Institutionalized normative heterosexuality: the case of sexual fluidity

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Institutionalized Normative Heterosexuality:
The Case of Sexual Fluidity

By
Nicole Lamarre

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ABSTRACT

Since Alfred Kinsey’s early exploration of sexual behaviors, identities, and desires, there has been a proliferation of studies on what is generally regarded today as sexual fluidity. Inquiry into sexual histories that are neither wholly heterosexual nor homosexual (or even bisexual) has been incredibly well documented by this time. Generally, theories about sexual fluidity have taken one of two positions. The first camp interprets sexual variance as a sign of changing times and crumbling sexual and gender binaries. The second group of theorists postulate that sexual fluidity is neither new nor a particularly positive or liberating social trend. Instead of providing more freedom of choice and experimentation for individuals, fluidity, beneath the surface, functions to mask continued oppressions and institutional controls. Through a qualitative analysis of forty sexual narratives of self-identified women, I make the case that Seidman’s (2009b) conceptualization of institutionalized normative heterosexuality is an important framework for interpreting the cultural significance of sexual fluidity today, and can bridge the gap in the existing literature on sexual fluidity. The rich sexual histories uncovered four different ways women understood their sexual identities and fluid experiences; institutional identifiers, political identifiers, identity irrelevance, and sexual proclivities. In the end, I argue that both the theories of compulsory heterosexuality and institutionalized normative heterosexuality should be used in conjunction to better understand the significance of sexual fluidity in contemporary U.S. society.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For there are signs of newer and diverse stories in the making which
shun unities and uniformities; reject naturalism and determinacies; seek
out imminences and ironies; and ultimately find pastiche, complexities
and shifting perspectives. –Plummer, 1997 (133)

“I think it is too complicated. I mean I’m not attracted to every man, just like I’m not attracted
to every woman. So, I don’t think I put much stake in it [sexual identity] because I don’t think
it’s possible [to categorize people]. I mean you may be surprised, you haven’t met everyone in
the world.” ~ LaMarre, 2010

Years ago now, I caught the beginning of Barbara Walter’s yearly special on ABC, “10
Most Interesting People.” The first guest was the pop/fashion icon, Lady Gaga. Known for
outrageous fashions and salacious lyrics, what Walters (and the network) seemed to find most
interesting about Lady Gaga was a line in her hit song “Poker Face” where she discusses
“bluffing” with her “muffin.” When Walters asked about the meaning of the phrase, Lady Gaga
implied that it was a reference to bisexuality. Upon being asked if she was bisexual, she replied,
“Well, I have never been in love with a woman,” confirming that she had sexual intimacies with
women in the past, but presumably no formal romantic relationships. Later in the interview,
when asked, Lady Gaga avoided sexually identifying as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual,
to the confusion of Walters and viewers alike.

The refusal to identify within socially constructed sexual binaries and the experience of
sexual fluidity are not “new” phenomena, as the quotes at the beginning of this chapter
demonstrate. Researchers and theorists across academic disciplines have underscored the
incredible variance within individual sexual histories since Alfred Kinsey (1948, 1953) first
began collecting sexual narratives in the 1940s. Generally, sexual fluidity refers to sexual
experiences, desires, and fantasies that contradict static heterosexual or homosexual identities.
For instance, many women report engaging in sexual encounters with, or some level of intimacy, fantasy, or desire for, other women during their lives. The study of sexual narratives has consistently posited that while the predominant framework for interpreting sexuality in the West is based on gender/sex preference, individual’s intimate narratives often transcend binary gender and sexual categorization. When desires, fantasies, and actual experiences are taken into account, very few individuals are “100%” straight, or gay for that matter (Messner 2002).

THE PROBLEM

The principal problem I am concerned with here is not Lady Gaga herself, or even contemporary media depictions of sexuality. Rather, I am interested in the binary discourses of sexuality that I see Lady Gaga, and many others, as struggling to navigate. Additionally, I am interested in documenting the public and private resistance that some individuals express to being sexually “labeled.” Opposition and conflict surrounding the adoption of sexual identities is certainly not a new social trend. Yet the vast majority of individuals, regardless of sexual encounters that contradict any semblance of a static sexuality, continue to identify within sexual binaries. Since the creation of sexual categories, individuals have rendered certain sexual experiences irrelevant, or discounted contradictory fantasies/desires in order to maintain the pretense of a fixed binary sexuality. Feminists and sociologists have long argued that a compulsory heterosexual order compels people to adopt normative sexual identities. Although compulsory heterosexuality has been expanded upon since its original formulation, several facets of the original theory continue to be used to explain the consistent cultural reliance on sexual binaries since the 1970s (Rich 1993; Seidman 2009).
The theory of compulsory heterosexuality, at its core, argues that normative heterosexuality creates both gender and sexual binary divisions through naturalized juxtapositions of masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality (Rich 1993). In this sense, men and women are assumed to need each other socially and sexually to be complete. Furthermore, heterosexual privilege coerces individuals to identify within these binary systems. Coercion, an important regulatory mechanism of patriarchal societies, refers to the power of compulsory heterosexuality to naturalize behaviors that come to be recognized as feminine/masculine, heterosexual/homosexual (Rich 1980).

In return for assimilating to these cultural scripts, the order of compulsory heterosexuality provides authentication for correctly enacted sexual and gender identities (Butler 1997: 306). Compulsory heterosexuality assigns and creates individual gendered and sexualized identities by pressuring individuals to partake in repeated, normalized gendered acts in order to be legitimated and recognized in American society (Butler 1997). In a compulsory heterosexual society, sexual identities are far from a choice or personal freedom. Indeed, we cannot be culturally authenticated without adopting binary sexual identities because of the socially obscured institutional constraints that suggest heterosexuality, masculinity, and femininity are the most basic and natural traits of humanity (Seidman 2009b; Warner 1994).

In compulsory heterosexual societies, individual sexualities are shaped into heterosexual identities through institutional sanctioning. Within a compulsory heterosexual order, Seidman notes, “Social institutions, laws, policies, cultural representations, and daily practices of harassment, intimidation, and violence enforce heterosexuality and gender binarism,” (Seidman 2009; 20). The sometimes severe social/physical backlash against people who do not conform serves to coerce them into heterosexual relationships. This, in turn, naturalizes both gender and
sexual divisions. Thus, heterosexuality as an institution enforces a social order based on binary
categorical differences and male dominance. The coercive power of compulsory heterosexuality
lends privilege to those who hold fast to normative gender and sexual performances (Butler
1997; Rich 1993; Seidman 2009). In return for adopting public heterosexual identities, people
are rewarded with institutional privileges and “normal” citizenship (Butler 1999; Rich 1993;
Richardson 2000; Warner 1993).

As a result of this larger social coercion, Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1994) have suggested
that, “people [who have engaged in same sex intimacies] construct an elaborate repertoire of
explanations to enable same-sex sexual activity without the concomitant development of lesbian
or gay identities (‘I was drunk’; ‘He’s the pervert, not me’; ‘It was just a one-off’; ‘I was only
experimenting’)” (312). How are sociologists to interpret the discrepancies between sexual
experiences and self-identities? Can compulsory heterosexuality fully explain this type of
identity disjuncture? Do the people who reject identity categories indicate a weakening of the
coercion surrounding sexual binaries? For those who continue to adopt binary identities, what
institutional ties serve to support binary sexual identification in contemporary society? What
experiences and cultural ties do individuals share who reject sexual identification? In a culture
where there was no coercive privilege attached to particular sexual identities, arguably, there
would be no pressure for individuals to interpret their experiences through limited binary
discourses. Certainly, socio-historians have documented various times in history where the social
construction of sexuality has relied on factors other than gender/sex preference (Chauncey 1994;

For those individuals who have had same-sex intimacies but maintain a heterosexual
identity regardless, this steadfast adherence to binaries can be interpreted as a consequence of
coercion. The same applies to LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) individuals who dismiss opposite-sex, sexual intimacies in order to don a static homosexual identity. But what about people who avidly reject sexual identity categories altogether, in a time widely interpreted as one that is dominated by compulsory heterosexual regulation? To return to my earlier Lady Gaga reference, her public narrative does not necessarily represent some new period in the history of sexuality in the United States. If anything, the sexual fluidity she exhibits epitomizes the continued complexity of interpreting personal intimacies in a dichotomous, compulsory heterosexual ordered society.

Continuing the analysis of Lady Gaga’s public narrative, some scholars have proclaimed that such stories are representative of a historically unique and growing “revolt” against sexual identities (Drobac 1999; Heasley 2005; Nestle et al 2002; Plummer 1997; Raymond 1997; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman 2009). No longer content to cling to one label or another, people are avidly proclaiming they are neither/nor. The past 25 years have seen the rise of several identity movements that have aimed to confuse binary sexual and gender roles. These movements have combined and blurred masculine and feminine self-expressions with homosexual and heterosexual desires. Examples include, but are not limited to, metrosexuals, queer lesbians/gays/straights, pansexuals, heteroflexibility and genderqueer movements (Diamond and Butterworth 2008; Drobac 1999; Essig 2000; Heasley 2005; Nestle et al 2002; Raymond 1997; Roseneil 2002; Scott 1997; Seidman 2009; Smith 2000). The emergence of these identities raises important questions about the normative status of heterosexuality and the coercion to adopt fixed sexual identities (whether gay or straight). While there is an abundance of literature documenting sexual fluidity, there is little agreement about the significance of such narratives.
Currently, there is a deeply entrenched debate in the academic community about the significance of these fluid interpretations and rejections of sexual orientation.

*Dawn of a New Day: The End of Sexual Binaries*

Two distinct arguments have emerged regarding the cultural significance of contemporary experiences of sexual fluidity. The first theoretical camp argues that fluid sexual narratives, such as Lady Gaga’s, are indicative of the end (or at least weakening) of sexual binaries and compulsory heterosexuality (Roseneil 2002; Seidman 2009). For the first time since the creation of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the 20th century, researchers assert that some individuals report being able to operate outside of restrictive binary discourses. The resistance to adopting a fixed sexual identity is understood by some as an indicator of a larger, social rejection of gender/sexual binaries. These arguments have explored various identities and sexual sub-cultures, from the interpretation of sexuality among today’s youth to those found in the swinger and BDSM communities (Plummer 1995; Rooke and Figueroa 2010; Roseneil 2002; Rubin 1993; Rust 1992; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman 2009a; Seidman 2009b). For instance, based on data collected from queer youth, Savin-Williams (2005) argues,

[The] scholarly resolutions to the problem of whose gay are seldom congruent with the way young people see it. Members of the younger generation doubt that their sexual orientation can be reduced to either homosexual or bisexual or heterosexual (30).

In this regard, Lady Gaga becomes exemplary of a new generation who is characterized by a widespread embracement of sexual fluidity and freedom of choice.

Together, these scholars argue that the rejection of sexual identities is having a profound impact on the larger social construction of sexuality. The formation of movements that reject sexual or gender identification are argued to render normative heterosexuality and fixed identity
claims obsolete. Although many institutions continue to rely on sexual binaries (religion, marriage) they exert less direct control and influence over people to adopt or interpret their experiences via binaries. Trends supporting the rejection of sexual labels/identities have been observed in empirical studies of bisexuality (Ault 1996; Esterberg 2002; Rust 1992, 1995), as well as in studies of baby boomer generations (Plummer 1995; Stein 1997; Seidman 2009a). This refusal to adopt conventional sexual identities across various ages and social groups, coupled with changes in the construction of normative heterosexuality are, to some, signaling the end of sexual oppression based on heterosexual/homosexual binaries (Roseneil 2002).

*Same Oppression, Different Era*

On the other hand, there is a long list of theorists who have vehemently disputed these claims. The resounding question is whether individual resistances effectively challenge institutional structures and inequalities. While on the surface these aforementioned identity movements seem to herald change, these theorists argue that they are the same oppression under a new guise. The most recent explorations of the fluidity in sexual narratives have focused on how these changes present the *illusion* of progress and sexual freedom (Diamond 2005; Essig 2000; Johnson 2004; Gamson 2002). Some researchers see Lady Gaga’s narrative as an example of heteroflexibility, where the political context of sexual decisions is glossed over by explanations of idiosyncrasy and personal choice (Essig 2000). Through the acknowledgement that she gave same-sex sexual experiences a “fair shot,” she maintains the impression that heterosexuality is merely a personal choice, rather than a socially regulated institution. The result is that the coercion to adopt heterosexual identities is overlooked entirely. The media, particularly, has come under fire from feminists and queer theorists for failing to recognize
heterosexuality as a hegemonic social institution (Diamond 2005; Fahs 2009; Gamson 2001; Gamson 2002; Nardi 1997).

Sexual fluidity, especially public displays between women, has also been interpreted to be an important part of the maintenance of contemporary patriarchal dominance. Same-sex intimacies among women have been highly heterosexualized, especially in pornography and on college campuses (Hamilton 2007; Jenefsky and Miller 1998). As Hamilton (2007) notes, “Same-sex eroticism between conventionally feminine women becomes a performance for men, one that inevitably ends in heterosexual sex,” (148); thus reinforcing normative heterosexuality. Sexual freedom may be praised, but it is done within the confines of compulsory heterosexuality. For example, should Lady Gaga have proclaimed her love for women over men, it may be doubtful whether she would be as well received by the larger heteronormative culture (Warner 1994). Much of the research in this field has focused on questioning the “positivity” of homosexual visibility in the media, as well as exploring heterosexual narratives in college fraternities/sororities (Diamond 2005; Gamson 2002; Hamilton 2007; Nardi 1997; Seidman 2009b).

