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Online, their Negotiation of Sexual Desire,
and Meaning-Making of Sexual Identity*

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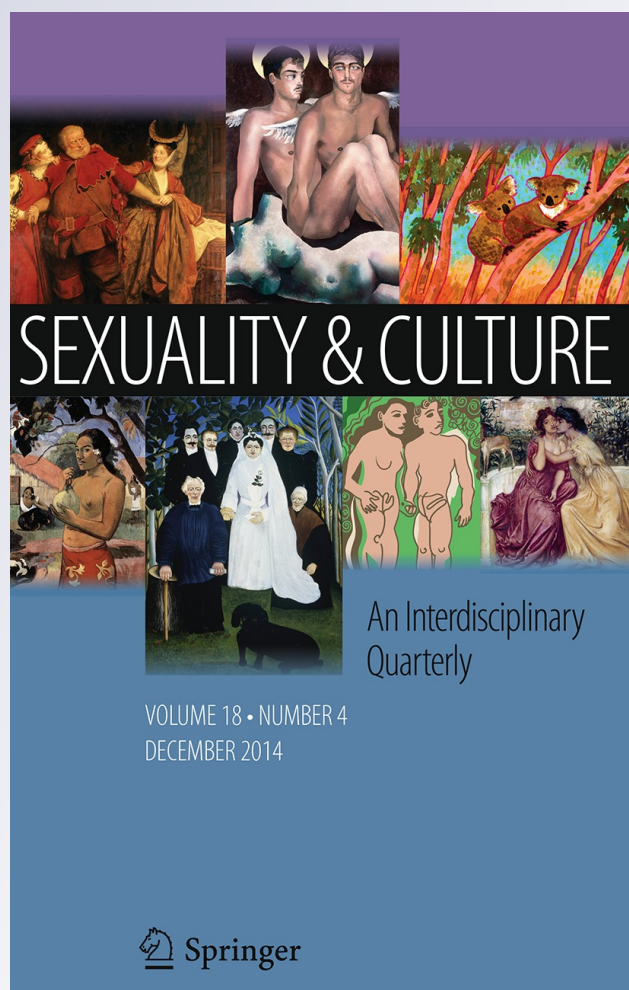
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“I’m not a lesbian; I’m just a freak”: A Pilot Study of the Experiences of Women in Assumed-Monogamous Other-Sex Unions Seeking Secret Same-Sex Encounters Online, their Negotiation of Sexual Desire, and Meaning-Making of Sexual Identity

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Abstract This pilot study looked to examine the experiences of women who are “undercover,” the meaning-making of their sexual identity, how they came to negotiate their same-sex sexual desires alongside their primary other-sex unions, and their experience of 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. The thirty-four women in this study report lifelong incidence of attraction to and encounters with other women as well as men. They are not transitioning toward a lesbian identity nor experiencing fluidity; rather, clandestine encounters are part of an ongoing means to negotiate their opposite-sex marriages. For them, our culture’s limited notions of sexual identity are less than useful. It was important to their self-concept that their sexuality be understood in terms of its intensity and their desire for frequency and diversity of acts. They defined themselves on their own terms and by their sexual personalities and inclination toward what they considered “hypersexuality” or “freakiness.” Despite conventional ideas that women are emotionally driven in their extra-relational affairs and need to “fall in love” to participate in extra-relational sexual activity, all of the women were clear in their desire to limit their association with their same-sex partners to sexual encounters only.

Keywords Sexual identity · Non-monogamy · Internet · Clandestine · Bisexual · Extra-relational

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Introduction

The incidence of married or otherwise heterosexually-partnered women seeking out same-sex encounters with women online is not a new happening. While this phenomenon is often unknown to many in the dominant group, the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community is well aware of the existence of “straight girls”—and even “straight, married girls”—who routinely seek out sexual attachments to other women. From online blogs that warn “straight girls” to stay away (Callahan 2014; Sasha 2010) to interest and advice items on LGBT websites (O’Leary 2014; Vanasco 2009) to word-of-mouth within the community, this phenomenon is widely known. Personal advertisement listings show large numbers of ads under the section for women seeking women which utilize terms such as “discretion,” “secret,” and “married” or “boyfriend.” Many will have phrases such as “I have a man of my own.” Most will specify that while they are open in terms of race, age, and body type, the need for their primary partner to “never know about this” is non-negotiable. There is a scarcity of literature on the phenomenon of women who are in assumed-monogamous pairings, are publicly assumed-heterosexual, and are even other-sex partnered, yet search for clandestine sexual meetings with other women. The present paper endeavors to investigate this topic of women who are “undercover,” an understudied topic, through the use of an Internet-recruited sample of women whose on online ads call for “discreet” female sexual partners.

Literature Review

In the interest of examining disease transmission, there is some work being done on “women who have sex with women,” which includes some women who identify as bisexual and have concurrent relationships with men (Munzy et al. 2014; Poteat et al. 2014). Additionally, other research on bisexual women as group includes exploration into substance abuse issues (Brown and McNair 2013; Gilmore et al. 2014; Litt et al. 2013; Patel et al. 2013; Pennay et al. 2013), comparison of sexual satisfaction with partners (Persson and Pfaus 2013), arousal patterns (Lippa 2007; 2013), body image (Chmielewski and Yost 2013; Huxley et al. 2014), mental health issues (Birmholz and Young 2012; Kerr et al. 2013; Kim and Fredriksen-Golden 2012), intersectionality (Glass and Few-Demo 2013; Lee and Hahm 2012; Nadal and Corpus 2013; Patel et al. 2013; Zheng and Zheng 2013), and risk of sexual victimization (Gilmore et al. 2014; Hequembourg et al. 2013; Sandfort et al. 2013). However, the current research on women who are assumed-heterosexual and secretly pursue same-sex sexual behaviors is scarce.

