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### “Our Little Secret”: How Publicly Heterosexual Women Make Meaning From Their “Undercover” Same-Sex Sexual Experiences

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**“Our Little Secret”: How Publicly Heterosexual Women Make Meaning From Their  
“Undercover” Same-Sex Sexual Experiences**

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## Abstract

The LGBT community is well aware of the phenomenon of “straight girls” seeking out and engaging in intimate sexual relationships with women. However, there is a dearth of research on women who openly identify themselves as heterosexual, and even participate in relationships with men, yet seek out secret relationships with other women. This exploratory study examined the experiences and meaning-making of women who are “undercover” in this way and the factors that shape their construction of their sexual identity and compel them to live a secret, compartmentalized life. Four major themes emerged: a desire to remain married, the belief that “girls don’t count” as extramarital partners, shame, and “on and off the wagon”. For the women in this study, the decision to act on their desire for sexual contact with another woman was fraught with internal conflict, shame, and guilt. The data reveal that the constraints around one’s sexuality are not nearly as powerful culturally as the constraints around one’s public image.

**Keywords:** bisexuality, infidelity, relationships, sexual identity, intimacy, websites, biphobia, heteronormativity, internalized biphobia, women

The LGBT community is well aware of the phenomenon of “straight girls” seeking out and engaging in intimate, sexual relationships with women. A quick perusal of any personal advertisement listings will reveal a large number of ads in the women seeking women section—ads that also include the terms “discreet” and “married.” Many of the ads lack specificity in terms of desired partner attributes, but talk extensively about “discretion” and the need for the man in their life to “never find out.” However, there is a dearth of scholarly research on women who openly identify themselves as heterosexual, and even participate in relationships with men, yet seek out secret relationships with other women—that is, women who are “undercover”. The present paper attempts to explore this much-understudied topic, by using a sample recruited from the Internet of women who placed online ads seeking female partners.

There is some literature on the fluidity of female sexuality: namely, the idea that an individual’s gender of sexual interest may shift over the course of their lifespan (Baumeister, 2000; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Diamond, 2008; Goode & Haber, 1977; Sophie, 1986). As a result of these shifts, an individual’s sense of sexual identity may also change over their lifetime. In the present study,<sup>\*</sup> the idea of fluidity was less useful because our participants reported a lifelong interest in same-sex and other-sex partners. Moreover, their interest constituted not a shift, per se, but reflected concurrent interest in both genders as sex partners (albeit one partner at a time). Within the last decade, the idea of fluidity has led the popular media to acknowledge the

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<sup>\*</sup> The author asks readers to forgive the fact that she will to a modest extent move back and forth between Introduction and Results. This is advisable in an exploratory study that was able to investigate an under-researched topic in which previous research provided little guidance.

trend of previously self-identifying heterosexual women transitioning into lesbian partnerships (Cass, 1990; Otis & Skinner, 2004; Shuster, 1987; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). But many women—such as the ones in the present study—do not express a desire to transition to a lesbian sexual identity or practice. The literature on this type of disparity between a woman’s self-reported sexual identity and her sexual behavior is meager.

The term “on the down low” came into existence in the early 1990s. Originating in the African American community, the term referred to something of secrecy, but was quickly associated with men whose public identity was heterosexual but who privately engaged in sexual activities with other men (Boykin, 2005; Ford, Whitten, Kaufmann, & Thrasher 2007; González, 2007; Phillips, 2005). Typically men who are on the down low (DL) describe themselves as, and identify as, heterosexual, but secretly engage in same-sex sexual behavior. Often the research on this topic focuses on African-American men who reject the label of homosexual, and carry on discreet relationships that they would never consider disclosing to their girlfriends or spouses (Bleich & Taylor-Clark, 2005; Denizet-Lewis, 2003; King, 2003; Millet, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005). These men on the DL have garnered the attention of researchers in part because of the putative spread of HIV to their girlfriends and wives (CDC, 2010; Denizet-Lewis, 2003). Of course, the phenomenon of men living a publicly heterosexual identity and privately engaging in same-sex encounters is not confined to one ethnic group. But the media attention given to DL men in the African American community positioned their experience as unique and distinctive to their community, because the phrase “on the down low” became strongly associated with their behavior. As a result, that attachment (combined with the rejection by African American men of the label bisexual or homosexual as an effeminate “White thing”), the phrase “on the down low”

or “on the DL” has been nearly exclusively applied to African American men (Denizet-Lewis, 2003).