Regardless of individual resistances to sexual categories, the larger social structure remains unchanged. Female same-sex acts may be considered chic and hip, but only to the extent that they are limited and directed towards male audiences. Likewise, although sexually fluid narratives may be widely observed, they have done little to challenge heterosexual privilege within institutions (Vaid 1995; Seidman 2009b). The times may seem to be changing, but freedom of sexual choice acts as a disguise for continued oppression.

What all of these studies referenced thus far have in common is that they speculate about the meanings of sexual fluidity within the existing theoretical framework of compulsory
heterosexuality. Rather than speculating whether society exists somewhere beyond or is still stuck within binary sexual regulation, I would like to explore a new understanding put forth by Seidman (2009b). Perhaps sexual fluidity could best be framed not by a theory of compulsory heterosexuality (or compulsory bisexuality- see Fahs 2009), but by a theory of *institutionalized normative heterosexuality* (Seidman 2009b).

**NEW FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL FLUIDITY:**  
**INSTITUTIONALIZED NORMATIVE HETEROSEXUALITY**

Ironically, the differing viewpoints addressing the significance of sexual fluidity operate within a binary discourse of their own. That is, to say, that researchers are interpreting contemporary sexual narratives and media depictions as either transcending or reinforcing compulsory heterosexuality. As different as these interpretations seem, researchers are addressing the same overarching question: what do contemporary accounts of non-identity and fluidity mean in the context of a culture permeated by binary sexual discourses? Despite the myriad of research trying to address sexually fluid experiences, there has yet to be a cross-discipline exploration of the literature addressing sexual fluidity and compulsory heterosexuality.

Among theorists who argue that we are witnessing the beginning of the end of sexual binary regulation, the theoretical assumption is that increased personal freedom and social visibility will challenge institutional inequalities. Roseneil (2002), particularly, argues that changes in the organization of intimacy are working to de-stabilize sexual binaries (see also Bawer 1993 and Sullivan 1996). For example, gay men and women have become normalized in many institutions (including work, media, the military, and to some extent the institution of marriage and family) (Gamson 2002; Raeburn 2004; Walters 2001). Even the repressive regime
of “the closet” is not what it once was, as the social acceptance and legal protections afforded to LGB individuals today has dismantled the repressive closet of the 1950s (Seidman 2004).

But to what extent does visibility and acceptance lend itself to widespread institutional change? Johnson’s (2004) qualitative research challenges the theoretical argument that individual acceptance leads to institutional integration. Even if same-sex love and relationships are more socially visible and accepted by individuals, heterosexuality remains normalized through the pollution of sexual acts between individuals of the same-sex. Regardless of changes in the demographics of intimacies, sexual identities and specific sexual practices continue to be organized by sexual binaries (Johnson 2004; Seidman 2009b). Additional research has made similar claims, arguing that the regulation of sexual binaries is being maintained in increasingly hidden ways, rather than disappearing altogether (Casey 2004; Seidman 2004; Stein 2005).

I assert that the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality can bridge the gap between these contradictory interpretations about the functioning of sexual binaries in contemporary societies. Integration does not necessarily lead to full equality and cultural acceptance. As Seidman (2009b) posits, “In many social sectors normative heterosexuality is reproduced in ways that institutionally incorporate gay men and lesbians but continue to position them in a socially subordinate position,” (25-26). Sexual binaries on an institutional level endure through their function as a gateway to social privileges. Institutionalized normative heterosexuality accounts for the continued “embeddedness of normative heterosexuality but not necessarily its compulsory status,” (Seidman 2009b; 25).

In other words, although institutions may be structured to an extent by gender and sexual binaries, individuals experience less coercion on a personal level to conform. Heterosexuality has become less of an individual condition of institutional belonging, but maintains its privileged and
“natural” status through structural divides. Although some spaces may be ordered by compulsory heterosexuality (primary schools, churches, the institution of marriage in some states), using compulsory heterosexuality as a framework for understanding sexual fluidity in general may obscure important changes in sexual agency and coercion that highlight a shift in the organization of Western sexualities. This research is an attempt to assess the compulsory status of heterosexuality, and empirically analyze Seidman’s (2009b) formulation of institutionalized normative heterosexuality.

EMPIRICIZING SEXUAL FLUIDITY

The aforementioned body of literature has utilized various techniques to assess the experience and significance of sexual fluidity in contemporary society. Many of these studies have used the framework of compulsory heterosexuality to explain why many people continue to identify within sexual binary categories (even if their actual experiences contradict the identity categorization). However, to date, there has not been an effort to empirically document coercion or question the compulsory status of heterosexuality outside of arguments that herald the end of sexual binaries altogether. In this study, I present a qualitative, empirical exploration of Seidman’s (2009) conceptualization of institutionalized normative heterosexuality.

Specifically, this research addresses the above debates with a new perspective, utilizing the theoretically distinct framework of institutionalized normative heterosexuality rather than compulsory heterosexuality. Additionally, I am concerned with the extent to which individuals experience various levels of coercion to adopt heterosexual or homosexual identities, particularly when their sexual histories may suggest their story is more complicated than those binaries allow for. Where and why do individuals adopt straight/gay binary identities? What does the resistance
to sexual identity categories indicate? Are some people able to resist the coercive restraints of normative heterosexuality on some levels? Furthermore, how are people experiencing and negotiating compulsory heterosexual constraints today? What social conditions may afford individuals less coercion to adapt to binary standards? What might lead some people to be more sexually fluid, and others not?

This analysis focuses on micro level, qualitative narratives. Detailed sexual narratives are integral to studying coercion and the compulsory aspect of heterosexuality. After all, compulsory heterosexuality is at its core argued to compel individuals into adhering to sexual identifications and interpreting their experiences through limited binary structures. Therefore, I argue that evidence of compulsory heterosexuality can be found in personal sexual narratives. For example, if an individual experienced a history of sexual fluidity, in a compulsory heterosexual society, they would be expected to claim a fixed identity even if it did not perfectly “fit.” Social coercion to assimilate into binary identities would result from the privileges afforded to people who (at least publically) present a static heterosexuality (or to an extent homosexuality). Such rewards would include being recognized as a good/normal citizen, a lack of formal and informal harassment, and civic inclusion. These benefits would compel individuals to reduce their (possibly) complicated sexual histories into static categories that tell little, if anything, about their actual sexual experiences.

However, if a society was operating within a regime of institutionalized normative heterosexuality, theoretically, there should be less pressure on people to adopt binary sexual identifications. If this was the case, then Seidman’s (2009b) theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality would be a more nuanced framework to understand the function of sexual binaries in Western societies today. Institutionalized normative heterosexuality would be
empirically supported if those who experience sexual fluidity were found to be less inclined to hold fast to sexual binaries in their personal lives, as the rewards and backlash for resisting would be lessened. Perhaps sexual narratives would be interpreted more loosely, so that people may be more open to expressing desires and fantasies for people of the same sex (or opposite sex for gays/lesbians), even if they did not act upon them. A lack of coercion could also be indicated by an embracement or increased importance put on particularized sexual acts (that could be experienced with any gender/sex) rather than identities. Finally, an individual in a society organized by institutionalized normative heterosexuality may also be more likely to outright reject identity labels publically. An example of such a rejection exists among the growing pansexual community (Drobac 1999).

Rather than looking at hyper-heterosexualized environments (such as fraternities/sororities, public schools, religious institutions, pornography, or the media as has been the case in previous studies), the histories presented in this study explore a myriad of narratives from individuals who self-identify as gay, straight, or otherwise to understand who, if, and how individuals are resisting sexual binaries and coercion. As such, data was collected across identity (and non-identity) groups. The focus of this study is on the individual accounts of sexual behavior and the personal understandings of sexual identity.

The meanings and functioning of sexual identities on an individual level are at the center of analysis, as opposed to institutional structures. Perhaps some groups are more likely than others to be sexually fluid, utilizing particular strategies of resistance to binary structures. Due to time and subject constraints, this study will center on women’s sexual narratives. This is not because I understand women to be more naturally fluid than men (as Diamond and many other psychologists argue), but because there is a dearth of literature underscoring male sexual fluidity.
Certainly, future studies needs to address the sex/gender gap in fluidity research and understand how additional sexual constraints, such as codes governing hegemonic masculinity, impact the experience and interpretations of sexuality among self-identified men.

ORGANIZATION OF DISSERTATION

I have several goals in the following chapters: to address the larger body of research on sexual fluidity; to review the theoretical underpinnings of this research; to outline the methodologies employed in this study; present the stories and experiences captured within the narrative interviews and categorize them based on shared understandings of sexual identities; and to present the findings and argue for the future theoretical implications of the data contained herein. In the next chapter, I begin by addressing the relevant theory regarding current interpretations of sexually fluid experiences and identities (or lack thereof). Specifically, I explore the advantages, similarities, differences, and drawbacks of how other scholars have documented sexual fluidity and the social pressures to adopt conventional, binary sexual identities.

After providing a brief survey of the history of the study of sexual fluidity, I present some of the social movements and circumstances that have perhaps served to encourage sexual fluidity since the Victorian Era. I then provide an overview of the research that has heralded sexual fluidity as a representation of the social transcendence of sexual binaries, and then posit alternate interpretations and research conclusions that argue sexual fluidity serves to reinforce sexual binaries in today’s Western societies. To end the second chapter, I provide a new framework for understanding sexual fluidity; institutionalized normative heterosexuality (Seidman, 2009b),
highlighting the ways this theoretical perspective can unify the aforementioned studies of sexual fluidity, their pitfalls, and their varying conclusions.

In Chapter 3, I outline my research questions and layout the qualitative research design utilized herein to address the central concerns of this study. After discussing the sample and measures of this dissertation research, I explore the specific details surrounding the data collection and its forthcoming analysis. Subsequently, I discuss the validity and reliability of the study, and special considerations for the generalizability of my research findings. Finally, I explore the particular ethical concerns of this dissertation research, such as the potential harm to participants due to the sensitive nature of the interview questions. I end the chapter by addressing the ethical considerations and the strategies utilized to minimize any potential detriment or negative impact to the interviewees.

In Chapter 4, “The People”, I present the demographic breakdown of the women I spoke with throughout this research and describe the sample more generally. Here, I underscore some of the emergent themes as it relates to both the ways women sexually identified and the reasons/understandings they provided for identifying either within or outside of sexual binaries. To begin organizing the data collected and to start exploring the question of where and why people adopt or resist binary identities, I present an initial categorization of the participants based on the reasons women provided for why and how they sexually identify.

Chapters 5 and 6 further delve into the observed themes by exploring the categories of identifiers outlined in Chapter 4, and groups the narratives by those who chose fixed identities, including the nuanced experience of politicized queer identities (Chapter 5), and the participants who rejected traditional sexual identity labels altogether (Chapter 6). These chapters specifically seek to answer the questions of where and why people adopt binary sexual identities, and what
institutional or cultural affiliations lend themselves to the continuation of hetero/homo binaries. And, for those who conveyed a fluid understanding of sexuality, what institutional experiences contributed to their fluid understandings, and in what ways have they resisted or experienced coercion to adopt binary identities throughout their lives?

In the concluding Chapter 7, I revisit the general trends across the identifier categories and the original research questions. What role did familial and religious institutions play in the women’s histories? Were there differences across age and racial/ethnic groups? Why did some women adapt to sexual and gender binaries, and in what ways did some women resist socially constructed binaries? What instances of social coercion were observed, and were there any empirical examples of what a regime of institutionalized normative heterosexuality may look like? Then, Chapter 7 reviews the limitations of this research and its unique contributions to the field of sociology. Finally, this study ends with suggestions for future research, and provides final thoughts on using empirical studies to assess and bolster sociological and feminist theory.

To bring this introduction to an end, it is worth noting that in a society that has been obsessed with sex since the Victorian era, studies of sexual identity have been and continue to be incredibly important. Although we may be in a post-closeted era (Seidman, 2004), individuals continue to be marginalized according to their socially perceived sexual identity. While sociologists have gone to great lengths to uncover the social construction of sexual identities, the legal and interpersonal discrimination that non-heterosexuals face remains. Understanding the limitations of the social inclusion of sexual variation can shed light on the current status of LGBTQ individuals in Western societies and help to underscore the specific needs of this historically disenfranchised group of people.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

It should now be clear that my unwillingness to squeeze my sexuality into any of the three sex-of-partner categories provided by the culture is not only a continuation of my 20-year long challenge to the lens of gender polarization. It is also a challenge to the lens of biological essentialism because it suggests that—as biologically natural as the sex-of-partner category system may now appear to be—there may be nothing natural or inevitable about organizing one’s erotic life around the dimension of biological sex. ~Sandra Lipsitz (1993)

Again, the observation of sexually fluid narratives, and identities that exist beyond sexual binaries, is far from new. Kinsey’s (1948) early exploration of sexual behaviors, identities, desires, and fantasies eventually led to a proliferation of studies on what is generally regarded today as sexual fluidity. Inquiry into sexual histories that are neither wholly heterosexual nor homosexual (or even bisexual) has been incredibly well documented by this time. Kinsey’s (1953) earliest findings estimated that 28% of all women in the U.S. had some level of sexual intimacy with the same sex. Much later, Bright (1992) found that 48% of lesbian identified women engage in heterosexual behaviors (136). Another study posited that among self-identified heterosexual men, 54% had sex exclusively with women, 23% had sex with women and men, and six percent had sex exclusively with men (Lever, Kanouse, Rogers, Carson, and Hertz 1992).