There is current discourse on the inherent fluidity—shifting and changing—of some women’s sexual behavior, attraction, and identification, (Baumeister 2000; Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Diamond 2008b; Goode and Haber 1997; Sophie 1986). The fluid nature of some women’s sexual desire may result in her embracing a different sexual identity over the life course. In the present study, the concept of fluidity proved less valuable simply because the participants conveyed a lifelong

concurrent interest in both sexes as sex partners (although they only wanted a single partner per sexual event). Popular media latched onto the idea of fluidity and began reporting of 'the trend' of previously self-identifying heterosexual women transitioning into lesbian partnerships (Cochran 2010; Fisher 2009; Hardy and Squire 2010). As more assumed-heterosexual female celebrities 'come out' in same-sex romantic relationships, popular media continues to revisit the notion (James 2009; Jones 2009). Some literature exists on previously married women transitioning into a lesbian identity (Cassingham and O'Neill 1993). Inspired by her own experience, Strock (1998) wrote a book about her study of women who were in heterosexual marriages when they fell in love with another woman and discovered their 'true' lesbian identity.

By contrast, the women in this study reported having had and acted upon sexual desire for other women throughout their lives and reported sexual desire, behavior, and attraction to women concurrent to sexual desire, behavior and attraction to men. There exists discourse looking at a public performance of concurrent sexual attraction, behavior, and desire (Diamond 2005; Levy 2005; Yost and McCarthy 2012) as well as private performances of concurrent sexual attraction, behavior, and desire (Fahs 2009). Discourse on bisexuality among self-identified heterosexual women in college (Hoburg et al. 2004) exists. Although there is also some work on bisexual women in heterosexual relationships having concurrent relationships with women (Reinhardt 2001), the incidence of women who openly participate in relationships with men and are assumed-heterosexual yet carry on secret sexual encounters with women is a phenomenon largely ignored in academic discourse. These women examined here place ads which explicitly state that she has no interest in her husband or "man" ever finding out about her activities. More often than not, she'll explain she wants a "friend," but has no interest in an ongoing partnership or "girlfriend." These women are not transitioning toward a lesbian identity. Their behavior doesn't represent fluidity as much as a stable facet of their sexual desires and behavior. These clandestine encounters are part of an ongoing means to negotiate their marriage.

Around the height of the AIDS crisis, attention was directed to men who have sex with men "on the down low." That discourse has continued in the health field examining patterns and rates of disease transmission in "men who have sex with men and women" (MSMW), which is also sometimes investigated under the term "men who have sex with men" but includes men who also have concurrent relationships with women (Groves et al. 2014; Lane et al. 2014; Tieu et al. 2014; Wei et al. 2014; Wirtz et al. 2014). On the surface, comparisons could be made between the women "undercover" in this study and men on the down low; however, the term "on the down low" was racialized, and used to apply almost solely to African-American men despite the prevalence of men having sex with men while claiming heterosexual identity is a behavior which crosses racial boundaries. Thus, even though, like the women in this study, these men were positioned as publicly heterosexual but privately engaging in same-sex sexual encounters, the term "on the down low" was also closely associated with a rejection of the label "homosexual" because of their perception of it as a "White" and "effeminate" identity (Bleich and Taylor-Clark 2005; Denizet-Lewis 2003; King 2003; Millet et al. 2005). Thus, the

term “on the down low” is not a useful lens with which to consider this phenomenon. It is also a problematic term to apply to these women given that it is so widely associated with the African American community. Additionally, the phenomenon of the “down low” is laden with a social stigma, whereby the public assumes men on the down low are subject to numerous health risks. Thus, this has become a loaded term closely associated and specific to African-American men. Neither does the lens of the closet provide an apt paradigm for this discussion (Sedgwick 1990). The term Married or Partnered Women who have Sex with Other Women (MPWWSWOW) is a bit cumbersome to try to employ and Wives seeking Wives (WSW) does not encapsulate the phenomenon as many women are not married, but in long-term heterosexual pairings. One of the participants described herself as “undercover.” Thus, I have adopted her language to discuss the results of this study.

Purpose of the Study

While this pilot study was not concerned with the issue of identity development, it looked to examine the experiences of women who are “undercover” and the experience and meaning-making of their sexual identity, how they come to negotiate their same-sex sexual desires alongside their primary other-sex union, and their experience of a secret, compartmentalized life. The ways in which women internally and externally navigate and make meaning of their dual-gender attractions and desires is of interest to many researchers, and work in that area contributes to the field. Their partner search is done completely online and serves to function alongside their primary heterosexual unions. Given the existing literature on men who seek male partners for sex online (Groves et al. 2013a; Moskowitz and Seal 2010; Robinson and Moskowitz 2013) and the literature looking at men who participate in concurrent relationships with men and women (Barnshaw and Letukas 2010; Beyrer et al. 2010; Icard 2008; Maulsby et al. 2012; Steward et al. 2013; Tieu et al. 2014), this is a significant gap in the research. 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. And, more importantly, to give voice to their experiences, which at present are not represented in the literature. Ultimately, this study asked the questions: How do women perceive their sexual identity? How do women make meaning of their secret behaviors in conjunction to their public life? How do these side-by-side relationships reinforce, conflict with, or support one another?

Theoretical Framework

The means by which individuals interpret and label themselves as sexual beings exist within a framework of categories bound by meanings constructed in the political and cultural understandings of orientation specific to a time and place. Thus, our sexual identity is less of a marker of any *true* orientation, but more of a

description of our own position in the social structure given the current available and accepted social constructs surrounding sexuality (Rust 1993). Thus, a woman's self-labeling as heterosexual, homosexual, etc. is not necessarily an outgrowth of an authentic evaluation of her behaviors and desires, but likely influenced by social acceptability, cultural meanings attached to the available categories, and the political view of those categories. Rust (1993) explains: "Identity is therefore a reflection of sociopolitical organization rather than a reflection of essential organization..." (p.68). When an individual is choosing a sexual identity label to describe themselves, they do so in a crucible of social influences rather than based on their biological and personal influence, and their selection will hinge upon the meaning and consequence of a particular sexual identity in the particular social environment in which they find themselves (Horowitz and Newcomb 2001).