In contrast, not much research has been devoted to women who are publicly identified or assumed to be heterosexual (due to their romantic pairings with men), but who secretly have same-sex sexual experiences. Unlike men “on the DL,” whose secretive same-sex encounters have captured the public’s attention via books and news articles (Ford et al., 2007), women on the DL have been virtually ignored in the literature. (Perhaps this is due to the fact that the rates of STI transmission are much lower in this population, and thus the phenomenon attracts less funding for health-oriented research.) Aside from the few disparate voices blogging on the Internet about this phenomenon, women on the DL have been able to enjoy the freedom to carry on their clandestine activities without much worry that anyone in their lives will suspect them of same-sex desire. Like the men in the down-low studies, many women who are publicly assumed to be heterosexual engage in their liaisons discreetly, keeping the secret from even their spouses, families, and friends. However, the men in the down-low studies often cite both community intolerance and the incongruent identities of being simultaneously ‘masculine’ and homosexual as chief reasons for their rejection of the identity as well as their self-denial (Bowleg, 2004; Brown, 2005). The women in this study made no such distinction or claim. Additionally, the affiliation of the phrase with men in the African American community cannot be ignored, as it is positioned as a rejection of White culture. The participants in this study are not exclusively African American, nor are they male.

Originally, the present researcher avoided the term “on the DL” due to its clear positioning as a rejection of White culture and its specificity for African American men.

However, the term Married or Partnered Women Who have Sex with Other Women (MPWWSWOW) is rather clunky, and the work was challenging to explain. The phrase “Wives Seeking Women” (WSW) doesn’t completely describe the phenomenon as many are partnered, not married. The phrase “on the down low,” however, was immediately recognizable and became convenient shorthand to describe the study. Additionally, in popular discourse, “on the DL” frequently simply designates something as secret. Accordingly, the present researcher began to employ the term on a trial basis.

But the term remained problematic. Ford et al. (2007, p. 209) defined the term as “publicly present as heterosexual while secretly having sex with other men”, a definition accepted by other researchers as well (King, 2004; Phillips, 2005; Wolitski, Jones, Wasserman, & Smith, 2006). Although women who publicly identify or are assumed to be heterosexual yet seek out and participate in same-sex sexual encounters are on the DL by Ford et al.’s definition (changing, obviously, “men” to “women”), it is not a term the women themselves seem to employ. The model of “being in the closet” has also proven to be less than accurate to describe what is happening.

Finally, one of my participants described her behavior with the term “undercover.” This seemed far more apt and precise. Thus I have adopted it for the purposes of the present paper.

This exploratory study sought to examine the experiences of women who are undercover and the factors that shape their construction of their sexual identity and compel them to live a secret, compartmentalized life. The study sought to understand their experiences as well as their meaning-making in the course of maintaining a public heterosexual persona while balancing their secret desire for sex with women. Ultimately, this study asked the following questions:

How do women perceive their sexual identity? How do women make meaning of their secret behaviors in conjunction with their public life? How do these side-by-side relationships reinforce, conflict with, or support one another?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Biphobia is the “fear of the other and fear of the space between our categories” (Ochs & Deihl, 1992, p. 69). It manifests itself as a fear of those who refuse to be pinned into either heterosexual or homosexual categories (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991). One of the ways biphobia is expressed is through a set of stereotypes that devalue the concept of a bisexual identity (Chen-Hayes, 2001). The common stereotypes regarding bisexual individuals are that they are promiscuous, incapable of monogamy, over-sexed/obsessed with sex, and very talented sexually (Rust, 2000). The chief stereotype surrounding bisexuality itself is that it is not a legitimate sexual orientation—a stereotype that persists in both heterosexual and gay/lesbian circles (Israel & Mohr, 2004). These stereotypes have often led to internalized biphobia and can interfere with the development or recognition of an individual’s own bisexual status due to internalized negative beliefs about bisexuality, as well as homosexuality (Dworkin, 2001). Such biphobia, when internalized by bisexuals themselves, generates internal conflict and shame (Szymanski, 2008), as well as self-hatred and doubt regarding their true identity and sexual group belonging (Finnegan & McNally, 2002). Many bisexual individuals begin to question their status, wondering if they are indeed “bisexual enough” to warrant the identity (Ochs, 2007). Not surprisingly, many bisexual women resist or avoid labeling themselves as bisexual (Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002), while others privately consider themselves bisexual but avoid social conflict and rejection by continuing to allow people to assume they are heterosexual (Ochs



& Deihl, 1992). However, the price for their silence is the feeling of being an outsider or imposter.