More recent quantitative figures found that between 29 and 32% of heterosexually identified, college aged women report some level of intimate behavior with, thoughts about, or attraction to the same sex (the percentage was slightly lower for college age men; between 12 to 19%) (Hoburg, Konik, Williams, and Crawford 2004). Savin-Williams (2005) estimates somewhere between 15 and 20% of all adolescents have some degree of same-sex desires, fantasies, or experiences regardless of self-identification (44). The latest figures regarding self-identified heterosexuals who have had same-sex experiences at some point in their lives (not
only thoughts or desires) are 9% for women and 3.2% for men (Chandra, Moshen, and Copen 2011).

The findings are extensive, and the exact statistics vary, but for the most part the research has yielded a similar finding; how people identify themselves sexually (gay/straight/bisexual) often reveals very little about their actual practices and history of gendered/sexed desires (Baumeister 2000; Bart 1993; Bell and Weinburg 1978; Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Coons 1972; Golden 1987; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948, 1953; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1994, 1995; Laumann et al 1994; Paul 1985; Plummer 1997; Rust 1992, 1995, 2000; Sophie 1986; Stein 1997; Storms 1980; Thompson and Morgan 2008; Weinburg, Williams, and Pryor 1994). In one of the more recent longitudinal studies concerning sexual fluidity, Diamond defines sexual fluidity as follows (2008a):

Sexual fluidity, quite simply, means situation-dependent flexibility in women’s sexual responsiveness. This flexibility makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation (3).

While sexual fluidity has been labeled with various terminologies across a wide range of fields of study (from the earliest conceptualizations of bisexuality by sexologists, to “mostly straight” women, to queers, to heteroflexible individuals, to “tri-sexuals” or “bi-curious,” to sexual plasticity, to “unlabeled,” to being on the “down-low,” to compulsory bisexuality, and most recently, pansexuality) these terminologies and frameworks address the same concept in different settings/periods: sexual fluidity.

Since the 1990s there has been a resurgence in psychological and sexological accounts of sexual fluidity (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995). This trend is evidenced by an ostensible retreat from queer theory (accusations that Warner (2012) himself felt the need to defend in a Chronicle
edition) and a striking lack of sociological research on pansexuality to date (Drobac 1999; Rupp and Taylor 2014). Although this shift has been heralded as a new, exciting era in the study of sexualities, it has come with two significant risks. The first is that many of the research conclusions generated have served to reinforce the harmful binary thinking that sustains heteronormativity and provides the basis for compulsory heterosexual domination (Rich 1980; Warner 1993). In other words, in much of the research on sexual fluidity (particularly psychological theory), despite the findings that there are more people whose narratives transcend categorization as gay, straight, bisexual, these researchers cling to the construct of biological sexual orientation. Outside of their initial acknowledgements of the historical social construction of sexual identities, they steadfastly adhere to the idea that there remains some static underpinning for our objects of desire.

This critique is not to discount the role biology plays in influencing our physiological responses to objects of desire. Our unique physiologies undoubtedly play a role in how our bodies respond to erotic stimuli. However, even prominent psychologist Lisa Diamond (2008b), who argued, “Hence, identity change is more common than identity stability, directly contrary to conventional wisdom,” (13), suggests that perhaps sexual fluidity is itself a, “fourth category of individuals for whom gender is irrelevant,” (2008a, 186). In other words, rather than interpreting her findings as indicating that the only sexual constant is flux, sexual fluidity becomes an addition to the existing social organization of sexuality (gay/straight/bisexual).

The observed complexities of sexual desires and behaviors are used to underscore the assumption that there are still human typologies such as heterosexuals and homosexuals. Using evidence of fluidity to suggest there are still “true” heterosexuals and homosexuals is as irrational as arguing that the exception proves the rule. Furthermore, these conclusions do little to
challenge the continued hardships that non-heterosexuals face in a heteronormative society that renders them institutional outsiders (Fuss 1991; Warner 1993). Simply adding a new category to account for fluidity allows the pre-existing constructions and inequalities of the heterosexual/homosexual binary to remain unchallenged. At its heart, sexual fluidity constitutes a renegotiation of, and represents a struggle with, socially constructed sexual binaries and sexual categorization.

The second issue is that much of the body of literature concerning sexual fluidity has been primarily concerned with documenting trends in sexual behaviors, identities, and desires rather than theorizing about the implications of sexual fluidity in a compulsory heterosexual culture (Chandra et al 2011; Laumann et al 1994 are notable examples). As such, the focus of this review will be on the empirical work that has sought to understand the repercussions of sexual fluidity in a binary society, as well as the theoretical works that have addressed the contemporary functioning of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Rather than spending additional time establishing that fluidity exists (which has been done in excess), I would like to suggest a new framework for how sexual fluidity can be understood. Thus, in addition to exploring research on sexual plasticity, my goal is to fuse this body of literature with theories that address the contemporary state of sexual binaries. This is especially fitting, as scholars who document sexual fluidity have interpreted the trend as either working for or against existing binaries.

Generally, theories about sexual fluidity have taken one of two positions. The first camp interprets sexual variance as a sign of changing times and crumbling binaries. These theorists argue that gender and sexual binaries are being challenged and are destabilizing in the post-modern era. The second group of theorists postulate that sexual fluidity is neither new nor a
particularly positive or liberating social trend. Rather than weakening binary constructions, fluidity has become an accessory of an ever-present system of compulsory heterosexuality. Instead of providing more freedom of choice and experimentation for individuals, fluidity, beneath the surface, functions to mask continued oppressions and institutional controls.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I begin with an overview of some of the social movements that have contributed to emerging academic discourses regarding sexual fluidity. Individuals have been having attractions to and sexual intimacies with individuals of both the same and other sexes since humans have graced the earth. What I would like to underscore in this review, however, is that what is new is how individuals are interpreting, defining, and understanding their sexually fluid experiences. After reviewing the movements that have enabled these new understandings of sexually fluid behaviors to emerge, I explore the positive theoretical interpretations of sexual fluidity and the accompanying social trends (and those that argue that sexual binaries are weakening) and their limitations. Then, I outline the arguments that interpret sexual fluidity as hindering sexual equality or reinforcing binaries, and the drawbacks to this second body of research. Finally, after exploring the research conclusions regarding sexual fluidity and the contemporary state of sexual binaries, I make the case that Seidman’s (2009b) conceptualization of institutionalized normative heterosexuality is an important framework for interpreting the cultural significance of sexual fluidity today, and can bridge the gap in the existing literature on sexual fluidity.

EMERGING MOVEMENTS: ENCOURAGING FLUIDITY

It’s bad enough feeling like you’re living a lie if you allow straight people to assume you’re totally straight and gay people to assume you’re totally gay. But having to think
Again, sexual fluidity, meaning people who have desires/fantasies that are not strictly heterosexual or homosexual, is not a “new” phenomenon. However, what is different are the emerging interpretations of sexual identity and the accompanying labels that individuals are adopting (or rejecting). In the past 15 to 35 years, there have been several movements that have presented a challenge to binary definitions of sexuality and gender. These newfound expressions and identities have paved the way for people to embrace alternative discourses of sexuality that either blur or reject the constructions of gender and sexual categories altogether.

First, I will explore non-binary, or alternative sexual identities that have emerged in the post-AIDs era of the 1990s to today. Next, I will outline gender bending movements that have contributed to the blurring of traditional gender and sexual dichotomies. Finally, I will highlight the changes in the social construction of intimacy that have enabled the above movements to develop and gain cultural visibility. While not all of these movements have necessarily embraced sexual fluidity, they have contributed to obscuring the boundaries of gender/sexual dichotomies, making space for expressions and experiences that are somewhere “in-between” the inside and out. Additionally, these movements highlight the changing structure of intimate arrangements, irrespective of the gender/sex composition of sexual relationships. While individuals today are not necessarily doing anything new “between the sheets,” how individuals are structuring their romantic and sexual exploits has changed greatly in the last 30 years.

*Alternative Identities*
Rather than cling to the available discourses of sexuality (gay, straight, or bisexual), there are a myriad of social groups who reject innate identities entirely. For some, gender/sexual identities are too constricting, reductive, or worse, divisive and harmful. The growing acknowledgement of the complexities of desires and expressions has led to the development of several growing identity movements that are adamantly opposed to sexual binaries and embrace fluidity. The advent of queer theory throughout the 1990s lent itself to the proliferation of non-binary, fluid identities. Taking a stand against the existing pejorative categories that continually reinforce the boundaries of the good/bad and the normal/abnormal citizen (Fuss 1991; Warner 1993), queer identities have purposefully sought to politicize and deconstruct the binary underpinnings of sexual categories. Rather than advocating for homosexuals as being the natural and equal counterparts of heterosexuals, queers have critiqued fixed identities, finding true freedom beyond labels (Seidman 2009a; 86).

Research in the past twenty years has perhaps hinted that queer critiques of sexual identity have slowly made their way into cultural discourses. For example, Savin-Williams (2005) argues the cultural landscape has changed such that youths are finding it less and less of a necessity to identify within the given sexual categories. High school students of today live in a “post-gay” world (or one could argue a queer informed society), where sexual diversity has worked its way into mainstream television and a growing number of institutions (L-Word, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Glee – marriage and the military, etc.), fostering increasing awareness and tolerance. Whereas the politicization of sexuality in the 70s and 80s ironically made lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities into master statuses, youths in contemporary Western societies are experiencing a “backgrounding” of sexual identities (Savin-Williams 2005).
In place of extremely closeted or out and proud vestiges of gay culture, today’s youth are abandoning sexuality as a totalizing identity (Savin-Williams 2005; 201). As a result, queer youths are rebuffing labels as their political and institutional necessity is waning. Savin-Williams’ (2005) findings underscore a shift in the utility of organizing privileges around sexual identities. Certainly, as institutional constraints lessen (marriage, military, increasing numbers of LGBTQ groups in educational settings), the political necessity of identifying as either/or loses importance (Scott 1997; Seidman 2009b). Institutions aside, there is plausible empirical evidence to suggest that some youths are more comfortable today without sexual identities than they are with them (Rupp and Taylor 2014).

An example of this type of sexual categorical rejection is the understudied identity, pansexuality. Pansexuality is a sexual identity organized by an attraction to all genders, sexes, and gender/sexual identities. Self-identified pansexuals report attractions to transgender and androgynous individuals in addition to both men and women (Drobac 1999; Rupp and Taylor 2014). Pansexuality is experienced as either an attraction to all genders/sexes or as a gender/sex blind attraction. Shorthand: pansexuality is an affinity for people, not how they dress or what they have underneath their clothes. What is so unique about pansexuality is that it is defined by fluidity, the understanding that sexual identification and desires are subject to change. By allowing for the possibility of sexual attraction to anyone existing within or outside of binaries, pansexuality sets itself apart from bisexuality. While bisexuality is often understood as an attraction to either men or women, or an attraction to both men and women, pansexuality does not reinforce or ascribe to assumptions of dichotomously ordered sexualities or genders (Drobac 1999; Rupp and Taylor 2014).
**Gender Benders**

Although not as all-encompassing as pansexuality, queer identities are also important to underscoring fluidity. In fact, queer identities are not limited to individuals who experience same sex intimacies or desires, necessarily. Today, there are heterosexuals who actively seek to work against heteronormativity by deconstructing straight identities. Thomas (2000) poses the question that if there are multiple ways to work against heteronormativity, then shouldn’t there be more than one way to be queer? Currently, there is an active movement on the part of straight identified individuals to acknowledge the historically specific and privileged status of heterosexuality.

By recognizing and creating awareness around the insider/outsider politics of sexual binaries, queer straights, although not necessarily sexually fluid, advocate for identities beyond either/or dichotomies (Smith 2000). Despite the doubts that queer straight identities can have the power to translate into institutional change (as Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994, 455) note, “Queer theorists have never satisfactorily answered the question, ‘What makes straight heterosexuality ‘queer’?”), identities founded on a historical awareness of the social construction of sexual/gender binaries creates a safe space for those who do reject straight/gay/bisexual identities altogether.

Similar to the queer straight identities that seek to undermine the heterosexual underpinnings of social institutions, queer straight males and genderqueer individuals seek to disrupt heteronormative, rigid constructions of masculinity and femininity. Heasley’s (2005) qualitative research underscores the population of men who (many purposefully) display “queer masculinities.” Accordingly, men who exhibit “queer masculinity” show some level of refusal to adopt normative masculine past times, appearances, and roles. Doing so allows queer straight
men to create more fluid spaces for what it means to be masculine and heterosexual. From straight sissy boys, to metrosexuals, to social justice straight queers, and to elective straight queers who merely flirt with crossing gendered behavioral borders, queer straight identities may create a space for fluidity to thrive and foster an acceptance of non-heterosexual identities (Heasley 2005).