The "Law of the Excluded Middle" suggests that culturally, in the absence of contradictory indication, we assume and categorize everyone we encounter as heterosexual (Hansen and Evans 1985). One important caveat results from this practice: a single same-sex partner sexual event designates an individual eternally as homosexual (Rust 2000); once this has happened, any further sexual acts with other-sex partners are read as attempts to deny the individual's "true" homosexual identity (Paul 2000). Effectively, the participation in any other-sex partnered sex acts subsequent to the initial defining homosexual act is rendered "counterfeit" (Hansen and Evans 1985). Our culture's claim of a binary classification system to try to make sense of complex human sexual behavior positions the concurrent coexistence of attraction and sexual desire for both same- and other-sex partners as both impossible and inauthentic.

The concept of biphobia, which is the "fear of the other and fear of the space between our categories" (Ochs and Deihl 1992, p. 69) proves useful in this discussion. Exhibiting itself as an anxiety directed toward those individuals whose behaviors and desires reject classification into either heterosexual or homosexual categories (Hutchins and Kaahumanu 1991), biphobia is frequently articulated through persistent belief in stereotypes devaluing the concept of a bisexual identity (Chen-Hayes 2001). Widespread stereotypes about bisexuals include the belief that they are unable to exercise monogamy, promiscuous in their sexual behavior, very gifted sexually, and obsessed with sex (Rust 2000). The most prevalent and damaging stereotype regarding bisexuality is the prevailing view of it as a "phase" used to cover a "true" homosexual identity, and thus the belief that it is not legitimate sexual orientation; this is a conviction held tightly in both heterosexual and homosexual circles (Fox 1995; Hansen and Evans 1985; Israel and Mohr 2004; Zinik 1985), which opens bisexuals up to criticize from all sides.

The stereotypes surrounding bisexuals coupled with the heterosexism foundational to our culture can provoke internalized biphobia, which hinders the recognition of one's own bisexual status (Dworkin 2001) and produces tremendous internal conflict, shame (Szymanski 2008), self-hatred, and especially doubt concerning the nature of their "true" sexual identity (Finnegan and McNally 2002). This leads many individuals whose sexual desires do not center upon one gender alone to question their own right to claim 'bisexual' as an identity as they question whether they are "bisexual enough" to merit the identity (Ochs 2007). Research

demonstrates that women's experiences and self-identification often do not mesh (Laumann et al. 1994; Rust 2003).

The meanings an individual woman attributes and understands to be attached to a sexual identity label will greatly influence how she perceives and describes her own sexual identity label (Peplau and Garnets 2000; Rust 1993, 2001). Complicating all of this is the lack of visibility of a bisexual identity in our culture; few models are put forth and often what models exist are largely negative (Hennessy 1995). As a result, it is common for bisexual women to resist or avoid labeling themselves as bisexual, and even to be confused by the meaning of the identity itself (Bower et al. 2002; Rust 1993). Others may choose to privately classify themselves as bisexual, but opt to simply evade social conflict and rebuff by permitting the assumption that they are heterosexual to continue (Ochs and Deihl 1992). This social peace is not without a price, however. Their silence triggers feelings of being an outsider or imposter. For an assumed heterosexual, desire, attraction, and sexual behavior with same-sex partners can become what Hennessy called 'open secrets,' things that are known without knowing (2009).

'Compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980) is useful here. Due to socialization, heterosexuality is not the individual choice or "natural" orientation we are lead to regard it as, but rather "an institution from which there is no choice" (p. 22). Through heterosexism, which is deeply embedded within our culture, heterosexuality appears so "normal" women seldom consider or imagine other structures for their adult life than participating in a heterosexual primary relationship (Rubin 1984, 279). Heterosexuality is incessantly emphasized as "normal," and presented as *the* path we are to take, which serves as a structural demonstration of the homophobia fundamental within our institutions (280–281). We can see the examples all around us, even in childhood with the depiction of a heterosexual expectation of "mommy and daddy" in children's television programming, books, and films, and in adolescence with the belief that asking young girls if they have any crushes on boys at school is an appropriate inquiry, and in the 'need' for male escorts to dances and even in the rituals performed at school events where girls are crowned 'queen' in high school and college and must have a 'king' to not only escort them, but to complete their performance. Heterosexual coupling is a mandate, rather than an option for young women. Should a young woman resist this idea, or move too slowly in acquiring a long-term partner, she is subjected to frequent questioning regarding her motives for avoiding her "natural" destiny. She will be peppered with, "Why aren't you married?", a question which implies, 'there clearly must be something wrong with you to cause your single status.' For women, the social pressure to marry—and reproduce—coupled with the widespread priority positioned upon attaining a heterosexual union around which to build one's life is ever-present. Due to this methodical positioning of heterosexuality, any woman who elects union with a same-sex partner is treated as exceptional (Rich 1980, p. 50). This positions the internal and external negotiations of women whose attractions and desires include partners of both genders as quite valuable. Their experiences add greatly to our understanding of sexuality as a whole.

We as a culture adhere to a hierarchy of sex acts. Rubin's (1984) concept of the Charmed Circle, which gives privilege to the characteristics of heterosexual,

married, monogamous, procreative, private, and between people of the same generation, explains this idea well (281). Rubin posits that our cultural privileging of heterosexual relationships undergird heterosexism (278–282). Current surveys asking what people *count* as sex consistently show that penile-vaginal intercourse is held in the highest regard across groups, while other forms of sexual expression are infrequently counted as “having sex.” As a result of this hierarchy, penile-vaginal intercourse is the socially sanctioned sexual act deemed as “normal.” Other types of sex—especially those outside the union of marriage—are “bad” kinds of sex. This positions those who perform, enjoy, and desire these sex acts as ‘deviant,’ ‘kinky,’ ‘perverse,’ and ‘abnormal.’ Thus, anyone whose sexual desires include same-sex partners fall into the outer ring of the Charmed Circle, which is the “bad sex” area. Those whose sexual desires include both same-sex and other-sex partners do as well.