Rich (1980) coined the phrase ‘compulsory heterosexuality’—and explained that, through socialization, heterosexuality is not an individual choice or orientation but rather "an institution from which there is no choice" (p. 22). Rubin (1984) explains that the heterosexism of our culture creates a situation whereby heterosexuality appears “normal,” so that women rarely entertain or envision other conceptions of adult life than a heterosexual primary relationship (p. 279). The continual reinforcement of heterosexuality as “natural” is a systemic exhibition of the underlying homophobia in our institutions, as reflected by the way in which heterosexuality is presented as *the* path (pp. 280-281). Examples are not difficult to recount: the early socialization of “playing house” with a heterosexual expectation of “mommy and daddy,” adults asking young girls if they have any boyfriends at school, the expectation of a male escort to dances and proms, and questions about getting your “Mrs. degree” alongside your academic credentials. It is less a choice and more of a mandate for young women. Those who resist it, or are slow to secure a spouse, are frequently asked, “Why aren’t you married?”—the subtext being ‘what about you makes you single when you should be married?’. Thus, the pressure and priority of securing a primary heterosexual union around which to construct one’s life is ever-salient in a woman’s life. As a result of this systematic presentation of heterosexuality, the act of choosing to prefer a same-sex partner is treated as exceptional (Rich, 1980, p. 50).

Rubin (1984) introduced the idea of a hierarchy of sex in her concept of the Charmed Circle, which gives privilege to the characteristics of heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, private, and between people of the same generation (p. 281). Rubin argues that our

cultural privileging of heterosexual relationships undergird heterosexism (pp. 278-282). We can see this in current surveys revealing what people believe to be “sex,” or what *counts* as sex; these reveal that penile-vaginal intercourse is held in the highest esteem, whereas other forms of sexual expression and pleasure are rarely counted or regarded as “having sex.” Despite the fact that study after study shows that men’s orgasm via intercourse is quite reliable yet the majority of women do not orgasm from intercourse alone (Wallen & Lloyd, 2011), penile-vaginal intercourse is the accepted and sanctioned sexual act—especially within a monogamous marriage. Our societal valuing of this act belittles female pleasure and places the importance and significance of sex on the male orgasm.

Ultimately, this invisible line we have drawn between good and bad sex stands between order and chaos in our sexual world. This gives birth to the idea that there is *one* proper way to have a sexual relationship and all other conceptions of sex are “bad.” If these “bad sex acts” are permitted or performed, there will be a domino effect leading to some type of disaster. Although we as a society have in many ways come to value other cultures and their norms, we have not yet come to a similar grasp of different sexual ideas and variation. We see sexual variation as “bad”—rather than simply something we ourselves may not be interested in, but that is perfectly benign.

Hansen and Evans’ “Law of the Excluded Middle” posits that everyone is automatically categorized as heterosexual in the absence of conflicting evidence. However, this law comes with an important caveat: one single homosexual act marks the individual as homosexual forever (Rust, 2000); any future sexual engagements with partners of the other sex will be interpreted to be in opposition or denial of their true homosexual identity (Paul, 2000). Essentially, any

heterosexual sexual activity after the single qualifying homosexual act is “counterfeit” (Hansen & Evans, 1985). The authors explain that by its insistence on binary classification of complex sexual behavior, our culture renders impossible the simultaneous authentic coexistence of attraction and sexual desire for both same- and other-sex partners.

## Methods

This pilot study was designed to examine the experiences of women who are “undercover”, and the factors that shape their construction of their sexual identity and compel them to live a secret, compartmentalized life. This study was guided by several specific goals of feminist methodologies, which place women’s experiences at the center of research, and allow women to explore their experiences in their own words (DeVault, 1999; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Gorelick, 1991). This experience-as-knowledge concept posits that looking at women’s collective experiences reveals realities and ideas about our social world that we otherwise wouldn’t see without the lives of women at the center of our work (Hartsock, 2004; Smith, 1987). As explained above, this study hopes to fill a gap in the current research on sexuality and sexual identity.