The extent of the impact of straight queers is certainly debatable, but again, the movement embraces fluidity, perhaps making room for new interpretations of sexuality that do not rely on sexual binaries or sex/gender of object choice. Conceivably, the most important point that Heasley’s (2005) interviews demonstrate is that we take sexual identities for granted; “straight” men and women, in fact, may have very little in common in terms of their gendered expressions, interpretations, and interests.

Another identity that has focused on upending dichotomies is a growing group of individuals who refer to themselves as genderqueer. Genderqueer individuals argue that gender is a continuum. Some believe that they are neither man nor woman, are both masculine and feminine, or are an ever changing combination of genders and sexes. Through varied gender expressions, genderqueers purposefully seek to dismantle constructions of what it means to look and act like a man or a woman, gay or straight, on a daily basis (Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins, 2002). Instead of ascribing to the notion that we are born masculine or feminine, genderqueers argue that gender is a performance we are coerced into enacting in order to gain access to social institutions and rewards (Butler 1999).

As Wilchins (2002) notes, “… I believe all the confusion surrounding gender means that perhaps just the opposite is the case: that gender is a set of meanings, and so like children learning to tell Daddy from Mommy and little boys from little girls, we see it once we know it,”
(23). Failure to reproduce gender and sexual dichotomies results in social stigma, discrimination, and often violence. By expressing identities that are neither/nor or somewhere in-between, the genderqueer movement aims to visually disrupt harmful assumptions about the “nature” of gender and sexuality (Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins 2002).

**Reorganization of Intimacies**

In addition to movements that aim to destabilize harmful binary structures, there have been drastic changes in the construction of intimacies that have also served to create spaces conducive to fluid and varied sexual experiences. While one night stands often are capitalized on and taken for granted across the country, the historical significance of the “hookup” culture is lost upon many of those who engage in the practice. “Hooking up,” or having certain levels of physical intimacy without the promise of a relationship (or even talking to the person ever again), is not a new intimate practice (Bogle 2008). Individuals have had one-time-only sexual encounters (or physical relationships that did not involve an emotional aspect) across all historical eras (Seidman 1991). However, while intimacies out of wedlock (pre-WWII) were once strictly monitored by families and regulated by state and federal institutions (Illouz & Finkelman 2009; Illouz 2011; Polikoff 2008), hookups have become a part of what it means to be young and in college (Bogle 2008).

In the Victorian era, to be a respectable sexual citizen required marrying and having children. Considerations for mates were practical; emotional connections and similarities in taste or passionate connections were not included in the “marriageability check list” (Illouz & Finkelman 2009; Illouz 2011; Polikoff 2008). Economic and social necessities always took precedence over emotional connections and love. For the Victorians, who were obsessed with
sex, albeit with how, when, and where not to have it, physical compatibility and attraction were secondary to the ability to bear children and economic concerns (Seidman 1991). However, post WWI, the strict control of intimacies and passions slowly began to dissipate in the aftermath of the war (Bogle 2008; Seidman 1991). By the 1920s, “dating” became the norm, and the practice of calling went the way of the horse and buggy. As opposed to being chaperoned by family members in the home, dates allowed couples to go out and focus on one another (Bogle 2008).

Although World War II further relaxed social controls regarding intimacies, the biggest change in the construction of intimacy occurred between 1960 and 1980 (Bogle 2008; Seidman 1991). This was when the emphasis on dating shifted from romance to pleasure. Civil rights, feminism, and a host of other movements stressing freedom of expression, pleasure, and communication led to the birth of the “one night stand” (Bogle 2008; Seidman 1991). The valuing of personal choice and the separation of love and romance from sexual intimacies made a cultural cocktail ripe for the development of the “hookup,” where men and woman are nearly expected experiment sexually. Bogle (2008) argues that hooking up has, for some, become a replacement for dating. Rather than “going steady” with someone for a period of time before committing to a sexual relationship, many relationships are formulated (however briefly) around hooking up.

The significance of these changes in the arrangement of romantic and sexual intimacies is that sex without commitment lends itself to experimentation with persons of the same sex. As Rupp and Taylor (2014) argue, “The hookup culture opens spaces for same sex sexual interactions, and the concept of sexual fluidity flourishes in this context.” Campus life today is structured by freedom of expression and experimentation. As one participant in an earlier study noted, “A lot of my friends use the term ‘trysexual’ as in they will try anything at least once … if
not twice,” (LaMarre 2010). While not everyone who hooks up does so with a person of the same sex, the laxity of regulation of sexual intimacies and the flourishing individualization of American culture have paved the way for fluidity to occur with little social or institutional backlash.

Undoubtedly, the hookup culture fosters gender inequalities, and women particularly continue to feel pressured to find a steady, long term partner, at once being sexually open but not too open lest they become labeled sluts (Payne 2010; Seidman 1991). Likewise, although men are regularly expected to make as many sexual conquests as they possibly can, among the larger society male same sex intimacies are stigmatized to a greater degree than female same sex intimacies.

In the end, the cultural transformation of intimacies has made the conditions ripe for social movements to develop that display some level of gender/sexual fluidity. Though there are certainly limitations to each of these movements in terms of their impact on the larger social structure, together they have changed the experience of life beyond the closet for gays and lesbians, and created a place for people to publically declare they are neither, nor, or at least something more fluid than the binary status quo (Seidman 2004, 2009a). The next section highlights the theoretical and empirical literature that heralds these movements and changes in intimacy as signaling the end of sexual binaries and, perhaps, heteronormativity.

SEXUAL FLUIDITY AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF SEXUAL BINARIES

“I don’t believe anybody is in the square they think they are I just think they haven’t been in the right situation. If I’m attracted to you I’m attracted to you and people find that fascinating because I’m very sexual and I’m like OK let’s just get to the business and see how it goes.” ~Interview excerpt LaMarre, 2010
Up to this point, I have briefly outlined the history of empirical accounts of sexual fluidity. Additionally, I have established that understanding sexual intimacies as transcending identifications of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual is a relatively new social phenomenon (circa 1990s and the advent of queer theory), one that has been given voice by movements that have facilitated new interpretations of fluid sexual experiences as existing outside of dichotomous constructions. There is a growing collection of theorists who adamantly argue that fluidity in contemporary sexual narratives points to a weakening of sexual and gender binaries (Plummer 1995; Roseneil 2002; Savin-Williams 2005). These scholars predict that major change is on the horizon, and that Western cultures will soon organize social privileges around traits other than sexual identity (gay/straight/bisexual). The researchers who have taken this standpoint have used various data and methods to support their conclusions, which I will explore at length.

Two of the first authors to contend that sexual binaries, as organizing principles, are weakening are Bawer (1993) and Sullivan (1996). Their perspectives were controversial not only in their staunch opposition to queer theoretical works of the time, but also because they were political pundits, without research to support their claims. Both authors made the argument that growing gay and lesbian visibility, tolerance, and social integration are bringing an end to the era of compulsory heterosexuality (Seidman 2009b). Through social legitimation and changes in legislation, Bawer (1993) and Sullivan (1996) argue that discrimination against gays and lesbians is being renegotiated. Through a combination of assimilation to heteronormative culture (marriage, families, monogamy) and civic inclusion, Bawer (1993) and Sullivan (1996) believe that the repressive regime of compulsory heterosexuality, and the coercion for people to adopt heterosexual identities, will slowly fade away through a “fitful process of assimilation,” (130). According to Bawer (1993), “The general guiding philosophy of the gay populace should be one
not of confrontation but of connection, not of agitation but of education, not of revolution but of reform,” (33). In sum, by focusing energies on the equal rights of gays and lesbians, each legislative victory will eventually spell the end of compulsory heterosexuality.

The principal drawback to Bawer (1993) and Sullivan’s (1996) claims is a decided lack of empirical research to support their assertions. However, there is certainly evidence to support that gays and lesbians are being normalized in popular culture and public sectors such as the workplace (Diamond 2005; Esterberg 2002; Gamson 2001, 2002; Nardi 1997; Raeburn 2004; Seidman 2004; Walters 2001). Sullivan (1996) and Bawer (1993) suggest that while discrimination and homophobia exist today, they are not maintained by institutional means, but rather by specific political regimes, organizations, and groups who stand to gain from the marginalization of the LGBTQ population.

With dwindling institutional discrimination, there is less coercion for individuals to adopt conventional sexual identities. The Supreme Court’s rejection of Article 3 of DOMA and the end of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell are indicative of the expansion of personal freedoms (at least on a federal level). There is, now more than ever, a departure from homophobic policies in social institutions across the U.S. (although it should be noted that currently, this is happening at the same time there has been an increase in anti-trans policies across the nation). The question to be addressed in the next section is: Are these changes having an impact on gender and sexual hierarchies altogether? Certainly, further empirical inquiry is needed to substantiate Bawer and Sullivan’s conclusion that institutions are no longer structured by the norm of heterosexuality.

A more recent interpretation, somewhat similar to the above, is Roseneil’s (2002) argument regarding the end of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Changes in the past 30 years in the organization of sexual intimacies have resulted in common patterns among heterosexual
and homosexual cultures. The result, Roseneil (2002) asserts, is that the distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals is rapidly declining, eventually rendering sexual binaries irrelevant. Accordingly, two processes are releasing individuals from normative heterosexual expectations: the increasing individualization and de-traditionalization of Western societies (Roseneil 2002). With traditional families no longer comprising the basic unit of society (due to increases in single parent households, cohabitation, divorce; decreases in marriage, number of children, etc.), coupled with growing hetero-reflexivity and gay visibility, the differences between gay and straight patterns of intimacy are diminishing.

Roseneil (2002) concludes:

I propose that at the start of the new millennium we are witnessing a number of queer tendencies in social and cultural life, which together constitute a significant cultural challenge to heteronormativity. These queer tendencies question the normativity and naturalness of heterosexuality, re-configure the hierarchical inside/outside relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and destabilize the binary opposition between the two categories (37).

The underlying foundation of Roseneil’s (2002) theoretical claims (again, without empirical basis but grounded in theory, unlike Bawer and Sullivan) is that changes in institutions will lead to changes in personal beliefs and the larger organization of sexual dichotomies that structure the fabric of society. Esterberg (2002) echoes these conclusions, asking, “Are we at the brink of just such a queer moment, in which the hetero/homo divide collapses into an unlabeled ambisexuality, in which gender plays no more role in sexual choices than in eye color or the way someone walks or cuts their hair?” (225). The above authors interpret fluid narratives as yet another sign of the end of compulsory heterosexuality and the sexual binaries it sustains.

Hetero-reflexivity is a particularly compelling piece of Roseneil’s argument. For example, Roseneil re-interprets the importance of DOMA (pre-2013 Supreme Court decision).
Rather than understanding DOMA solely as a heterosexist policy aimed at privileging heterosexuality, Roseneil (2002) sees DOMA as marking the first occasion in modern Western history that heterosexual privilege needed to be protected institutionally. Heterosexuality was in such a panic as a result of the growing visibility of gays and lesbians in the 1990s that, for one of the few times in history aside from the creation of the closet in the 1950s post-WWII culture, the institution of heterosexuality had to defend itself legally. Heterosexuality’s increasing need to be consciously produced, defended, and self-monitored is further shown in the recent fads of “no homo” and the use of fag discourses in primary/secondary education settings (Pascoe 2007). If heterosexuality was not perceived as being threatened, there would be no need to declare one’s straight identity on a daily basis. These changes in the structure of intimacies (fluidity included) are argued to have effectively destabilized the heterosexual-homosexual binary in contemporary Western cultures.

Another genre of literature that has heralded the end of binaries without supporting empirical evidence are self-narratives that emerged with the onslaught of queer theory throughout the 1990s. These narratives use the author’s own fluidity as case in point for the demise of sexual binaries. Such works have emphasized the personal as political, and (I would argue over-state) the power that individuals have to reject and challenge dichotomous conceptions of sexuality on a macro level (Dobinson 1999; Lipsitz 1993; Nestle et al 2002; Raymond 1997; Scott 1997; Smith 2000). A common theme among these works is an attempt to reconcile the social necessity of sexual identification while allowing for fluidity.

Raymond (1997), for example, muses, “This disjuncture between what I actually am or identify as, inasmuch as I even know myself, and how that self is received or perceived by my social context, has informed my own confused sense of my identity as well as of identity politics
in general” (60). In other words, regardless of how individuals self-identify, or refuse to identify, institutions may require identification of some sort, or place its own label upon those who refuse them. An example is bisexuals. If they are not being dismissed as going through a “phase,” it is very likely that people consider them gay if they are with a same sex partner or perceive them as straight when they are in a relationship with opposite sex partners (Esterberg 2002). How can anyone fully reject categories when the surrounding culture relies on them to determine who has access to certain formal and informal social privileges?