Methods

The purpose of this pilot study was an investigation of the experiences of “undercover” women and the factors shaping their construction of their sexual identity, their management of their sexual desires, and how they balanced and negotiated their secret lives with their public relationships. Feminist methodologies guided this study, and placed women’s experiences at the center of the research and permitted women to delve into those experiences in their own words (DeVault 1999; Fonow and Cook 1991; Gorelick 1991). This experience as knowledge concept positions women’s collective experiences as a revelation of their realities and ideas about our social world. This unearths insight that we otherwise wouldn’t see without the lives of women at the center of our work (Hartsock 2004; Smith 1987). Ultimately, this study hopes to fill a gap in the current research on women’s sexuality, concurrent relationships, and women’s navigation of marriage.

Recruitment of a closeted population is complicated by its secrecy. There is no directory or existing sampling frame from which a researcher can draw a truly random sample. The original intent of the researcher was to utilize snowball sampling via local LGBT organizations and conduct face-to-face interviews. However, this method proved fruitless. After speaking with many contacts in the local LGBT community, I was advised that women who were of interest to the researcher would not be affiliated with those groups. Time and again, the researcher was directed to Craigslist, a well-known (in the local LGBT community) cruising site for women who secretly have sex with women. Given the known difficulty bisexual women have in signaling one another in public, online venues are often their only means of finding partners (Hayfield et al. 2013). Thus, to work around the difficulties in finding and recruiting sexual minority populations (Gorman 2003; Hash and Cramer 2003; Sullivan and Losberg 2003), the researcher employed the popular website, Craigslist, to find a sample population. Although this may at first glance seem unorthodox, other researchers have also employed the site to gather participants (Groves et al. 2013a, b; Erickson et al. 2013; Richmond et al. 2013; Sitar et al. 2009). Previous researchers have also recruited solely from Craigslist and then

conducted the entirety of their study online as well (Mohebati et al. 2012; Ramo et al. 2010; Siegel et al. 2011). Researchers have turned to Craigslist to analyze patterns of partner-seeking behaviors, especially those of men seeking male partners for sex (Groves 2010, 2012; Groves and Crowe 2012; Marik 2011; Robinson and Vidal-Ortiz 2013; Rosenbaum et al. 2013). Robinson and Moskowitz's (2013) study surveyed men who utilized Craigslist for their internet cruising to find male partners for cybersex. Moskowitz and Seal's (2010) study contacted participants by responding to the participants' ads and then surveyed the men about their sexual health. The present study solicited participants from Craigslist to examine the experiences of women who utilize the site to cruise for female partners, which is currently a gap in the literature.

The researcher's original intention was to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants. Thus, the original Craigslist study protocol permitted contacting women who had placed Craigslist ads in the "w4w" section of the "Casual encounters" portion of the personals ads as well as the "women seeking women" section in the researcher's local city and cities within a 3-h round-trip drive. Sadly, this protocol also proved fruitless. No women responded to the invitation to interview face-to-face. The few women who responded to the email invitation seemed eager to talk about their experiences, but simply could not bring themselves to risk exposure with a face-to-face interview. All potential participants in this study were women who were keeping their same-sex sexual encounters a secret from their other-sex partner, as well as nearly everyone else in their lives.

As a result, the study protocol was modified to include both the solicitation of women nationally and the option for participants to be interviewed over the telephone or via email. The researcher searched both the "w4w" section of the "Casual encounters" portion of the personal ads and the "women seeking women" section on Craigslist in major cities in all 50 states of the United States by a set of keywords: "secret," "discreet," as well as the misspelling, "discrete," and "married" within the title or body of the advertisement. Criterion sampling method filtered the list of possible participants further. Criterion sampling is used when a researcher selects subjects that meet a certain criteria (Taylor-Powell 1998). Using criterion sampling, the researcher chooses participants who have both experienced the phenomenon under study and are capable and willing to discuss their personal experiences regarding the phenomenon with the researcher (Heppner and Heppner 2004; Seidman 1998).

Once selected, the researcher contacted potential participants via email with a form letter, the informed consent and description of the study attached. All respondents opted for email-only interview. Once again, even among those who responded from areas close enough to consider a face-to-face interview, women were too concerned about confidentiality to consent. Again, women cited concerns about exposure. Phone interviews were similarly dismissed; women cited difficulty finding the privacy to speak about these experiences on the phone, concerns about being overheard, and having to explain the number if their primary partner were to see it on the bill. Thus, demographic data regarding age, race, and location were collected via email from each respondent, and each woman was given the opportunity to choose her own pseudonym. This only identifier utilized on interview

transcripts was the pseudonym chosen by the participant. Interviews were conducted through email. The researcher sent one question at a time and the participant responded to the question. Follow-up questions were posed based upon the participants' response. Thus, the interview was very much a "virtual conversation." Participants' answers tended to be quite long and detailed, with all of the participants generating at least three single-spaced transcripts. A single interview took weeks to accomplish, giving the participants time to consider their response to my questions. Many emailed in response to a question to first say they needed time to think about it before constructing their answer. Many women spoke of having emotional responses to the questions and to their own responses to them. Thus, the methodology ultimately worked well for the purposes of the study as it gave the women the time and space to manage their emotional responses and gather their thoughts regarding their responses. At the conclusion of the interview, the texts of the individual emails were assembled into one document and identified only by the participants' pseudonym. Then the transcript was sent back to the participant for member checking. After the participant signed off on their transcripts, the researcher destroyed the original correspondence so as to protect and ensure confidentiality.

Sample

All participants were between the ages of 24 and 65, and partnered in unions that were assumed monogamous by both outsiders. Their other-sex partner partners expected monogamy and were themselves monogamous, to the women's knowledge. None of the women in the study would ever consider clandestine meetings with an other-sex sexual partner. Each claimed that their other-sex partner was the only man they desired in their lives, but that he alone was simply not enough (Walker 2014). None of the women regarded their sexual encounters with women as "cheating," but kept their activities secret out of the realization that their spouses, friends, and others would not regard it in that manner (Walker 2014). The average age of participants was 37.8, which is relevant given that historical context plays a role in women's sexual identity constructions (Blackwood 2000; Diamond and Savin-Williams 2003; Paplau and Garnets 2000).