Due to a variety of difficulties in finding and recruiting sexual minority populations (Gorman, 2003; Hash & Cramer 2003; Sullivan & Losberg, 2003)—for example, the lack of a directory of women (from which to draw a truly random sample) who secretly have same-sex relationships with other women—this study employed the popular website Craigslist to recruit a sample population. The researcher searched personal ads under the “women seek women” and the “w4w” category in the “casual encounters” section of the site in major cities in all 50 states of the United States. Ads were filtered by keyword searches, including “secret,” “discreet” (as well as the misspelling “discrete”), and “married” within the title or body of the ad. Because the participants

for this study needed to meet specific inclusion criteria, the researcher used the criterion sampling method to select participants (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Heppner and Heppner (2004) and Seidman (1998) explain that when participants are chosen via criterion sampling, they have not only experienced the phenomenon under study but also are capable and willing to discuss their personal experiences regarding that phenomenon with the researcher.

A total of 34 women volunteered for the study and completed interviews. An additional 6 women also volunteered, but dropped out without notice midway through the interview process; these partial transcripts were not included in the data analysis. The final sample consisted of 24 respondents who identified themselves as White, 8 respondents who self-identified as African American, 1 who self-identified as Indian; and 1 who self-identified as Asian. Ages ranged from 24 to 65.

Participants were contacted using a form letter with the informed consent and description of the study attached. Women who responded were then interviewed via e-mail. Demographic data were collected from each respondent, and each woman was given the opportunity to choose her own pseudonym. The interview transcripts (i.e., text of the e-mails) were then assembled, identified only by the pseudonym, and sent back to the participant for checking. Once the respondent signed off on the transcript, the original correspondence was destroyed so as to ensure confidentiality.

Once data collection was complete, the transcripts were analyzed using what Stringer (2007) described as “the process of distilling large quantities of information to uncover significant features and elements that are embedded in the data” (p. 95). The coded data were reviewed line-by-line and organized into “a set of categories that typify or summarize the experiences and

perspectives of the participants” (Stringer, 2007, p. 98). The shape of the data thus emerged from the transcripts themselves.

## Results

A number of themes were common to the interview transcripts. Women repeatedly expressed the following four themes: a desire to remain married, the belief that extramarital sex with other women “doesn’t count,” a deep sense of shame undergirding their desire and instances of acting on that desire, and a history of swearing off these encounters only to seek them out again.

### **Desire to Remain Married**

True to compulsory heterosexuality and society’s pressure and expectation of marriage as a master status, all of the participants in this study consistently expressed a desire to remain in their marriages and heterosexual romantic relationships. As Taylor (30, White) explained of her husband: “He is a good man. I do love him. I wouldn’t want anything to break us up.”

Several women in the study had not kept their sexual interest and desire for other women secret from their husbands. However, even the women whose husbands knew of their interest, curiosity, or past sexual history with other women admitted that their husbands and boyfriends were unaware of their current advertisement to meet another woman for a discreet sexual encounter. Conversely, just as many women said, as Adlai (38, African American) did, that their significant other did “not know about [their] sexual preferences.” In many cases, the women interviewed explained that they went to great lengths to keep their activities secret because the women felt sure their husbands would be hurt by the knowledge of their activities. Samantha (27, White) put it simply: “If he found out he would be devastated.” The costs of the secrecy required

to continue in their marriages, even while participating in same-sex encounters, was not lost on the participants. Gabriella (37, White) said: “It’s secret. It’s dangerous. It makes me feel good. But he would be hurt if he knew.”

Yet the women agreed that relying on their marriages alone was too challenging to consider. Frankie (30, White) explained: “I wouldn’t be happy if I didn’t find a way to express that part of myself.” Taylor (35, White) went even further and asserted that if she had to stop seeing women, “I’d have to go to counseling and get some happy pills.” Although the women spoke of the joys of their same-sex encounters, they were clear on their preference to maintain the public life they had constructed for themselves. Hannah (35, White) stated: “He is who I ultimately want to be with.”

## **“Girls Don’t Count”**

Rubin’s Charmed Circle was very evident in the recurring claims that same-sex sexual encounters outside of their marriage (or primary heterosexual romantic partnerships) simply did not rise to the level of “cheating.” The standard for extramarital infidelity was clearly penile-vaginal intercourse, which could not be accomplished via encounters with other women.