For Dobinson (1999), the answer lies in utilizing a myriad of identities in different spaces to maximize their political impact. Dobinson (1999) addresses the disjuncture between the political necessity of identification for gaining institutional inclusion for same sex intimacies while at the same time recognizing the disastrous consequences of confusing sexual/gender identities as human types. Rather than rejecting all identities, “[Accepting] that these contradictions and limitations can be recognized, celebrated, and used to my political advantage is a powerful revelation, one that enables me to act on the basis of sexual identification, while maintaining a critical and ironic perspective on all identity and all reality” (269). Thus, identifying as bisexual when the need to acknowledge fluidity arises, or lesbian when that is the best understood identity, or queer when it will have the most radical impact, can all be politically useful. Rather than necessarily reject sexual identities, individuals can adopt any number of identities and use them in a politically significant way (Dobinson 1999; Nestle et al 2002; Smith 2000). This tactic also allows for sexual fluidity to thrive.

As important as these narratives are in establishing strategies for undermining sexual and gender dichotomies, they do not offer any empirical evidence to support their claims. Additionally, these authors have been criticized for writing in an “ivory tower” (Goldman 1996).
While it is easy for upper/middle class white queers to either reject labels or adopt various identities in an attempt to combat heterosexist institutions, those with little social and economic capital can hardly afford to do so without harsh backlash (ridicule, violence, arrest). For example, the label pansexual may be understood within an academic setting, but imagine explaining the premise to a local politician or a grandparent? Similarly, the costs for rejecting/adopting multiple identities are much higher for those who are already at a social disadvantage, such as the poor and people of color. The same critique could be said for Bawer (1993), Sullivan (1996), and Roseneil’s (2002) work, as their theories are devoid of any racial/ethnic/class analysis, as well as lacking empirical support for their conclusions.

However, the next group of researchers have collected extensive data and narratives to address the emerging personal interpretations of sexual fluidity. One of the earlier sociological, qualitative studies that heralded a new era for the organization of sexual identities is Plummer’s (1995) collection of “sexual stories.” Plummer (1995) argues that changes in technology, the media, and the impact of social scientific discourses have led to the development of new understandings of sexuality. As sexual stories, defined as, “the narratives of intimate life, focused especially around the erotic, the gendered and the relational,” (6) have proliferated, multiplied, and been widely dispersed around the world, their significance and structure have transformed. These emerging “late modern” experiences diverge from earlier historical accounts of sexuality in that they have come to rely less on scientific (psychology and sexology) and religious discourses and more on stories of difference and deconstruction (Plummer 1995; 133-134).

Using a symbolic interactionist perspective, Plummer (1995) concludes that there are definitive shifts occurring in sexual stories at the turn of the millennium. Plummer (1995) began
collecting interviews in the 1980s, during a qualitative project that was funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Drawing from his interviews that spanned across age and sexual identity groups, Plummer posits that today, “sexual life is no longer seen as harboring a unitary core with an essential truth waiting to be discovered,” (Plummer 1995; 138). Rather than discovering one’s “true sexual self,” narratives at the turn of the century began to revolve around embracing differences and incongruities, rejecting binaries, and embracing often contradictory “gray” areas of identities. Instead of presenting coming out stories that reflect a linear pattern from identification to acceptance, sexual narratives since the 1990s have become more fluid, blurring the boundaries of binary identities (Plummer 1995; 140).

After empirically documenting and analyzing the shifts in sexual stories since the 1970s, Plummer (1995) contends, “this era brings with it the potential for new sexual stories that harbor the potential for political change” (147). As sexual stories are used by individuals to develop a sense of self and identity, the development of new narratives that reject the sexual and gendered status quo can have a profound impact on the politics of intimate citizenship (Plummer 1995; 180). The result of this new politics, Plummer (1995) muses, is that it has the power to create more pluralistic, diverse communities that allow room for both old (dichotomous) and new (fluid) experiences of sexual/gender desires, expressions, and identities.

The social psychologist Savin-Williams (2005) more recently addressed the changes in accounts of identities among teenagers, and made similar, albeit more nuanced, conclusions regarding changes in sexual narratives. For the youths and young adults that Savin-Williams (2005) interviewed regarding their experiences with sexual identities and how they viewed/experienced sexual labels, many deconstructed what it meant to be “gay” or “straight.” Additionally, they challenged the interview questions regarding sexual binaries with a question
of their own; why does it matter how or if they identify? Contemporary youths’ understanding of sexual and gender identities are vastly different than their historical counterparts. “For these young people, being labeled as gay or even being gay matters little. They have same sex desires and attractions but, unlike earlier generations, new gay teens have much less interest in naming these feelings or behaviors as gay,” (Savin-Williams 2005: 1). Not only do Savin-Williams’s (2005) interviews indicate that youths are more freely experiencing and sharing their same sex feelings, but that they are rejecting heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual, binary identifications altogether. Thus, “the new gay teenager is in many respects the non-gay teenager” (Savin-Williams 2005: 1).

Similar to Plummer’s (2005) observations, Savin-Williams argues that the up and coming generations are either outright rejecting identities altogether, or adopting multiple terms to address the complexity of their experiences. Examples include boidyke, queerboi, polygendered, trannyboy, omnisexual, stud, stem, multisexual, etc. Savin-Williams (2005) attributes these changing narratives to a “cultural makeover.” For example, formal federal and state regulation of sexuality has been declining since the millennium, starting with the repeal of sodomy laws in 2003, to most recently the repeal of section 8 of DOMA and the military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. The media and popular culture has also played a role in normalizing same sex intimacies and advocating for tolerance and freedom of expression. Additionally, workplaces and religious institutions have created safe spaces where same sex intimacies are protected, if not accepted. The result, similar to Roseneil’s argument, is that socially, heterosexuals and homosexuals are seen as having more commonalities than differences.
Together, the cultural shifts of the past 20 years have created a younger population for whom the degree to which sexuality is viewed as a central component of one’s core-self varies greatly (Savin-Williams 2005; 202). Savin-Williams (2005) concludes, “These young people are repudiating the appropriateness and artificiality of dichotomous definitions of sexual identity as they challenge cultural definitions of gay lives … Sexual behavior and sexual orientation flow within various gender expressions and changing definitions of what is gay, bisexual, and straight” (209). Some teens reject labels for philosophical reasons, others because they do not “fit,” some to avoid homophobia, and yet others still because the labels are viewed as irrelevant and reductionist. Whatever the reasons, Savin-Williams’ (2005) interview data indicate that that there are definitive changes in the organization of sexual identities, such that, “we are on the forefront of what can be called a post-gay era” (222). This era, the author argues, will usher in sexual narratives that reject sexual and gender binaries in favor of multiple or new terms that reflect the complexity of intimate experiences. These changes are made possible by the shifts in acceptance of same sex intimacies in a rapidly growing number of institutions in the past three decades.

A more recent sociological study addressing the growing trend of rejecting binary identities argues that two factors have made it possible for people to adopt alternative sexual identifications. The first is the shift from dating culture to hook up culture among today’s college students. The second is due to the impact that queer theory has had as it has become popularized and disseminated across college campuses (Rupp and Taylor 2014). Their analysis of 94 qualitative interviews (gathered through snowball sampling) with non-heterosexually identified, racially diverse female college undergrads found three different interpretations of sexual fluidity.
For some, rejecting static, binary sexual identities emerged from rapid changes the individuals experienced in their attraction that existing labels failed to capture. In place of heteronormative labels, fluid, queer, and pansexual identities were used to be more inclusive of the participants’ multiple changes in desires and attractions. Others used fluid identifications to account for shifts in identification, especially those who distanced themselves from the category of bisexuality. Finally, for those embracing fluid sexualities, identifying in non-binary ways (such as queer/pansexual) was a way to incorporate and signal attractions to all genders, not just female and male (Rupp and Taylor 2014).

Rupp and Taylor (2014) draw the conclusion that non-heterosexual students who reject binary identities, “open up the possibility of intimacies beyond both traditional heterosexual and gay/lesbian committed relationships.” The ability to construct relationships beyond heteronormative scripts opens up the possibility for individuals to experience new freedoms outside of monogamous, monosexual, traditional intimacies. The emerging embracement of sexual fluidity and changing understandings of what same sex intimacies mean hold promise for a future where, perhaps, binaries no longer exist. Rupp and Taylor’s (2014) study of the personal conceptualizations of non-heterosexual intimacies builds upon earlier studies of Plummer and Savin-Williams by addressing racial and class differences in their methodologies. However, the research is limited in terms of age and cultural variability, as it was conducted on college campuses. Additionally, the interviews specifically targeted non-heterosexually identified individuals, where research on “mostly straight” individuals suggests that fluid interpretations of sexuality are not limited to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Fahs 2009; Thompson and Morgan 2008).
In summation, what unites this varying group of scholars is the assertion that the rejection of sexual identities is having a larger effect on the social construction of sexuality. The observed growth of movements and populations that reject sexual or gender categories is argued to challenge, and perhaps, even bring an end to dichotomous, fixed sexual identities. Although many institutions continue to rely on sexual binaries (primary/secondary educational institutions and religious sects) they exert less control over people to adopt conventional identities. The growing number of youths rejecting categories altogether or adopting multiple, changing identities at once is interpreted as signaling a dramatic change in the organization of sexual intimacies in the United States. As Esterberg muses, “Are we at the brink of just such a queer moment, in which the hetero/homo divide collapses into an unlabeled ambisexuality … The existence of those who prefer not to take on an identity, who prefer to remain unlabeled, may hint at such a possibility,” (Esterberg 2002; 225). Although the aforementioned theorists perceive these changes as positive, there are many who have used empirical evidence to cast doubt on the impact that individual, fluid accounts of sexuality can have on the larger compulsory heterosexual order.

REINFORCING BINARIES

*The irony of gay and lesbian mainstreaming is that more than fifty years of active effort to challenge homophobia and heterosexism have yielded us not freedom but “virtual equality”* ~Vaid (1996, 5)

While the previously discussed authors make strong cases for their position that sexual binaries are weakening in a post-modern world in light of emerging fluid discourses, many theorists just as strongly dispute these claims. Instead, they assert that while on the surface these
movements herald change, they are the same oppression under a new guise. Much research in this field has focused on questioning the limits of homosexual visibility in the media, as well as exploring the restrictions of gay/queer acceptance among the “straight” population and in institutions such as educational environments (high school, college).

Vaid (1996) and Warner (1999) adamantly dispute Bawer (1993) and Sullivan’s (1996) commentary that assimilation has led to LGBTQ acceptance. Although some gays and lesbians have benefitted from legal protections (end of DOMA section 8, Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, sexual non-discrimination and sodomy laws), those that have are mostly white, middle and upper class gay men and lesbians. While there has undoubtedly been progress, this progress has clear limitations. There is not a direct causal relationship between legal protections and larger social acceptance. In schools, for example, Pascoe (2007) found that although high school students did not necessarily use the word “fag” pejoratively towards self-identified homosexuals, the discursive production of the “specter of the fag” furthered the subordination of femininity and homosexuality by normalizing hegemonic masculinity and polluting homosexuality. Despite progress, many institutions continue to serve as, “A place where people are still governed primarily by the fear of disclosure of their sexual orientation” (Vaid 1996; 6). The recent rash of gay youth suicides across the country supports the argument that even with legal protections, many non-heterosexuals continue to be ostracized and discriminated against on the basis of their sexual identity.

Both Vaid (1996) and Warner (1999) argue that adhering to the “normal” and changing regulations are not enough to attain full equality for the LGBTQ population. In fact, the success that assimilation tactics have had on securing gay visibility has come at a great cost to non-binary identities. Particularly, bisexual and transgendered individuals are rendered invisible at
best, and mocked and insulted as either going through phases or mentally unstable at their worst by laymen and psychologists alike. There are still many LGBTQ individuals who do not have the social privilege to come out without losing their jobs, friends, family, and being subject to ridicule and violence. The increasing statistics on violence and bullying against LGBTQ youth are not supportive of a post-binary era; 64.3% of LGBTQ youth feel unsafe in their schools due to their sexual identity, 39.1% were victims of physical harassment, 18.8% hear homophobic remarks from teachers, and 44.7% of LGBTQ students of color report being bullied because of their sexuality and their race/ethnicity (Lambda Legal 2013).

Furthermore, even with the inclusion of federally recognized same sex marriages in 2013, the vast majority of states continue to segregate and define marriage as a heterosexual institution. As Vaid (1996) and Warner (1999) argue, binary discourses of sexuality continue to pervade American culture and perpetuate hetero-romance as the foundation of humanity (Best 2005; Ingraham 1994; Warner 1993). Tolerance for gays and lesbians has not led to full equality; instead, “gay and lesbian people are at once insiders, involved openly in government and public affairs to a degree never before achieved, and outsiders, shunned by our elected officials unless they need our money or votes in close elections. We are at once marginal and mainstream, at once assimilated and irreconcilably queer … treated as if we are aliens to the family as an institution” (Vaid 1996; 4-5). Both LGBTQ and straight citizens continue to be held to repressive and limited definitions of “normal” families and intimacies.

Johnson (2004) makes an empirical attempt, like Pascoe (2007) and Best (2005), to underscore the maintenance of sexual and gender binaries in a seemingly post-binary world. At the core of Johnson’s (2004) qualitative research is addressing, “the fundamental mistake … that whilst there may be a general social tendency towards recognition of certain forms of
homosexual intimacy, this has not necessarily impacted upon the organizing principles of sexuality in any meaningful way” (186). Growing visibility, legal inclusion, and superficial tolerance in the public sphere masks the continued inside/outsider, normal/abnormal dichotomous construction of intimacies. The growing language of LGBTQ acceptance hides the continued perpetuation of inside/outside, binary dichotomies (Fuss 1991; Johnson 2004).