At the study's conclusion a total of thirty-four women had volunteered for the study and completed interviews. An additional six women originally volunteered, but dropped out without notice midway through the interview process. Those partial transcripts were not included in the data analysis. The sample was comprised of twenty-four respondents who identified themselves as White; eight respondents who self-identified as African American; one respondent who self-identified as Indian; and one respondent who self-identified as Asian (See Table 1).

Analysis

Data analysis employed grounded theory. Thus, rather than going into the study itself with a predetermined theory concerning what was happening, the researcher permitted the data itself guide theory formation (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 1998).

Table 1 Sample demographics

	Pseudonym	Age	Race	State		Pseudonym	Age	Race	State
1	Adlai	38	White	Alabama	18	Madison	24	White	Michigan
2	Brittany	29	African-American	California	19	Marie	38	White	Texas
3	Brooklyn	32	White	West Virginia	20	Morgan	24	White	South Dakota
4	Butterfly	46	White	Maryland	21	Nicole	45	African-American	Washington, DC
5	Colleen	40	White	Oklahoma	22	Noelle	32	Indian	Texas
6	Cynthia	56	White	Arkansas	23	Olivia	24	African-American	Massachusetts
7	Euphemia	31	African-American	Maryland	24	Reagan	33	White	Wisconsin
8	Frankie	30	White	Georgia	25	Roe	34	White	Nebraska
9	Gabriella	37	White	Iowa	26	Rosie	46	White	Mississippi
10	Hailey	31	White	Ohio	27	Roxie	47	White	South Carolina
11	Hannah	35	White	Indiana	28	Sadie	33	White	Illinois
12	Jasmine	33	African-American	Georgia	29	Sakae	35	Asian	North Carolina
13	Jess	43	White	New York	30	Samantha	27	White	New Hampshire
14	Jody	65	White	Wyoming	31	Tasha	35	African-American	Louisiana
15	Katie	48	White	Arkansas	32	Taylor	30	White	Nevada
16	Kylee	43	African-American	Florida	33	Veronica	37	White	California
17	Lola	33	African-American	Maryland	34	Victoria	34	White	New Jersey

Theory formation arose from the codes, which serve as anchors for key points. The codes evolve from the transcripts themselves. Transcript documents were reviewed line by line and allocated to develop themes and patterns that gave shape to the data. Once codes have been identified, the researcher groups them into similar concepts and categories. From these concepts, categories begin to become obvious, so that a theory can begin to form explaining the phenomenon observed. This coding, conceptualizing and categorizing took place by hand. This provided the means of "distilling large quantities of information to uncover significant features and elements that are embedded in the data" (Stringer 2007, p. 95). Thus, the researcher did not formulate a hypothesis prior to interviewing participants, but rather allowed the data collected to inform her theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As Glaser (1998) explained, grounded theory allows the researcher to formulate a theory "sequentially, subsequently, simultaneously, serendipitously, and scheduled" (p.1).

The analysis of the data yielded a grouping of themes consistent throughout the data. The women in this study repeatedly articulated that their sexual identity was that of "hypersexual" or "freak"; their encounters and search for a same-sex partner was solely for sex; sex with other women bore greater levels of intimacy than sex with men; and women as lovers to other women possess special knowledge which makes them better in bed.

Results

Results revealed that rather than closeting a bisexual identity, the women in this study were not interested in claiming a sexual identity other than "heterosexual." To them, the most salient characteristic of their sexual selves was their self-described high sex drive and amplified interest in sex. They found socially-recognized labels ("heterosexual," "homosexual," and "even bisexual") to be of little concern or merit. To them, the gender of their sexual partner of choice was not upon what their sexual identity should be based. Within their own responses, the data revealed contradictions. While the women all explained their search for a female partner was for "*just sex*," they also described sex with women as "more intimate" than sex with male partners. Additionally, they all attributed heightened sexual skill to female partners than to male partners. Each women espoused a belief that there were "just certain things" female partners were better at than male partners. This certainly seems to echo prevailing research on the stereotypes attributed to bisexuals (Rust 2000); though the women in this study didn't regard themselves as bisexual, they clearly projected the characteristic of being especially skilled at sex onto all women who choose same-sex partners.

"Just a freak"

Twenty-six of the thirty-four participants in this study claimed a heterosexual sexual identity. Of the eight women who claimed a bisexual identity, six were White; two were African American. All of the eight women who claimed a bisexual identity were careful to delineate that their public persona was that of heterosexual. Their

conception of themselves as bisexual was secret. But even within that conception, they too did not find that socially-recognized label to be all that meaningful personally. Like the rest of the women in this study, the more salient identifier for their personal conception of sexual identity had to do with their desire for sexual frequency and what they perceived as boundary-pushing. Thirteen of the twenty-six not claiming a bisexual identity dodged the question, "How do you perceive your sexual identity?" altogether and responded with some variation of: "I'm not a lesbian; I'm just a freak." This precise phraseology was in fact used by multiple respondents. Five of those dodging the question were African-American and both the Asian and Indian participant were in this group as well. Overall, twenty-three of the women in the study maintained that their behavior was driven more from a desire for more sex than their primary partner was willing, able, or interested in providing. All of the women of color in this sample made that claim. Thirteen expressed a need or desire for more boundary-pushing sex than their primary partner was interested in. Of that group, four were African-American and one participant was Indian. In general, the women conceived of their sexual selves as a more sexualized, more decadent, and more sensual in their sexual expression than most people they knew. To the participants, their experiences with women were merely an outgrowth of their sexual personality, which was more aggressive, more debauched, and more carnal in their appetites than their public personas and their primary partners' conception of them permitted.

