Following is a discussion of the four themes that emerged: discovery, closeness, conflict, and defining identity. Table 1 presents the number of event narratives within each of the four theme categories separated by classification group. Themes were coded as present/not present and were not mutually exclusive, such that one event narrative could have all four themes present. All event narratives had at least one of the four themes present.

*Discovery.* Discovery refers to the realization of sexual attraction and sexual desire for a same-sex friend; this was the most common theme

TABLE 1. Number of Event Narratives in Each Theme Category Separated by Classification Group (N = 48)

Theme category	Classification group			
	Childhood		Adolescence	
	Attraction	Behavior	Attraction	Behavior
Discovery	1	4	18	15
Closeness	0	3	9	9
Conflict	0	0	8	2
Defining identity				
Identity confusion	1	5	6	7
Identity solidification	0	0	3	6

*Note.* Theme categories are not mutually exclusive; event narratives can appear in multiple categories. All event narratives contained at least one theme. Classification groups are mutually exclusive; an event narrative can only appear in one classification group.

across event narratives, particularly in adolescence. As seen in Table 1, the theme of discovery was present in event narratives that took place both in childhood and adolescence and involved attraction and sexual behavior. The following examples illustrate the kinds of narratives that characterized the theme of discovery. The first event narrative emphasized discovery of sexual attraction for a same-sex friend. The event was reported by a 19-year-old Mexican-American woman whom we will call Anna, who identified as bisexual. The event reportedly happened at age 10 with her "best friend Mandy":

We were out playing in the field during our lunch break when Mandy and I decided to talk about our latest crushes. She went on about a boy name Brad and how he was really cute and I said I had to agree. We played in the field while we thought about what we looked for in a friend and in a boyfriend and I realized that I really liked the idea of having Mandy as my boyfriend. At first the thought of it was a bit scary. "My girlfriend like my boyfriend." She had everything that I wanted a great smile and a really good friend and more of all I really loved her. I never told her what crossed my mind, but I really wanted to see what it would be like to have a relationship with a girl and not a boy.

The next event narrative example emphasized discovery of sexual desire with a same-sex friend that was not enacted, but described as "the first moment I knew I was attracted to women." This event was reported by a 19-year-old White woman, Debbie, who also identified as bisexual. The event reportedly happened at age 13 with her "girlfriends":

My girlfriends and I often make jokes about hitting on each other. I pull my friend into the closet and fake like I'm going to kiss her—the thing you do where you put your hands over the other person's lips so that from far off it looks real. As I lean in I realize that I really, really, want to drop my hands and kiss her for real. I don't. I don't tell her that I wanted to kiss her either, but I do tell my friends that I'm bisexual that very day.

The following event narrative also emphasized discovery of sexual desire with a same-sex friend, but this time it was enacted upon. This event came from an 18-year-old Latina woman, Marisol, who identified as mostly straight/heterosexual with some bisexual tendencies:

I had never thought about another girl in a sexual way since I had only had sex with my boyfriend and very much enjoyed it. But this changed by the end of my junior year in high school. One time I went to a party and I was dared to kiss one of my really close friends. We both agreed. At first I didn't feel anything, but then I started to like it . . . she later confessed she liked it as well. Then we began to go out more often and we felt very comfortable with each other and whenever we were asked to kiss we would happily accept without hesitation. By the time I was a senior I considered myself bi-curious, but never told anyone but my friend.

As these three event narrative examples suggest, participants are reporting it was with their female friend(s) that they discovered feelings of same-sex sexual attraction and desire. While models of bisexual identity development (e.g., Brown, 2002) have acknowledged that discovery or recognition of same-sex attraction and initial same-sex experiences are typical aspects of the emergence of a bisexual identity, that this discovery may occur with friends is less well-documented. The emergence of a theme of discovery for sexual attraction and sexual desire emphasizes the possibility that realization of one's bisexuality or bi-curiosity could occur with a same-sex friend. Additionally, as seen in both Anna and Debbie's narratives, framing of this discovery as a "realization" was similar to Epstein and Johnson's (1998) findings through interviews with adult lesbians who spoke of "realization" of lesbianism, rather than "becoming" a lesbian. Here, bisexual and bi-curious participants credited interactions with their same-sex friends for this realization.