Through interviews with heterosexually identified men and women gathered via snowball study (of varying ages) conducted between 1999 and 2002, Johnson (2004) focused on the limitations of homosexual acceptance, particularly the borders of where inclusiveness turned to disgust. The results of his questions regarding the acceptance of same sex love versus the acceptance of same sex intimacies were telling. The boundaries of acceptance for LGBTQ individuals, Johnson (2004) found, exist where enlightened inclusivity (acceptance of same sex love) gives way to pollution discourses surrounding sexual physicality between two people of the same sex. Love, as we discussed earlier, is no longer exclusively tied to sexual intimacy (Illouz 2010; Seidman 1991). As such, the participants Johnson (2004) interviewed indicated that they felt gay men and lesbians experienced the same kind of loving relationships as heterosexuals. The author speculates that this is a result of assimilation politics that have relied on normalizing homosexuals through the argument that same-sex relationships are just as healthy and loving as their heterosexual counterparts (Vaid 1996; Warner 1999). In this part of his interviews, participants conveyed acceptance for homosexuals.

However, upon further questioning regarding their feelings towards same sex sexual intercourse, all of his participants expressed, regardless of gender, revulsion when discussing same sex physical intimacies. Men, particularly, used anal sex to reinforce heterosexual/homosexual binaries by attaching a polluted status to the act. In other words, the
polluted status attached to male/male intimacies was accomplished through discourses of disgust. These discourses, in turn, created the boundaries of insider/outsider dichotomies and reinforced sexual binaries (Johnson 2004; Fuss 1991). Even among the women interviewed, same sex acts between females were described as “gross” or made them “feel sick” (Johnson 2004; 193). As Johnson (2004) argues, “What is at work, in all of these accounts, is the normative organization of heterosexual love and sexual desires, which relies upon the invocation of borders and parameters to sexual identity. Such borders are created through the homo/het binary and produce both a prohibition of practices deemed homosexual and a naturalness of heterosexuality” (196).

Heterosexuality’s privileged status, despite increased social tolerance for same-sex couples, is continually secured through the prohibition, pollution, and erasure of sexual acts defined as “homosexual.” This documented discourse of pollution was also captured in Hamilton’s (2007) research among college campuses, where, “woman-to-woman eroticism had its place on campus among those who identified as heterosexual, but out lesbians often encountered disgust or hostility” (164). In ethnographic observations and within both group and individual interviews (43 participants in total), Hamilton (2007) found that one way female undergraduates maintained their normative borders of heterosexuality was to maintain social distance from lesbians, thereby “[assuaging] their fears of status contamination and [quelling] anxieties about their own sexuality” (150).

Plummer (1997) and Savin Williams (2005), as previously discussed, provided empirical evidence supporting a shift in contemporary sexual narratives, where sexual histories are predicated on choice and are rife with understandings that transcend binary ordering. While this evidence offers exciting new prospects for the future, there is another group of theorists who express doubt that individual fluidity lends itself to larger socio-structural change. Jenefsky and
Miller (1998), Essig (2000), Gamson (2001, 2002), Diamond (2005), Hamilton (2007), and Fahs (2009) all contend that increased fluidity in individual narratives and LGBTQ media visibility does not necessarily translate to more freedoms and lessening social reliance on sexual/gender binaries to organize institutions. Instead, these theorists posit that today’s depictions of fluidity and same sex visibility is a re-structuring of existing binaries to maintain heterosexual dominance amid changes in the structures of intimacy in the past 30 years.

Laurie Essig (2000) outlined several drawbacks to the media’s increasing depictions of female sexual fluidity in her conceptualization of heteroflexibility. Heteroflexibility refers to a person who, “has or intends to have a primarily heterosexual lifestyle, with a primary sexual and emotional attachment to someone of the opposite sex. But that person remains open to sexual encounters and even relationships with persons of the same sex” (Essig 2000). At first glance, heteroflexible identities hint at an emerging, non-binary identity that is neither fully heterosexual nor homosexual. Certainly, it provides women with a degree of sexual agency to experiment in a more accepting environment. Additionally, it can expand and empower new gendered sexual roles for women (Essig 2000; Diamond 2005). However, Diamond’s (2005) analysis of media trends suggests that heteroflexibility reinforces compulsory heterosexuality, rather than disassembling the binaries it creates and maintains. Firstly, heteroflexibility erases and invalidates bisexuality as real identity (Essig 2000; Diamond 2005). Secondly, heteroflexible media presentations more often than not objectify women and lesbians as having sexualities that solely exist for the purpose of stimulating men.

Although Essig’s theory was not formally empirically assessed, Jenefsky and Miller’s content analysis of Penthouse magazine support her arguments, as they asserted, “Through a
variety of mutually reinforcing strategies, images of girl-girl sex in *Penthouse* help to reassert male sexual mastery, reinscribing heterosexual dominance more broadly,” (383). Again, Hamilton (2007) found similar evidence, in observations/interviews with college women, that heteroflexible behaviors (even though not specifically named as such by participants) are often employed to attract or please male spectators. Hamilton (2007) observes, “Like a sexy new outfit or new stilettos, heterosexual women could deploy same-sex eroticism as a statement of style to get attention … They often contextualized their behaviors so that others (and perhaps themselves) would interpret them as heterosexual” (164).

This evidence strengthens Diamond’s (2005) conclusion that heteroflexibility (as an identity and set of actions) de-legitimizes same sex relationships and uses same sex experimentation as a means of confirming one’s “true” heterosexuality. Although the identity/practice does hold some level of sexual freedom, it does so without actually challenging the “natural” assumption of heterosexuality. Even content analytical research on “swinging” culture reveals that, while swinging culture challenges the heteronormative component of monogamy, the overall culture is highly heterosexualized despite the frequent same-sex intimacies involved in “threesomes” (Rooke and Figueroa 2010). In the end, in all of these examples, homosexuality as a viable option is lost, and heterosexuality retains its normative status.

My favorite example of heteroflexibility that I use in teaching is the movie *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001). Three quarters of the movie is spent building a love story between two women who overcome barriers that many same sex couples negotiate on a daily basis (coming out to friends, family, negotiating friendships and even professional networks). However, at the
end of the movie, Jessica’s relationship with Helen is reduced to a plot device to drive the “natural” hetero-romance between Jessica and her ex/boss, Josh, who quietly pines for her in the background throughout the movie. He finally gets his chance when Jessica is essentially rejected as a “bad lesbian” by Helen, and the women break up. What could have been a lesbian love story ended as a typical romantic comedy film, where, despite all of the hijinks, the guy always gets the girl. As Diamond (2005) notes, “these media images serve the same basic functions that have historically been served by open stigmatization of same-sex sexuality, yet in a guise that is more palatable to a generation of women that reflexively spurn notions of sexual repression and embrace self-determination” (109). The end result of such portrayals and heteroflexible intimacies is that the institutional rewards and coercion to adopt heterosexual identities is overlooked entirely.

The media, especially, has come under fire from feminists and queer theorists for failing to recognize heterosexuality as a hegemonic social institution. In Gamson’s (2001; 2002) research (consisting of content analyses of talk show transcripts, interviews with talk show producers and guests, and focus group interviews with heterosexual talk show viewers) he disputes claims that visibility has heralded an era of equality for the LGBTQ community. Gamson (2002) quips, “It is no longer so easy to assume that visibility, for instance, is always and necessarily a political step forward” (350). Gamson (2001) further argues that simply having gays and lesbians on television does not necessarily indicate larger social acceptance or a cultural breakdown of sexual inequalities. In fact, the author found that portrayals of gays and lesbians often exacerbate class division and perpetuate damaging stereotypes among the LGBTQ population.
While news stations have middle and upper class white gays and lesbians on air, talk shows capitalize on stereotyping poor, lower class LGBTQ individuals. Additionally, the growing tolerance and visibility of homosexuality has come at the cost of added stigmatization for bisexuals and transgender individuals (the *Jerry Springer Show* is one of many examples of the pollution/stigmatization of transgender and bisexual people). Gamson (2001) concludes that talk shows, “suggest that visibility cannot be strategized as either positive or negative, but must be seen as a series of political negotiations” (326). In the case of sexual fluidity in the media, showing same sex female intimacies does not necessarily bring more equality for lesbian relationships. Instead, “Same sex eroticism between conventionally feminine women becomes a performance for men, one that inevitably ends in heterosexual sex,” (Hamilton 2007; 148); thus reinforcing normative heterosexuality.

Another recent theory to address “heteroflexible” behavior has come from the field of bisexual studies. Fahs (2009) argues that we are entering an era of compulsory bisexuality. Extending Rich’s (1993) argument that individuals are coerced to adhere to the social norm and expectations of heterosexuality, Fahs (2009) postulates that today, women engage in “performative bisexuality” (here I would use heteroflexibility interchangeably) in a compulsory manner. For women, doing so, “garner[s] sexual-validation within their heterosexual relationships or the heteronormative culture at large” (432). The theory of compulsory bisexuality refers to women who are coerced to have intimacies with other women, sometimes in front of men, and at frat parties, bars, and clubs, in order to garner attention from or to please their male partners. Fahs’ (2009) research draws upon two waves (40 women in total) of qualitative, face-to-face interviews collected through local entertainment and art listings. The
women were questioned regarding their sexual histories, sexual practices, and attitudes about sexuality (Fahs 2009; 438).

In her interviews, Fahs (2009) found that college aged women under 30 years of age were more likely to partake in public displays of “performative bisexuality,” while older women faced pressures to engage in heteroflexible behavior in private (such as threesomes). Among the women Fahs (2009) interviewed, many were homophobic and/or did not support LGBTQ rights despite engaging in same-sex intimacies themselves. Women often denied the significance of same-sex encounters as “not real,” “a one-time thing,” or “not important.” Thus, although many women today report same sex intimacies, there is a strong disconnect between their actual behaviors and the interpretations of their bisexual behaviors. Because these same sex intimacies often occur in the presence of men, with men’s approval, and for men’s arousal, these women are actually engaging in normative heterosexuality, even while having same sex intimate encounters (Fahs 2009; 445). Fahs (2009) concludes, “Compulsory heterosexuality, however challenged by increasing acceptance of, and performance of, bisexual behavior, is still alive and well” (445).

Collectively, these researchers maintain that regardless of changes in individual definitions of sexual identity, the larger dichotomous social structure of sexual binaries remains undeterred. Female same sex acts may be considered chic and hip, but only to the extent that they are limited to highly heterosexualized environments. Likewise, although sexually fluid narratives and resistance to identities may be widely observed today, there is no evidence that this has led to changes on an institutional level. Furthermore, the majority of institutions continue to rely on and differentiate people according to strict sexual dichotomies of normal/abnormal. The times may seem to be changing, but freedom of sexual choice is acting as a disguise for continuing oppression.
A NEW FRAMEWORK: INSTITUTIONALIZED NORMATIVE HETEROSEXUALITY

*I intend this concept to grasp the institutional embeddedness of normative heterosexuality but not necessarily its compulsory status ... Whether normative heterosexuality in institutions is compulsory is an empirical question.* ~Seidman, 2009b (86)

Amid these conflicting accounts, how are researchers to interpret the juxtaposing findings and conclusions regarding sexual fluidity and its implications for sexual binaries? Each of these studies present a different part of the organization and experience of sexualities in contemporary society. While many theorists have undertaken the task of exploring accounts of sexual fluidity, sociologists have yet to propose a theory that unifies and explains the varying arguments of the impact of non-identity and sexually fluid narratives in culture. Although the aforementioned academics often take aim at each other and present contradicting pictures of the significance of sexual fluidity, I believe each provides an important perspective for understanding the current construction of sexuality in the United States. Before proposing a new framework through which to interpret sexual fluidity, I would first like to address and briefly problematize some of the existing literature on sexual fluidity.

Studies that have argued that the sexual/gender binaries constructed by compulsory heterosexuality are weakening have done so in several ways. Many of these scholars have remained in the realm of theory, examining already documented social trends and speculating on their meaning (Bawer 1993; Roseneil 2002; Sullivan 1996). Such works have relied on statistics of declining heterosexual marriage, rising divorce and cohabitation rates, homosexual visibility, and changes in public policy (to name a few). These studies, furthermore, have focused on the lessening role of institutional control over sexualities. The drawback to such studies is that they
fail to address how normative heterosexual discourses may be operating on a micro level. Additionally, they offer no empirical attempts to test their claims. It is quite possible that, despite the social integration and normalization of homosexual identities in the public realm, micro social interactions may continue to reproduce sexual dichotomies and differences in spite of macro level changes.

I would like to explore sexual narratives to observe where, how, and what level of coercion individuals may feel to adopt binary sexual identifications. For example, when do individuals feel compelled to identify within sexual binaries? Are there spaces where they are more likely to think about/use binary terms than others? While it may be true some individuals are finding the freedom to shed sexual identification altogether, it is also true that there remain institutions where identification within sexual/gender binaries is required in order to access social privileges. To date, no theory fully encompasses this divergence in institutional/personal experiences.