Lola maintained her identity was "closet freak," and went on to described herself as a "hypersexual person." She explained: "I remember watching my first girl-on-girl porn when I was 14. But at 12, I was so interested in sex, I watched my 16-year-old neighbor girl undress. When she babysat me, I talked her into letting me touch her breast and rub her vagina." Tasha also claimed "freak" as her identity, explaining: "I'm just sexual. I just like being freaky and being with a woman isn't the norm and is somewhat taboo. I enjoy the freakiness of it." Among those who did respond that they considered themselves heterosexual, they explained their omission of any consideration the gender identity of their sexual partners in their construction of sexual identity by explaining that their activities with women were an outgrowth of their high sex drives. Veronica explained, "I identify as a hedonist. I have never had any interest in pursuing a relationship with a woman, I just enjoy the physical contact." Lisa reiterated, "I just like sex. Sex with women; sex with men. I just need a lot of sex in general." Even among those few women who claimed bisexuality as an identity—an albeit secret identity—most still maintained that sex with women was just an outgrowth of their intensified desire for sex, which they believed set them apart from other women. Colleen, who describes herself as "one of those rare creatures who are 100 % bisexual," explained her desire in this manner: "Basically, I just love sex." She further explained why she needed to keep this secret: "It bothers me that a man in the same position would never be labeled the same way a woman would be." Kylee explained that she was discounting her experiences with women in her sexual identity because she is a freak as well. She elaborated: "I just enjoy or have a fetish for the sound of a woman cumming. It's the thrill of having sneaky sex no one knows about." Interestingly, none of the women claimed to be involved in BDSM (bondage, dominance, sadism, masochism), kink, or any other

sexual subcultures. For the women in this study "freakiness" and "hypersexuality" was defined as a high sex drive, becoming excited by secretive sexual encounters, desiring sexual encounters of an extended length, and desiring extended foreplay. Fifteen women specifically remarked that part of what was exciting about being with a same-sex partner was the "taboo" or "forbidden" nature of the encounter. Within that group was all eight of the African-American participants.

The women in this study clearly defined themselves as "freaky," "hypersexual," and having a "high sex drive" to explain their desire to arrange clandestine same-sex sexual encounters. For them, the gender of their partner was not a consideration in their formation of a sexual identity, but instead represented a desire to push boundaries and engage in taboo behavior. Their refusal to pin their identity on the gender of their partner-choice is consistent with previous research on bisexuals (Hemmings 2002). Brooks' (2006) study found that in cohorts over the age of 30, women who have experience with same-sex partners are less likely to use sexual identity labels than cohorts 18–30. Given the average age of participants in this study was 37.8, the data confirms her findings. Our sexual identities evolve from the categories and associated meanings existing within our socio-cultural settings, which influence and shape their meaning and expression, as well as what is deemed desirable, possible, and proper. These social constructions surrounding sexual identity labels form and mold the way we interpret and label our behavior and experience.

The data certainly supports previous findings that bisexuals tend to be more conflicted about their sexual identity (Moore and Norris 2005). Further, it supports previous research showing that many people do not perceive bisexuality as a bona fide identity, but rather a 'cover' for those who are actually homosexual but do not want to admit that identity (Fox 1995; Hansen and Evans 1985; Israel and Mohr 2004; Zinik 1985). Given that these women have sex with both same-sex and other-sex partners, it is interesting that they also do not perceive bisexuality as a real identity and suspicion it may be a cover. Considering that the repeated phrase "I'm not a lesbian" was put forward in response to "Do you consider yourself bisexual?," we can assume there is at least some sense within these women that a bisexual identity may not be completely authentic. Additionally, their self-perception as "hypersexual" and a "freak" is supported by Rubin's Charmed Circle, which positions any woman having sex with another woman, and sex outside of marriage as "bad" and "abnormal" (1984). Given the extreme heterosexism in our society, the perception of themselves as heterosexual despite their same-sex partner-choice could signal an inability to conceptualize a sexual identity between heterosexual and homosexual (Morgan and Thompson 2006).

Their responses refuting a bisexual identity could be due in part to a lack of "unlearning" our socialization, which is what McLean (2001) explained would be required for an individual to accept a bisexual identity for themselves. At minimum, it supports previous research showing that the sexual categories now available to us culturally fail to fully encapsulate women's sexual behavior and self-perception (Diamond 2003, 2008a, b; Harper et al. 2004; Horowitz and Newcomb 2001). Considering the research demonstrating that a dissonance between sexual behavior and sexual identity can result in damaging health outcomes (Kerker et al. 2006;

Pathela et al. 2006), this could be concerning for the women in this study. Self-identifying as a bisexual could lead to engagement with the bisexual community and provide enhanced well being and self-confidence, as well as stave off the ill effects of biphobia (Kertzner et al. 2009; Levahot et al. 2009).

Just sex

The women in this study all framed their associations with other women as “just sex.” Their simplified view of their encounters permitted them the space to continue on in their primary relationships without disturbing or disrupting their daily rituals, routines, or relationships. The compartmentalization required to carry on these side-by-side clandestine relationships is enabled by their framing of these associations as “just sex” and nothing more. In fact, when asked, “How do these encounters or relationships complement or interfere with your primary relationship” and “How do these relationships work alongside your primary relationship?” time and again, the women insisted that the two things were “separate” and not related to one another. This belief was buttressed in part because of the concealed nature of these encounters, but also because the women positioned the importance of these events as very low because they are “just sex,” and therefore, not threatening to their primary relationship, or sexual identity.

Adlai explained: “I am not interested in women emotionally. Most of my desire for women is purely on a sexual plane.” Sakae describes the struggle in securing a partner: “If the girl is single, mostly they end in falling in love or wanting something more than just hookups. I try to find women similar to me, who are in relationships and can handle NSA [no strings attached] sex. It’s hard.” Colleen echoed the sentiment that finding another woman who was not “bisexual emotionally” was a challenge. She explained: “The first woman I found was a very giving lover, but she got way too attached.” Jasmine makes her position clear: “I am not into having an actual relationship with women. Sexually I have an itch that my boyfriend can’t scratch. That’s all.” Woman after woman explained that their interest in women was “purely physical.” Veronica explained that this delineation is why she doesn’t claim a bisexual identity. “I have no interest in dating women. So I don’t want to detract from people who genuinely open to both genders. I am just in it for the fun.” Brooklyn clarified her stance on women as partners as well. “I’m not unhappy in my marriage. I’m not sexually unsatisfied either. This is something outside my day to day that is strictly for fun only.” Hannah differentiated herself from bisexual women as well: “I seek sexual gratification, and I don’t happen to be selective about what gender the person is.”