*Closeness.* Closeness materialized as both a precursor to and as a result of a sexual encounter with a female friend and was generally discussed in conjunction with feeling "comfort" from or "comfortable" with this friend. Ashley's narrative at the beginning of this article nicely encapsulates the theme of closeness in describing her sexual experiences with female friends as slumber parties as, "soft, enjoyable, comfortable and intimate." As seen in Table 1, closeness emerged in more adolescent event narratives, though it was also found in three of the ten childhood narratives. The following examples illustrate the kinds of narratives that characterized the theme of closeness. In the following event narrative, the participant emphasized closeness in her discussion of a romantic relationship with a friend she "fell in love with." The event was reported by a 19-year-old White woman, Jenna, who identified as bisexual. The event reportedly happened at age 14:

In eighth grade I was boy crazy just like all my other friends. I was as straight as the group I hung out with. Then a different girl joined our click. She was interesting, different, not boy crazy. I liked it, and her. After nine months of getting to know each other, separating ourselves from our click, sexually pleasing each other, and being in-love at an early age, it became difficult to hide our relationship from both our nosey friends and parents. [. . .]. To make a long story short, despite being in a healthy relationship, one that grew everyday, and made us truly happy, and in-love at age 14, it didn't matter to [our moms]. We never got to see each other again.

This next event narrative that emphasized closeness described a time when the participant was comforted by one of her "best friends from high school" that turned into her "first real same-sex kiss." The event was reported by a 19-year-old White woman, Carrie, who preferred not to label her sexual identity:

I had just broken up with my boyfriend of two years. We had broken up partly because the relationship wasn't healthy anymore, but also because I was sexually curious about girls, and could no longer be in a committed relationship to a male until I explored those feelings. But at the time, I was very upset about the breakup, as it was such a drastic change from how my life had been for so long. So I was at Brittany's house, on a couch, crying and talking to her, and she was comforting me and hugging me, and then she started touching my hipbone and stomach and holding me closer, and telling me that, despite the tears, I was "all kinds of sexy." I stopped crying and we stared at each other for a long time not saying anything, and then, it seemed like all of a sudden, we were kissing. We went to her bedroom and lay down on the bed, but did nothing beyond kissing and holding each other that day. Several days later things went farther, but the first kiss is my most vivid memory.

As indicated in the two preceding sexual event narratives, participants emphasized their emotional closeness with their female friends. In Carrie's narrative, it was Brittany's comforting and supportive behavior that led to sexual desire and subsequent sexual activity. In Jenna's narrative, she made it clear how close and "in love" she was with her friend, with whom she had become romantically and sexually involved. Thus, both the initial stages and later stages of sexual experiences with



same-sex friends can be characterized by emotional closeness, which is highly congruent with Dempsey et al.'s (2001) hypotheses and findings regarding women's sexuality and same-sex experiences in general.

*Conflict.* Conflict with friends regarding same-sex attraction or sexual exploration was present in only narratives of events that took place in adolescence. The first event narrative is an example of conflict with the friendship group. The event was reported by a 22-year-old White woman, Carly, who preferred not to label her sexual identity and remarked that she did not "have a sexual orientation," was "open to having a relationship with another woman" and was "at a point where labels are just kinda hilarious." She was 16 years old at the time of the event and it involved, "Eliza, my good friend":

I fell in love and got into a relationship with a good friend of mine named Eliza. It was the first time I had even considered being involved with another woman. It was perplexing to be because I didn't and still don't identify as a lesbian or bi-sexual. It was just her essence that I craved and enjoyed. I was a bit shunned at school, I stopped hanging out with my friends, I focused more on school, got the best grades I've ever gotten and thus got into every college I applied to.

Another participant, a 21-year-old Chinese-American woman, Lana, who identified as mostly straight/heterosexual with some bisexual tendencies, wrote about "being attracted to a good friend" when she was 18. She commented:

In the beginning, I didn't know how people know if they are a heterosexual or a homosexual. Because being close to all my friends (girls) and a few male friends. While being with them, I constantly judged people whenever I see them in the streets or anywhere. Judging them whether or not they are attractive. Then I wondered if I liked both sexes, so I started asking my friends about it. However, my friends thought I was just weird because they grew up where their family will like to see them with the opposite sex. So my friends started to be different awhile. So after awhile, I decided not to talk to them about it and told them I was joking around with them. I guess they were afraid of what I am.