Moreover, sexual binaries and their regulatory function can be reproduced among individuals or groups in a society, even if they are not reinforced by social policy. For example, even though same sex marriage has been federally legalized in the U.S., it has not stopped individuals or varying institutions from differentiating people based on normal/abnormal sexualities (Foucault 1990; Warner 1993). The assumption in works that foresee the end of binaries is that changes on a macro social level will trickle down and promote changes in individual interactions. However, neither is it correct to assume that the current legal inclusion of the LGBTQ population will have no impact whatsoever on the larger organization of sexuality (as argued by Vaid and Warner who also lack empirical support). My goal is to integrate both
sides of the argument to create a more complete and cohesive understanding of how far sexual freedoms, acceptance, and tolerance reach in a post-closeted era (Seidman 2004).

Others, still, who argue for the weakening of sexual/gender binaries have made their claims based on extensive qualitative research. Such theorists have looked in depth at the sexual narratives of both younger and older generations to uncover the meanings behind contemporary accounts of sexual fluidity (Plummer 1995; Savin-Williams 2005; Stein 1997). These studies have been particularly useful in highlighting sexual fluidity and “anti” identities across generations. However, these studies have only centered on one sexual community at a time. For example, Savin-Williams’ (2005) data only looks at queer youth, ignoring heterosexual narratives and the role sexual fluidity may play in “straight” narratives. Stein’s (1997) study is similarly limited to self-identified lesbians (or ex-lesbians). By putting lesbian and gay narratives in the spotlight, these studies ignore the potential for heterosexual narratives to resist or “undo” sexual binaries. Having sexual relationships primarily with people of another sex does not disqualify individuals from resisting the confines of binary constraints and expectations. Additionally, these accounts and data do not explain the rising statistics of violence and bullying against LGBTQ individuals or the rash of teen suicides that have been widely publicized. Certainly one would expect such incidences to decrease in a truly post-closeted world.

Yet, there are further limitations that arise in research on sexual fluidity. Among researchers who argue that heterosexuality and sexual/gender binaries continue to be privileged and normalized, the media has been a large focal point of study. Rather than understanding increasing homosexual visibility as positive change, these theorists argue that homosexuality is being portrayed in ways that reinforce the dominance of heterosexuality (Diamond 2005; Doty and Gove 1997; Jenefsky and Miller 1998; Wilkinson 1996). While same sex intimacies are
being portrayed, it is often for the enjoyment of heterosexual audiences and done in stereotypical ways (think of the Madonna/Brittany Spears kiss on MTV, or *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*).

However, the problem with focusing on public presentations of gays and lesbians (or same sex sexual acts) is that the research assumes audiences perceive and interpret these representations uniformly. These studies, while important to understandings the limitations of homo-visibility, fail to address the different meanings and interpretations individuals may take from such images (Plummer 1997). While some people may interpret public presentations of normative heterosexuality and homosexuality within dominant binary sexuality and gender, others may see these portrayals as opposing normative constrictions of heterosexuality. If we fail to research personal interpretations of sexuality, we miss observing the ways that homosexual visibility can be positive to some people yet problematic to others.

Another group of researchers who argue for the continuing normative status of heterosexuality have supported their position by exploring highly heterosexualized spaces. The heterosexualization of female same sex intimacy is argued to occur when female intimacies are accepted only so long as they are for the benefit of male audiences (Hamilton 2007; Jenefsky and Miller 1998; Stombler and Martin 1995). What I find missing from such studies is an exploration of the individual meanings behind same sex intimacies. These studies focus only on the political significance of engaging in same sex sexual acts for the benefit of male audiences. Fahs (2009) research, for example does not take into account, regardless of whether or not participants “wrote off” their same-sex encounters, what level the women felt gratified from the experiences. I do not think researchers should necessarily be quick to dismiss women kissing at
fraternity parties without first exploring the personal meanings that guide their actions and their comfort levels.

The larger social practice or trend of women kissing at fraternity parties/bars (or in music videos, movies, and television shows) may be symptomatic of compulsory heterosexuality and its resulting sexual/gender binaries, but are there some spaces where the coercion associated with compulsory heterosexuality is lessened? Does compulsory bisexual and heterosexual regulation encompass all institutions, or are there places where individuals do not feel compelled to adhere to sexual binaries? Again, this would require researchers to explore the significance of sexual behaviors, desires, and acts on an individual level in various social spaces (not just within the confines of college campuses) and across sexual identifications (not just among heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, or pansexuals). Where can researchers draw the line between the positive and negative ramifications? I would like to address these questions and the reach of compulsory heterosexuality and its role in compelling individuals to adopt normatively heterosexual identities and lifestyles. Specifically, I assert that Seidman’s (2009b) theory of institutional normative heterosexuality can bridge the gap between the existing literature on sexual fluidity, and shed light on the contemporary status of compulsory heterosexuality.

Seidman (2009b) uses the theory of institutional normative heterosexuality to underscore the continued embeddedness of sexual binaries in institutions while acknowledging the lessening compulsory status of heterosexuality at the same time. Today, normative heterosexuality continues to be institutionalized across various social structures which are, “organized by patterns of sex-gender division and hierarchy” (86). However, these same institutions, to varying degrees, have incorporated and recognized the civil liberties of gays and lesbians (marriage, discrimination laws, etc.).
The individual coercion to adopt binary identities in order to be socially legitimized is not the same as conditions were in the 1970s, when Rich (1993) originally conceptualized the theory of compulsory heterosexuality. Instead, “to the extent that the public face of these institutions, their marketing and public image, their executive hierarchies, and their informal and gendered culture continues to privilege heterosexuality in patterned ways, it is appropriate to speak of the institutionalization of normative heterosexuality,” (Seidman 2009b; 86). In other words, the social changes in the construction of intimacies and the growing number of legal protections/inclusions of LGBTQ individuals points to a weakening of compulsory heterosexuality.

However, at the same time that LGBTQ individuals are being symbolically integrated into institutions, this very incorporation of “normal gays” stabilizes the moral boundaries between good sexual citizens from, “citizens who fall outside the circle of normality, for example, trannies or libertines, bisexuals or serial monogamists,” (Seidman 2004; Seidman 2009b, 86). While the binary between gays/straights may be disappearing in some institutions, it has been done at the cost of reinforcing divisions of good and bad sexual citizens in others (or as Johnson (2004) observed, normal sex and “disgusting” sex). Thus, while homosexual normalization has arguably ended the compulsory status of heterosexuality in some institutions, it has also stabilized institutionalized normative heterosexuality by providing a guise of sexual equality.

This is not to say that compulsory heterosexuality has vanished and is a thing of the past. Indeed, Pascoe’s (2007) research strongly suggests that compulsory heterosexuality is alive and well in some institutions, as exemplified by fag discourses in schools. Similarly, Fahs’ (2009) account of compulsory bisexuality indicates that just because the requirements of normative
heterosexuality are changing, that does not mean that it is no longer compulsory within relationships. But, there are some institutions that are increasingly less compulsory in their regulation of sexual binaries.

The theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality can explain both sides of the arguments regarding the significance of sexual fluidity that I outlined earlier. This theory allows that in many institutions, sexual identification has little bearing on whether or not individuals are granted access to privileges and acceptance. Thus, those that herald new changes on the horizon of sexual binaries are not necessarily wrong. At the same time, the researchers who note the limitations of sexual fluidity and the ongoing cultural privileging and naturalizing of heterosexuality are not wrong, either. Seidman’s (2009b) theory effectively acknowledges each side of the aforementioned argument, and asserts that while normative heterosexuality continues to be institutionally embedded, it has afforded gays and lesbians new levels of social integration.

As of yet, the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality has not been empirically assessed in regards to the compulsory status of heterosexuality. The aim of this research is to explore to what degree individuals are coerced to adopt binary identities by, “means of disenfranchisement, criminalization, homophobic harassment and violence, sequestrations, and cultural pollutions” (Seidman 2009b, 92). The central question I will explore is: whether or not sexuality, while still regulated by institutional means, is necessarily constricted by compulsory restrictions of heterosexuality. My research will focus on the spaces where individuals experience coercion to adhere to sexual binaries, as well as the places where it may be lessened. Next, I will outline my research questions, goals, and the methodologies employed in this dissertation.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS
Exploring the Complexity of Sexual Narratives

Power is a process that weaves its way through embodied, passionate social life and everything in its wake. Sexual stories live in this flow of power. ~Plummer, 1995 (26)

As noted earlier, the goal of this research is to explore individual sexual narratives, focusing on sexual fluidity and the boundaries of desires, experiences, and self-identification. By boundaries of desires, experiences, and self-identification of sexuality, I mean the circumstances where individuals feel compelled to categorize their experiences/desires into binary sexual identities (such as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual). Throughout this analysis, the terms binary, rigid, and static will be used interchangeably to refer to socially constructed sexual identity categories. While Diamond (2008a) defines sexual fluidity as a situational attraction/desire/experience regardless of an individual’s overall sexual orientation, here, sexual fluidity will refer to the thoughts/fantasies/desires/behaviors and identities that are contradictory to static, binary conceptualizations of sexuality and gender.

This difference is important, as psychologists use sexual orientation to refer to a biologically, inert, and often pre-determined sexual attraction to one sex or the other. Omission of the term sexual orientation is deliberate, as I remain unconvinced that heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality exist outside of their respective, historically specific, social constructions (Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio and Freedman 1997; Faderman 1991; Foucault 1978; Weeks 2000). In place of sexual orientation, I will use the term self-identification to acknowledge the historical specificity of these terms (and the role individuals have in choosing a category to project to the rest of society) and avoid naturalizing the assumption that individuals have sexual predispositions.
The general aim of my research is to explore how and to what degree some individuals may or may not be coerced to adopt binary, normative identities by, “means of disenfranchisement, criminalization, homophobic harassment and violence, sequestrations, and cultural pollutions,” (Seidman 2009b: 92). With this goal in mind, the first question is; are there some circumstances where individuals experience less coercion, or pressure, to adopt rigid binary categories to understand and express sexual identities? Are there specific scenarios or interactions where individuals are more likely to use binary language, and others where fluidity is more prevalent? What might compel individuals to use binary definitions to describe their overall sexuality?

The second question I will explore is what role, if any, does fluidity play in individuals’ lives? How do individuals understand their fluidly defined experiences? Does fluidity provide women freedom from dichotomous and rigid understandings of sexuality, or does fluidity, in the end, serve to reinforce sexual binaries and the hierarchies they sustain? How do individuals interpret fluidity in their own lives, or the fluidity of others (whether with friends or media images)?

The third research question addresses the role that institutions play in binaries; what interactions do individuals have with sexual categories within institutions (such as educational institutions, families, friendship networks, etc.)? How are individuals navigating sexual dichotomies within institutions, and to what extent are individuals disenfranchised for being deemed sexual outsiders? Are there specific boundaries that individuals run into where sexually fluid experiences are rendered invisible/invalid within institutions?

In order to shed light on these questions, I conducted a qualitative study of sexual identity and intimate histories among women. This research captures the experiences of only self-
identified women; however, women of various ages over 18 and from a myriad of race/ethnicities/backgrounds were interviewed. Given the different gendered roles and pressures men and women in our society face, it is likely that women’s and men’s relationship with sexual identification differ greatly. In fact, Whisman’s (1996) study of sexual identity among gay men and women suggests that men are more likely to interpret their sexualities as being biologically based, whereas women perceive sexual identity as at least partly rooted in choice. I also focus on women in this study because they have a unique history of being largely ignored in research on sexuality.

As Ussher and Mooney-Somers (2000) note, “Research on [women’s] sexuality has focused on sexual behavior, adopting survey methodologies which examine issues such as safe sex, sexual intercourse and contraception,” (184) resulting in a narrowly constructed view of contemporary women’s sexuality. Although sociologists have done extensive research on sexual identities and practices, they have not spent as much time exploring the meanings behind sexual behaviors and identities among women (Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000).

While focusing on women only provides part of the story of the experience of sexual identities in contemporary society, the differing bodies of literature and conclusions regarding sexual fluidity among men necessitates a separate study. This is because the arguments/theories regarding sexual fluidity among men have been overwhelmingly understood as a biological rather than a social phenomenon (a problematic viewpoint that merits its own critique). Additionally, men have historically occupied a dominant position within sexual relations, providing a contrasting and unique experience from women. Therefore, I believe the topic of men’s sexual fluidity warrants a different, albeit related, study. Overall, in researching women’s sexual narratives and instances of fluidity, I hope to synthesize the existing literature about
sexual fluidity and address their aforementioned limitations by providing a framework that unifies the contrasting research findings.

SAMPLING

*Personal narratives (of all sorts, not only sexual ones) are central to how we construct our most basic sense of self. The belief that one is who one is supposed to be may be an abdication of personal responsibility, but is a very comforting one.* ~Whisman, 1996: 119

The following qualitative interviews focused on the ways in which sexual histories may or may not reproduce and transcend sexual binaries, with a focus on the meanings that women attach to their sexual experiences and self-identifications, and their relationship to institutional regulation (Mishler 1986; Reissman 1993; Ussher and Mooney-Somers 2000). In-depth, semi-structured, open ended, face-to-face interviews were held with forty (40) women, between the ages of 19 and 74. I chose to look at a wide array of ages because I have not seen any evidence to suggest that younger generations (born after the 1980s) are more likely to experience fluidity than those whose sexually formative years occurred in the past (before the 1980s). Additionally, experiences of fluidity have been captured in research as far back as the early 1900s (Kinsey 1948; 53) and are extensively documented in Victorian era “romantic” letters (Seidman 1991). In fact, it would stand to reason that the longer the sexual history, the more likely it may be that an individual has experienced sexual fluidity.