Repeatedly, the women in the study reinforced the stance that although they needed to carry on their activities in secrecy, their encounters didn’t “count” as cheating. Samantha (27, White) explained: “Another man in the picture is threatening, so I don’t want another penis at all! But girls aren’t cheating.” Roe (34, White) explained: “I am really faithful and I don’t cheat. Like, I’d never be with a man!”. All of the women explained that seeing another man was not something they would entertain. Morgan (24, White) maintained: “A girl has needs, but I don’t

want another penis at all.” Noelle (32, White) echoed this sentiment: “I don’t want to hurt him and I can’t ever, ever imagine cheating on him with another guy.”

Some women went so far as to say that although they would never cheat (by which they meant take a male lover, as discussed), they didn’t need to do that because, as Victoria (34, White) explained: “My husband completely satisfies me as much as a man can.” On the other hand, many women cited unsatisfactory sex lives within their marriages, but maintained their commitment to not cheating (with a male extramarital partner). When pressed to quantify why the sex of the extramarital partner mattered, Tasha (35, African American) said: “Being promiscuous with a woman instead of men is I feel better than having an affair with a man.” Hannah (35, White) explained: “Being with a woman seems like a lesser evil.”

But many agreed that their own logic was flawed. Gabriella (37, White) was stymied to explain: “I would never sleep with another man while married so I am not sure why I would [with] a woman.” Hannah (35, White) reiterated that point: “Another woman seems like she would be less of a threat to a man, therefore making it less of a betrayal.”

## **Shame**

The shame resulting from the deep-seated biphobia in our society wove through the fabric of every interview in this study. Every interviewee used the words “guilty” and “wrong” somewhere in their responses in reference to themselves and their behavior. They all spoke about the ramifications that discovery would bring in terms of their families and social circle. Olivia (24, African American) said: “It is society’s expectation that because I’m married, I’m heterosexual. I keep it a secret because I don’t like being judged even if I am wrong.” Jasmine (33, African American) got fearful even thinking of what might happen: “My mom would be

very upset. Others would be grossed out. My boyfriend would probably break up with me.”

Madison (24, White) feared that her “family would freak bad.” And Sadie (33, White) spoke of her risks as well: “I don’t want it to get back to the kids.”

There was a clear sense that these women believed that exposure or disclosure would cause them to lose it all. Carrying around the secret of their desire—even when they didn’t act on it—weighed heavily on them. Hannah (35, White) explained: “I hate feeling guilty, and when I am going through the motions of arranging sex with a woman, I feel like he’s going to find out. If he comes home irritated or calls me upset, my mind immediately goes to, ‘Oh shit, he knows’ and I get a cold chill.” They were also very hard in judging themselves and their own desires. Tasha (35, African American) called herself “a walking hypocrite” because of her religious beliefs and affiliation. Morgan (24, White) berated herself: “I feel really driven to be with anyone else just to get the tension released even if I end up feeling like an asshole afterwards.” Many reported that their guilt and shame interfered with their pleasure. Hailey (31, White) reported: “I only use my hands. I don’t do oral with a woman and I won’t receive oral sex from her. You can wash your hands, but your mouth is different.”

## **On and Off the Wagon**

Many women tried to manage their guilt and shame by depriving themselves of encounters and sexual contact with women for prolonged periods of time. Throughout the interviews, there was a sense among most of the women that they went as long as they could bear without seeing another woman for sex, and then they had to give in to it. This theme crossed racial boundaries. Among White participants, 10 of the 19 women reported this self-deprivation; 6 of the 8 African American participants echoed the sentiment. The lone Asian and Indian



participants mentioned this practice as well.

Some women articulated this self-denial with pride. Jasmine (33, African American) stated proudly: “Once I’ve gotten it out of my system, I’m good for a least a few months and sometimes I can make it up to a year.” Kylee (43, African American) proudly confessed: “It’s been over 5 years since my last sexual encounter [with a woman]” before placing her current ads on Craigslist. Roe (34, White) echoed this: “Haven’t been with a woman in years. I just do it when I get the urge too strong to ignore.”

These periods of being “on the wagon” from sexual encounters with women were taxing to them. Noelle (32, Indian) elaborated: “I feel like part of me is being suppressed because I enjoy being with another woman.” Jasmine (33, African American) stated: “Sexually I have an itch that my boyfriend just can’t scratch.”