This theme suggests the potential for conflict with friends as a result of same-sex friend sexual experiences. Potential conflict with cross-sexual

orientation friends has been previously documented (Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; O'Boyle & Thomas, 1996; Muraco, 2005) and the findings here support that same-sex friends can "shun" or reject women who express same-sex attraction or desire. One possible explanation for anticipated or actual conflict could be informed by Reeder's (2000) findings with dyads of cross-sex heterosexual friends. Her findings suggest that while friendships can occasionally be sites of sexual and romantic attraction, both members of the friendship dyad are not necessarily experiencing similar types of attraction leaving the dyad open to conflict and asymmetrical desires for the relationship.

However, research also suggests that cross-sexual orientation friendships are not *only* negatively affected, and frequently serve positive functions, such as mutual support, an indication to lesbian and bisexual youth that acceptance from heterosexual individuals is possible (Galupo, Sailer, & St. John, 2004; Galupo & St. John, 2001). Three participants in this study did indicate that support from friends was important in developing their sexual orientation, as exemplified by Debbie who said that when she told her friends that she was bisexual, her "relationships with my girlfriends at the time was very important. They were accepting, and some of them were testing out whether or not they were into girls, too." Another 20-year old White woman who identified her sexual identity as "fluid" indicated that "having people around me who are supportive of 'fluidity' and who understand it" has been important in developing her sexual orientation. Thus, both conflict and support can materialize as a result of same-sex friend sexual encounters.

*Defining Identity.* Defining sexual orientation identity differs from discovery in several ways. While discovery of same-sex attraction and sexual desire is typically an initial aspect of bisexual identity development, questioning sexual identity involves beginning to reorganize one's self-recognition of the meaning that sexual orientation and sexual behavior have had for that individual (Savin-Williams, 1995). Thus, defining identity involves meaning-making, or stepping back from an event to reflect on its implications for future behaviors, goals, values, and self-understanding (Pillemer, 1992). So, within this theme, participants engaged in meaning-making by examining what effects their sexual experiences with same-sex friends have had on their sexual orientation identity.

Event narratives containing the defining identity theme were broken down into two sub-themes: either (a) solidification of a bisexual identity, or (b) confusion about how to define one's identity following a same-sex friend sexual experience. As seen in Table 1, confusion was

more common overall than solidification, and the sub-theme of solidification occurred only regarding events from adolescence, not childhood. This result makes sense as many bisexual women do not settle on a bisexual identity until their twenties (Rust, 2003).

The first example (confusion sub-theme) is from an 18-year-old Filipino-American woman, Gloria, who identified as mostly straight/heterosexual with some bisexual tendencies. Following is her report on the meaning of a sexual experience with her best friend when she was 14. She indicated that:

This memory, although I'd like to forget the person involved, helps me identify myself as an extremely sexual person. I was actually in a secret relationship with her for about five months. However, I always knew I wasn't a lesbian because I've always been attracted to males. After my relationship with her, I know I could not and would not ever be in a relationship with a female. It helped me confirm that I am heterosexual for the most part. I don't really know how to label myself because I don't consider myself bisexual. I'll do sexual acts with a woman, but I'm not interested in women romantically.

Another example of confusion surrounding defining sexual identity came from a 19-year-old White woman, Carol, who identified herself as mostly straight/heterosexual with some bisexual tendencies. She indicated:

I began to question my sexual orientation in high school when it became "the cool thing to do" among my group of friends. Although my girl friends and I would make out when we got drunk, I decided that when it came down to it, I was straight. Well, I was pretty sure that I was straight until I suddenly got into a relationship a girl five months ago. Now I'm not sure what I am. I think I'm still predominantly straight, and I am attracted to men more than I am to women, but clearly I can have feelings for women as well.

In these first two examples, both Gloria and Carol indicated that sexual experiences with same-sex friends actually reinforced their heterosexuality and desire for a relationship with a man, while also retaining their interest in and attraction to women. This is consistent with Diamond's (2005b) discussion of same-sex "testing" and the erasure of bi-

sexuality, where women experiment with bisexuality, acknowledge the experience as enjoyable, but emphasize their heterosexuality by proclaiming the enjoyment to be situation and person-specific. The erasure of a sexual-minority identity following a same-sex encounter furthers Muraco's (2005) finding from surveys of heterosexual college students asked to evaluate a hypothetical same-sex gay or lesbian friend. She found that male and female participants indicated a degree of acceptance of gay men and lesbians on the interpersonal level; however, they simultaneously engaged in identity work to distance themselves from homosexuality. Diamond (2005a) also discusses how women may choose to question the nature of their sexual attraction to female friends rather than their sexual orientation. Results from this study indicate that participants' same-sex attraction and desire may have led to experimentation with female friends, but the pressure these experiences produce regarding a re-evaluation of sexual orientation identity necessitated an erasure of a possible lesbian or bisexual identity and a return to a heterosexual identity. Diamond (2005b) suggests that this process is likely reinforced by the remaining strict sexual dichotomy of homosexuality and heterosexuality that does not leave room for a valid identity in between homosexuality and heterosexuality, such as bisexuality or bi-curiosity.