The participants made a clear delineation between individuals seeking or open to an interaction laden with emotional attachment to same-sex partners and themselves. That separation was a critical point of classification and meaning for these women. Because they only desire sex with same-sex partners and nothing more, they saw themselves as distinctive from a bisexual identity. This position supports previous research on bisexuality which says many women refuse to claim a bisexual identity in part because they do not see themselves as “bisexual enough” (Finnegan and McNally 2002; Ochs 2007). Relevant here also is Schwartz and

Blumstein (1998), who found that women prioritize relational factors when selecting a bisexual identity. In fact, falling in love with a same-sex partner is often the salient factor for a woman taking on a lesbian or bisexual identity (Esterberg 1994; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; Schwartz and Blumstein 1998). Since the women in this study were firmly opposed to emotional ties with their same-sex partners, most failed to identify themselves as bisexual. Considering the stigma and isolation attached to a bisexual identity, it may be somewhat of a relief to these women to find themselves "not bisexual enough" to claim the identity (Correll and Park 2005; Dworkin 2001; Jost et al. 2004; Szymanski 2008).

Intimacy

In juxtaposition to their compartmentalization of these associations to "just sex," all of the women in this study also consistently mentioned an increased level of intimacy as a benefit of a same-sex partner. In response to being asked, "What are all the things you get from your relationships with other women that you do not get in your primary partnership?" most of the women in the study mentioned "intimacy" in their response. For these women, sexual activity with same-sex partners was marked by a heightened level of intimacy they felt was unavailable to them with opposite-sex partners.

Initially, Noelle struggled to answer this question. She replied to the initial inquiry: "I've found myself unexpectedly emotional when I try to answer this. Give me a few days and I'll get back to you." When her next email arrived, she had settled on this explanation: "Longer intimacy and the enjoyment of tasting another woman." When asked to elaborate on what she meant by "intimacy," she clarified: "One thing is the genuine interest in my body and time spent in making sure I am satisfied." Marie explained it similarly: "With another woman I seem to find a level of mental intimacy not possible. And I feel a lot safer than I do with any man." Hailey revealed that she had tried to "give up" her dalliances with other women, but came back to it because she "miss[ed] the intimacy with women." Butterfly remarked on intimacy as well: "Sexually, it's not as rush, so more pillow talk and playfulness. The intamacy [sic] is more intense as well. I can talk about things like shopping and trying new hairstyles. It's an ear that listens and we talk about things most men are not interested in at all." Brittany reiterated this idea as well. "Women, regardless of race, class, education, all have something in common. I've had very insightful conversations because for the most part we are very open with each other." Taylor elaborated on her idea of greater intimacy with women as well: "Someone wanting to hold me and be close to me. That affirmation that I am wanted." Colleen summed it up: "The female encounters are more fulfilling. There is nothing in the world like making another women cum. It gives me a powerful feeling of being desired, affirmation that I'm a wholly sexual being."

While in these women's minds, their associations were restricted solely to sexual activity, most spoke of a heightened connection, closeness, and confidence with other women than they felt with the men with whom they shared their lives. Even among women who restricted dalliances with any given partner to a single encounter to avoid problematic "clinginess" or "attachment" on the other woman's

part, heightened intimacy was cited as a benefit of same-sex partners. This echoes previous research demonstrating that women often report getting different things from sexual relationships with women than they do with men (George 1993; Norrgard 1991; Orndorff 1999; Strock 1998; Weinberg et al. 1994), as well as work showing that women who have sex with women often claim a closer emotional connection with same-sex partners than with other-sex partners (Norrgard 1991; Orndorff 1999; Strock 1998).

'Special skills' of women

Another theme seen across narratives was the idea that women as a same-sex partner were simply "better" sexual partners than an opposite-sex partner. Over and over again, women spoke of other women as having a special skill set when in bed with another woman. Every participant in the study made mention of this belief and expectation of their same-sex partners. The possession of this special insight into women's sexual needs, desires, and pleasure was clearly a vital component of their experience and desire for same-sex encounters. The search for another encounter with a specially skilled partner was important enough to the women to risk detection, engage in deception with their spouse, family, and friends, and to invest the time to cull through responses to their ads—the bulk of which were often men hoping to talk a desperate bisexual woman into anonymous sex—in order to experience it once more.

Many women used the phraseology in their explanations. Many said, "A woman knows another woman's body because she has the same parts." In fact, the researcher began to wonder if this was a common saying they were repeating. Another group repeated the phrase: "Women are just better at oral sex on a woman than a man is." Others elaborated in their own verbiage. Nicole put it simply: "women know to a tee what another woman wants." Samantha elaborated: "A man's touch is nothing like a woman's touch. They know what you want because they have the same body parts and if they know how to please them selfs [sic] then they know how to please other women." Sadie lamented this difference in genders: "My husband does the best he can, but not one knows a woman's struggle [to orgasm] like a woman." Lola echoed the sentiment: "You will get a longer sexual experience. A female knows the right places to touch and how to touch those places. I mean, we have the same anatomy. But with a guy, he sometimes feels he has to dominate or the sexual experience is far too short for you to even enjoy it. He touches the wrong places. You never have that with another woman."

For these women, the idea that women are superior to men as lovers to other women held salience. This belief was reiterated even by women who shared stories of previous unsatisfactory encounters with other women. All of the women firmly believed that an encounter with a random female stranger was sexually a better bet than sex with a random man, and possibly even sex with their primary male partner. This conviction clearly played a role in their decision-making. This echoes the work on stereotypes of bisexual individuals as "sexually gifted" (Rust 2000), as well as the work finding that women claim to get something from relationships with same-

sex partners that they cannot get from other-sex partners (George 1993; Norrgard 1991; Orndorff 1999; Strock 1998; Weinberg et al. 1994).