Some tried to convince the researcher and themselves that this was merely a phase. Tasha (34, African American) reported: “It’s a ‘get it out of my system’ thing. I don’t foresee it lasting long. At least, I don’t want it to.” But as Nicole (45, African American) explained: “What draws me back is what drew me there in the first place.” Sakae (35, Asian) reported that giving in was inevitable because: “It satisfies my hunger, which is so deep down within me I cannot make it go away.” Morgan (24, White) explained that she eventually gives in because: “When it does happen, I feel like a weight has been lifted and I can let loose with my husband.”

## Discussion

For the women in this study, the decision to act on their desire for sexual contact with another woman was fraught with internal conflict, shame, and guilt. So overbearing was their sense of shame that these women subjected themselves to long periods of deprivation from same-

sex sexual encounters in an effort to try live up to the model of compulsory heterosexuality they have been socialized to accept as inevitable. Each woman expressed a strong desire to remain in her central heterosexual relationship and to avoid risking the rejection of her family and peers, who assumed their heterosexuality in the absence of evidence to the contrary. The burden of their desires had to be kept secret to avoid the possibility of exposure to ridicule, stigma, and even greater shame than they already carry.

Although the women expressed a desire to remain with their men in their lives, each one admitted that there was simply something within the relationship that was missing, an ache that could not be soothed through contact with their primary partner. Each woman had internalized the hierarchy of sexual acts revered in our culture by stating that sexual encounters with other women—while wrong—were not “cheating” because female-female acts were not intercourse.

Although previous studies of men secretly seeing same-sex partners revealed a racial divide, this study found more similarities among women of different racial groups than differences. However, this study did not examine class; most people in the United States claim “middle class” status when asked—irrespective of their actual class status.

Given that the ads on Craigslist were free, one might hypothesize that the sample may be somewhat skewed toward working class and lower middle class women. But it’s not clear from the women’s narratives that that is actually the case. For example, at least one woman mentioned the universal availability of Craigslist as a reason for having chosen it (rather than any financial motive), as well as a perceived dearth of other dating sites where a married woman seeking a female partner in secret would be welcome as a member. Further research looking specifically at class with a reliable measure of that variable would be useful in examining this phenomenon.

Additionally, a longitudinal study on women undercover would reveal whether fluidity eventually plays a role. Although most of the women had been seeing same-sex partners alongside their heterosexual pairings for many years, a long-term study would reveal whether this is a persistent feature. Such a study may reveal interesting patterns at follow-up in terms of the behavior of women undercover as well as their self-perceptions of sexual identity and meaning-making.

The data in this study reveal that the constraints around one's sexuality are not nearly as powerful culturally as the constraints around one's public image. These women all participated in public relationships modeled after the compulsory mandate of heterosexuality, but their private sexual behavior was not consistently constrained by that directive. However, their desire to maintain the public and social identity of heterosexuality was salient and significant. Thus, the inclination is not to refrain from having same-sex sexual encounters, but to conceal one's participation.

Returning to one of the original research questions for this study, women were split in regards to whether these undercover relationships reinforce or conflict with their primary relationships. Some women felt that without these undercover encounters and relationships they would struggle to remain married, whereas others made it clear that they would easily favor their public relationships regardless of any benefits gleaned from same-sex encounters. However, all of the women in the study regarded their extramarital relationships as supporting their primary relationships.

## Conclusions

This was an exploratory study of a group of women who had secretly placed ads seeking a same-sex partner for discreet sexual encounters. The goal was to determine how they made meaning from their experiences and navigated simultaneous relationships.

The women revealed a desire to maintain a public image of heterosexuality, but also a desire to continue their undercover relationships. Although some women were firm that if the need arose to stop seeing other women, they would make that choice, others were quite conflicted when considering the (hypothetical) need to discontinue these practices. Most women in the study reported periods of denying themselves the release of undercover encounters, and all of the women reported feeling ashamed of their behavior. The undergirding sense of concern that their loved ones and friends would reject them should this information come to light was prevalent throughout their discourse. Racial differences did not prove to be significant among these women (as it has in previous studies of men “on the down low”); however, social class was not considered in this study. Further studies measuring class are warranted, as are longitudinal studies looking at the possible fluidity of these women’s practices, self-identity, and meaning-making.

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# ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

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