The first example of identity solidification as a result of a sexual experience with a same-sex friend is 19-year-old bisexual Jenna, who was in a relationship with Julie during eighth grade. As indicated before, this relationship was terminated by both Jenna's and Julie's mothers. In response to what this memory meant to her now, she replied:

It means the world. I won't ever hide my relationship no matter who it's with because the initial shock of my mom hating me for a month and the emotions from everything else put me in a depression. And this helped me realize that I'd rather be in-love and happy, than pretend to be whatever else my mom wants me to be. I am not a lesbian. I look at guys just as much as I like at girls, if not more. It just happen though that I can keep a more interesting and longer relationship with girls.

Another example came from Anna, a bisexual woman whom we also heard from earlier. She followed-up her event narrative with, "Since I was a little girl I really liked the idea of being with a girl or a boy. I was never lonely but both guys and girls are sexually attractive to me. I am a bisexual Mexican American girl and I wouldn't like it any other way." A 19-year-old White woman, Hillary, who identified as bisexual, ex-

plained the following experience that occurred with "a close female friend" when she was 12 years old:

My friend, Michelle, lived in my neighborhood and attended my middle school. Even though this experience represents the first time I admitted my bisexuality, I had been attracted to/messing around with girls since a very young age. I found Michelle extremely attractive, and found out that she was bi. She was open about it, and talked to me about prior experiences with her ex-girlfriend on the bus to and from school. I felt comfortable telling her that I was bi, well, because I wanted to get in her pants. I found out that the attraction was mutual, and soon afterwards had my first real sexual experience with a girl.

Hillary added in her response to the sexual orientation development questions that, "I've thought about my sexual orientation since I was 6-years-old, which is the first time that one of my older girl friends approached me in a sexual manner. In my lifetime, I've pondered about my orientation a lot, but now I am completely comfortable being attracted to both sexes." Unlike Gloria and Carol, bi-curious women who experienced confusion in defining their sexual identities, Jenna, Anna, and Hillary indicated that they clearly defined themselves as bisexual women, and attributed this identification to their experiences with same-sex friends. Thus, not only might sexual attraction to and sexual desire for female friends lead to discovery of bisexual tendencies, as seen in the theme of discovery, the defining identity theme suggests that sexual experiences with female friends have also led to re-evaluations of one's sexual orientation identity, resulting in confusion for some, and the solidification of a bisexual identity for others.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The overall purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the discovery and emergence of women's bisexual and bi-curious identities through the examination of event narratives about sexual attraction to and sexual behavior with same-sex friends during childhood and adolescence. As Ashley's narrative at the beginning of this article illustrated, a primary finding was that almost half of bisexual and bi-curious women reported one or more sexual experiences with a female friend. Secondly, these experiences helped define themselves as sex-

ual persons or at least were important in their sexual orientation identity questioning and development. Examination of the self-defining memories and sexual orientation responses regarding sexual experiences with same-sex friends revealed two axes of classification, childhood or adolescence and sexual attraction or sexual behavior. Further thematic analyses revealed four themes: discovery, closeness, conflict and defining identity. As a group, these themes can be interpreted as a meta-narrative of one way that bisexual or bi-curious identity develops. Specifically, through same-sex friendships, these participants "discovered" their same-sex attractions, which often led to either "comfort" or "conflict," or both. Ultimately, for some participants, this led to defining themselves as bisexual or bi-curious.

Although previous studies have not reviewed the role of sexual experiences with same-sex friends in women's bisexual or bi-curious identity development, findings with regard to the themes that emerged from the event narratives are generally in line with models of bisexual identity development (e.g., Brown, 2002; Fox, 1995). For example, Fox asserts that bisexual individuals must recognize both the homosexual and heterosexual components of their sexual orientation identities. The results from this study suggest that the recognition, or discovery, of the homosexual component of their identity was a remarkable outcome of these women's sexual experiences with same-sex friends. Additionally, the conflict evident in several of these young women's narratives parallels Fox's description of the confusion that bisexual individuals often experience as a result of their feeling of attraction and behavior for both sexes not fitting within traditional dichotomous, either/or views of sexual orientation. Furthermore, Brown included the importance of strong emotional attachments with other women as an aspect particular to bisexual women's identity development. Thus, the themes of discovery, closeness, and conflict, as well as actual identity definition coincide with and support previously proposed models of bisexual identity development.