Discussion

For the women participating in this study, sexual identity as we now culturally render it with limited choices based on the gender of our partner-choice is a useless concept. Most claimed a heterosexual identity. More importantly, salient to the women's self-concept was that their sexuality be understood in terms of its intensity, a desire for frequency, and their desire for a diversity of sexual acts. This was also true among the few respondents who claimed a bisexual identity. This is critical considering the importance of research into "sexualities" which do not confine themselves within the parameters of "heterosexual," "homosexual," or even "bisexual." These women clearly illustrate that for some, those categories simply do not hold much worth or use. This is consistent with Brooks' (2006) findings that women over 30 tend to eschew self-labeling in terms of sexual identity.

All of the women were clear in their desire to limit their association with their same-sex partners to sexual encounters only (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; Schwartz and Blumstein 1998). Many told stories of painful extrication attempts from women who got "too attached." Finding partners who were only seeking a limited and compartmentalized association as well was an ongoing struggle for them. At the same time, within the encounters themselves, the women reported experiencing and perceiving a greater level of intimacy and sensuality with their same-sex partners than they enjoyed with their primary partner, or even their previous other-sex partners (Norrgard 1991; Orndorff 1999; Strock 1998). Likewise, they believed their same-sex partners to possess a greater skill, innate knowledge of women's bodies, and thus to be better and more intuitive lovers than opposite-sex partners (George 1993; Norrgard 1991; Orndorff 1999; Strock 1998; Weinberg, et al. 1994). These findings support much of the existing data on bisexuality despite the lack of claims of bisexual identity in this sample (Diamond 2003, 2008a, b; Fox 1995; Hansen and Evans 1985; Harper et al. 2004; Hemmings 2002; Horowitz and Newcomb 2001; Israel and Mohr 2004; McLean 2001; Morgan and Thompson 2006; Zinik 1985).

Unlike previous work on men "on the down low," this study did not reveal a racial divide. There were in fact more similarities among racial categories than differences. A limitation of this study, however, is a lack of demography regarding class. In light of the tendency of individuals in the U.S. to claim a middle class identity, demographic information regarding class was not collected. Thus, a study utilizing a reliable measure of class may reveal more nuances than can be shown here. While fluidity did not appear to play a role in these women's lives, a longitudinal study of women "undercover" may demonstrate distinctions which cannot be gleaned from a study of this nature or bring to light other processes of meaning-making as well as identity construction. The women in this study reported ongoing secret same-sex sexual partnerships concurrent to heterosexual couplings throughout the life course. A longitudinal study would confirm this. Interviews

scheduled at five- and ten- year intervals may bring to light fascinating truths regarding meaning making, self-perception, and sexual identity.

The data in this study challenges the notion of women as primarily “emotional” in their affairs. Previous studies on heterosexual extra-relational affairs suggest that women must “fall in love” in order to engage in extra-relational sexual activity (Glass and Wright 1985). The women in this study not only do not need to “fall in love” with same-sex partners to engage in sexual activity with them, and, further, they report a resistance to even entertaining ongoing or deep emotional involvement with their partners. Many consciously choose one-time sexual events with a variety of partners to ensure there are no “complications” stemming from their partners’ emotionality. Likewise, the data from this study challenges our cultural ideas about sexual identity. The participants refused to be bound by simple ideas about sexual labels. Even among women who claimed “heterosexual” or “bisexual” labels, they were careful to impress upon the researcher that their perception of themselves as a sexual being hinged more upon their frequency of sexual desire and preferences for variety. These facets of their sexual personality weighed far greater to them in fashioning their self-identity than the gender of their partner. Even among the few women claiming a bisexual identity, they explained that their public identity was assumed to be heterosexual by other people in their lives. For them, their tendency and preference for boundary-pushing, taboo-breaking, and partiality to ever-changing same-sex partners served as the basis for how they made meaning of their sexual identity. Part of the excitement of same-sex partners for these women was that it broke a social taboo. The popular dichotomous sexual identity system used by most of American society was irrelevant to the women in this study. Even adding in a third option of “bisexual,” did not encompass their concept of themselves as sexual beings. Ultimately, our widely used and supposedly stringent categories of sexual identity do not hold much salience, relevance, or meaning for these women.

Conclusion

This was a pilot study examining the meaning-making and navigating practices of women whose secret Craigslist ads lead them to same-sex partners for clandestine sexual encounters. These sexual associations took place alongside the women’s primary relationships—either with a husband, fiancé, or live-in, long-term boyfriend, who expected monogamy from them. Although assumed heterosexual (and monogamous) by their friends, families, and coworkers, these women were unconcerned with existing labels such as “heterosexual” or “bisexual.” They defined themselves on their own terms and by their sexual personalities and inclination toward what they considered “hypersexuality” or “freakiness.” Despite conventional ideas that women are emotionally driven in their extra-relational affairs and need to “fall in love” to participate in extra-relational sexual activity, these women had no interest in emotional attachment and avoided partners who they believed would not be able to handle compartmentalized encounters. The women in the study experience sex with same-sex partners as more intimate and sensuous than sex with opposite-sex partners. And overall they believe women to more capable

lovers to other women than men. However, all of the women were clear on their lack of desire and unwillingness to be exclusively involved with women. For these women, their "undercover" life offered just enough same-sex sexual release to please them. They preferred the rest of their lives as is. Although predominately a White population, there were no significant differences in data generated by dominant group respondents and non-dominant group respondents. Thus, the delineation found in studies of men "on the down low" did not appear to hold true here. Class was not a variable considered in this study due to a lack of reliable measures in a study of this nature. The results of this study indicate a need for further studies as well as longitudinal studies to examine the possible role of fluidity, which was not reported as a factor here, as well as looking at women's practices, self-identity, and meaning making in this phenomenon. Overall, there is a great deal to be learned from "sexualities" which do not fit neatly into the boxes our culture has designated to describe sexual behavior.

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