### *Unique Strengths of the Present Study*

Beyond supporting previous models of bisexual identity development, the results from this study contribute to the literature on bisexual women and friendships through both the inclusion of bi-curious participants as well as the use of bisexual women's friendship experiences to better understand the meaning and impact of these experiences on bisexual identity development. First, the inclusion of bi-curious partici-

pants further challenges the dichotomous, discrete conceptualization of sexual orientation (Fassinger & Arseneau, in press), for which research on bisexuality has already been praised (Berenson, 2002; Rust, 2001). Additionally, recent research has begun to recognize the fluid nature of women's sexual orientation (e.g., Peplau & Garnets, 2000). By broadening our definitions and including bi-curious women as participants in this research, we more accurately represent women who experience both hetero- and homosexual attraction and behavior. Second, this research uniquely examines the meanings of bisexual or bi-curious women's sexual experiences within friendship and how this relates to bisexual or bi-curious identity discovery and/or definition. While research that studies bisexual women's friendship dynamics or demographics is highly important, it is also worth recognizing the potential impact these relationships might have on the sexual orientation identities of the women involved in these friendships.

#### ***Limitations of the Present Study***

While these results are highly informative, there were several limitations to this study. This study had a small sample of women who primarily identified as bisexual, which may have been due to the younger age of the participants. Additionally, it is worthwhile to note that online research is a newer data collection method and has a unique set of methodological issues. There are concerns with the lack of control over the setting in which the questionnaire is completed (e.g., the participant could be in a public or private place); however, a potential upside to online data collection is that participants may in fact feel more comfortable being "honest" while at home, or not in the presence of a researcher. Nevertheless, this study offers a starting point for understanding bisexual and bi-curious women's experiences with female friends.

#### ***Directions for Future Research***

As indicated from the results of this study, same-sex friendships are a site of bisexual and bi-curious identity exploration and development. Both children and adolescents are indeed experiencing same-sex sexual attraction and desire within friendship relationships, and reporting that these experiences are integral in their sexual self-definition and/or sexual orientation development. Thus, further investigations into same-sex friendships and sexual experiences within these friendships can in-

crease our understanding of bisexual identity development and expand the small amount of information about bi-curiosity and bi-curious identity. Furthermore, not all bisexual and bi-curious participants discussed same-sex friendships within their self-defining memories; therefore, an investigation of the other types of events or themes within all self-defining memories of bisexual/bi-curious participants could provide further insights into their identity development. Future research could also compare lesbian, bisexual, bi-curious, and heterosexual women's experiences with same-sex friends (and even cross-sex friends) and subsequent differences in identity development. As evidenced here, the use of written narratives about sexual orientation development and sexual self-defining memories yield rich and informative data about sexual orientation identity development and should be applied in future research on this and other related topics. In general, findings from this exploratory study can guide more specific inquiries into the complex and dynamic nature of same-sex attraction and sexual desire within young women's friendships.

#### NOTE

1. Names have been changed; pseudonyms chosen by the authors are used.

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APPENDIX  
Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire

For the first 5 questions, you will be describing a self-defining memory that pertains to your sexuality. A self-defining memory is a memory of a specific event in your life that you remember very clearly and that still feels important to you even as you think about it now. The memory must be at least a year old. It is a memory that helps you to understand who you are as an individual and might be the memory you would tell someone else if you wanted that person to understand you in a more profound way. It may be a memory that is positive or negative, or both, in how it makes you feel. The only important aspect is that it leads to strong feelings and that it is familiar to you, like a picture you have studied or a song (happy or sad) you have learned by heart.

For the next question, please think of a self-defining memory that has helped define you as a sexual person. So think of a specific event that helps you understand who you are as a sexual person. First, jot down a one caption or one-sentence summary for the memory that comes to mind. Then describe the memory with enough detail as if to help an imagined friend see and feel as you did. Although the memories are confidential, please do not reveal a memory that is so painful as to make you feel uncomfortable describing it.

1. Caption (Give a brief sentence to identify the event):
2. Age at the time of the original event:
3. Other person/persons involved in the event:
4. Description of the event: where you were, whom you were with, what happened, how you and others reacted. Include details that will help an imagined friend see and feel as you did.
5. What does this memory mean to you now?