As well as collecting narratives from various age groups, data was collected across a myriad of identity (and non-identity) groups. While I was originally hoping to be able to interview between 40 and 60 individuals, due to traveling constraints and the difficulties gathering participants I was only able to speak with 40 women over what became a five year
period. Despite the challenges in gathering a larger sample of participants, I was able to garner a large enough data set to be able to analyze the levels of coercion (or lack thereof) that individuals face to adhere to sexual binaries. Here, coercion refers specifically to the feminist conceptualization of the social rewards provided to individuals for adopting normative, binary sexual identities such as social recognition and legitimation [marriage, adoption rights, etc.] (Rich 1993).

The open-ended interview format was designed to allow participants to focus on the experiences and interpretations of their sexual identity that are most important to them. I chose open ended interviews because they are the best way to capture “sexual stories” in the making (Plummer 1997). Although the sample size is relatively small, I was able to collect incredibly detailed data from a wide variety of sexual subgroups (Berg 2997; Marshall and Rossman 2006). As noted in the literature review, one of the drawbacks to earlier studies on sexual fluidity is that they have focused on one sexual group at a time (either LGBT identified or straight identified). However, the body of research on sexual fluidity reveals that individuals of all sexual identifications (or non-identifications) report fluid experiences (Diamond 2008a; Fahs 2009; Golden 1987; Thompson & Morgan 2008; Rupp & Taylor 2014).

As such, I attempted to sample equal numbers of participants from different identification groups, such as lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, and non-identified individuals. At the conclusion of the interviews, I had spoken with nine women who (at least initially in our discussions) identified as gay or lesbian, 18 women who identified as straight, two who identified as bisexual, and 11 who identified as queer, fluid, or pansexual. Although I had hoped to speak with a more equal number of bisexual identified women, there were several reasons that I found this to be the most difficult group to target, which will be discussed at length in the forthcoming chapters.
I utilized a purposive sampling design to gather data from participants of different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds to bolster the diversity of participants. Gaining racial, ethnic, and class diversity in research on sexual fluidity is important, as different groups have unique histories surrounding sexual norms based on their varying identities and cultural experiences (Bogle 2008; Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio & Freedman 1997; Faderman 1991). While I was targeting to get roughly equal amounts of participation and planned to over sample from different racial and ethnic groups, the sample I garnered fell short of that goal.

Instead, the makeup of participants resembles fairly closely the racial and ethnic composition of the area with which this research began in upstate New York. In all, 67.5% of the participants identified as white and 32.5% identified as African American, Latina, multi-racial, Middle Eastern, or Asian American. As a diverse sample is important to underscore the ways that race, class, and gender intersect to influence our experience of sexuality and sexual identity, I feel further study is warranted to explore more of the intricacies of how race and ethnicity intersect with sexual identification and intimate experiences (Collins 2004; Durham 2002; Goldman 1996; Nagel 2000; Somerville 2000). In the end, I was at least able to speak with enough women of color to share a myriad of voices and experiences beyond upper/middle class white women.

To begin, I started gathering interviewees through word of mouth and posting flyers in local establishments (bars/coffee shops, etc.). I first reached out to personal contacts in an attempt to access more diverse (racially and sexually) networks outside of my personal circles. I purposefully tried to find women who were not necessarily politically active (in terms of their sexual identity) in order to gain a more broadly representative sample. Studies on populations that reject sexual identification (Rupp & Taylor 2014; Thompson & Morgan 2008) have too
often relied on the experiences on college campuses. This tendency has led to the assumption that younger generations are more likely to experience fluidity (Savin-Williams 2005), leaving out an examination of non-college affiliated populations, such as older individuals or people who are not college educated. One realm of diversity that this study was successful in was gaining a variety of ages groups within this sample. Overall, 32% of the respondents were over the age of 50, 45% were between the ages of 30 and 49, and 23% were younger than 30.

That said, it should be noted that one of the drawbacks to the sample is that twelve of the participants did end up having at least a graduate school education or worked in some capacity in higher education. However, 70% of the sample did not have an overly political occupation or background in higher education, which is an improvement over some prior research on sexuality and fluidity. In order to target individuals who were not necessarily tied to college campuses or who had even been to college, I utilized a snowball sample design in order to access some of these harder to find groups by utilizing other participants’ and acquaintances’ networks and affiliations (Berg 2007; Marshall and Rossman 2006). As time went on and I started traveling more regularly for work, out of necessity I switched to posting the call for participants more frequently in online forums and groups (such as professional associations/list serves, i.e. Q-Study). This enabled me to at least conduct interviews remotely, which was convenient and enabled the data collection to remain steady.

Conducting interviews remotely (via FaceTime or Skype) had advantages and disadvantages. Out of the forty interviews, eighteen were held remotely. The obvious advantage was that I could talk to people regardless of what city/state I was in. It also afforded a greater level of privacy for people to speak from their own homes and at a time that they could be alone. The challenge for remote interviews was twofold. I found it took longer to gain a rapport with
the participants and put them at ease to start disclosing more personal details remotely. The second disadvantage was that interviews were easily (and for some, often) disrupted by bad service and connectivity. This led to occasional frustrations as sometimes the participants would lose their train of thought, or were abruptly interrupted at some pivotal moments in the interviews. Only one remote interview was of such poor quality that we ended up switching to a phone call after the initial half hour of video conferencing proved futile.

MEASURES

Finding out what people do sexually, and furthermore, what kinds of erotic narratives they apply to what they do sexually, can rewrite both psychoanalytic theories of desire and scientific theories of sexuality. It can also clear up homogenizing notions of gay and lesbian desire that hold that all lesbians are attracted to all other lesbians and all gay men to other gay men. ~Halberstam 1998: 117

The interview questions were designed to focus on how sexual histories may reproduce or transcend sexual binaries and to explore the meanings that women attach to their sexual experiences and identities (Mishler 1986; Reissman 1993; Ussher and Mooney-Somers 2000). They also sought to explore incidences of coercion, where, regardless of individual experiences that contradicted the premise of static identities, women still adopted a homosexual or heterosexual identity. As defined earlier, coercion refers to the social/personal acceptance and rewarding of individuals who adhere to normative heterosexual (and homosexual) scripts. On an individual level, this coercion can be experienced as the social influences and constraints people face in regards to their sexual freedom. Anti-gay bullying and even pressures from friends/family to get married are examples of coercion that individuals can face.
Throughout this analysis, I will use terms such as coercion/constraints/influences interchangeably to address the micro level pressures individuals face to sexually conform to binaries. The general premise of my hypothesis is that if individuals are experiencing pressure to adopt sexual categories/norms, then it will be possible to chart the sexual boundaries they navigate within their sexual narratives, as social constraints impact individuals within their everyday interactions. For example, in a compulsory heterosexuality society, individuals would be consistently policed in regards to their sexuality; whether by police harassment, bullying, violence, and marginalization on a daily basis throughout different facets of their lives (Rich 1993 Seidman 2009b). However, if individuals reported not feeling pressure to identify their sexuality, or were able to understand their sexual experiences in ways that transcended sexual binaries, then perhaps the compulsory aspect of heterosexuality is less salient (at least for some). While select institutions may continue to be organized by compulsory heterosexuality regulation, there may be individuals who do not feel compelled to understand their experiences through the lens of sexual dichotomies. These narratives would be characterized not only by reporting fluid experiences, but also by providing understandings of identity that do not rely on fixed definitions of sexuality.

As such, the questions for this study were designed to explore the institutional spaces that individuals navigate, and capture not only their sexual experiences, but how they interpret their sexual experiences throughout their lives and in the particular social spaces they occupied at different times. Which individuals, if any, actively express and adhere to notions of heterosexuality/homosexuality? Why do they find the identification important? Are there some times when they feel it is not necessary to identify at all, and is that reasoning related to institutional boundaries and constructions? Do the participants report being aware of or fearing
any backlash for not adhering to sexual norms? When do women find themselves reflecting on their sexuality, and what types of narrative experiences portray a lack of thought or reflection regarding sexuality in general? When did women first begin their sexual experiences, and did they feel any pressure or compulsion to engage in those intimacies or relationships?

Furthermore, are there any times when binary understandings of sexuality are resisted and which institutions/times/spaces does it occur within? What role does morality play within sexual narratives, and what role does tradition/expectation play in people’s sexual intimacies and relationships? For a full listing of questions discussed with interviewees during the course of this research, please see the appendices.

In order to target a wide array of participants, this study is somewhat unique because participants were recruited from any age (over 18 due to the explicit focus of the questions), race, ethnicity, or sexual identity. Coercion (or social constraints on an individual level) can be observed across sexual identity categories, as it is not necessarily dependent upon any one experience or background. Again, a narrative that is not compulsory would not place importance on identity, and reserve identification, perhaps, for particular institutions within which identifying is still necessary to access social privileges. This could be portrayed by individuals who refuse to identify sexually, or women who have a broad range of fluid, non-binary experiences (without writing them off as for the attention of men), or a person who might not have had fluid experiences but is open to them, and even someone whose desires (not actions) are fluid and they interpret that fluidity as not fitting into either binary.

Charting when, where, and how people identify is important to observing the social spaces/institutions that still heavily rely on sexual dichotomies to access certain privileges (or to at least be recognized within the institution’s discourse). For example, much of the research
regarding sexual fluidity indicates that college is an institution that has lent itself to the proliferation of fluidity. As Rupp and Taylor (2014) observe, at “…campuses across the country, the sexual scripts of the hookup culture, with the possibilities for same-sex sexual experimentation and an openness to a variety of relationships, provide a context for the development of new intimacies and sexual identities … This opens up the possibility of intimacies beyond both traditional heterosexual and gay/lesbian committed relationships.” College students have been observed to report fluid identities ranging from queer, pansexual, mostly straight, to heteroflexible or bi-curious (Rupp and Taylor 2014; 87). A lack of institutional coercion, experienced on an individual level, could be marked by the rejection of sexual binaries, the absence of bullying/fear surrounding non-heterosexual liaisons, and even the interpretation of experiences/desires as not being fully heterosexual/homosexual.

However, while the college scene may afford more access to fluid experiences/interpretations/experiences, certain sectors of campuses most assuredly remain more compulsory in the regulation of heterosexuality (such as clubs and many, though not all, fraternities and sororities). Hamilton’s (2007) and Payne’s (2010) research emphasize the importance of searching for the limitations of institutional acceptance of non-binary and fluid identities/experiences. By exploring specific institutional spaces and limitations of acceptance in participant narratives, I investigate the institutional constraints/influences in people’s sexual lives (when/how/where it emerges within sexual narratives), and analyze one of the key regulatory principles that underlies the theory of compulsory heterosexuality: coercion. Compulsory heterosexuality relies on the premise that heterosexuality, and the expectations that come with it for women (marriage, child bearing, etc.) are enforced and rewarded.
As Rich (1993) so poignantly notes, “… heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (238-239). However, if sexual narratives reveal incidences of fluidity, display a reluctance to adhere to binary understandings of sexuality, or even reject expectations of “normal” relationships (monogamy, marriage, etc.), it would suggest that perhaps the theory of compulsory heterosexuality may require revisiting.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This assumption of female heterosexuality seems to me in itself remarkable: it is an enormous assumption to have glided so silently into the foundations of our thought.

~Rich 1993: 232

Data was collected through in person, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Again, topics visited during the discussions ranged from people’s current relationships, history of sexual encounters, understandings of their sexual self-identification, incidences of fluidity/feelings of sexual freedom, and their relationship to/participation within different institutions. The interviews were audio recorded with the participant’s informed verbal consent (not written as to protect the identity of the interviewees), and during transcription, pseudonyms were substituted in place of any names mentioned during the narrative collection. Interviewees were asked if they were willing to participate in a one and a half to two hour interview regarding their sexual histories and sexual identification, detailing both their practices and how they interpret and categorize their experiences.

It should be noted that the interviews ended up lasting well beyond that, with an average time between two and a quarter to three and a half hours. Anyone who responded to the call for
participants was screened based on their gender self-identification, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, and age in order to obtain as much diversity as possible in the study. To help provide an incentive for individuals to talk to me without unduly coercing them with economic rewards, I offered each a free coffee/tea/beverage of their choice and a friendly conversation. To make the interview process more convenient, thereby encouraging more people to participate, I tried to meet individuals at the nearest public place that was convenient for them (that fulfills the criterion of having a more private space within for talking) or at their own residence/place of choice (or remotely, when necessary). In trying to travel to the participant’s locale, rather than expecting them to meet me in an area outside of their community, I was hoping to remove any barriers/inconveniences that would lead people to drop out of the study. Although the original intent was to conduct all forty interviews (and then some) in person, due to personal circumstances and out of necessity, almost half of the interviews were conducted via video conference, utilizing Skype or FaceTime.

In addition to recording the interviews, I took detailed notes to capture the reactions of participants (when relevant) and track themes or revise questions as I spoke with the women. During the transcription process, which I undertook personally using InqScribe software, I reflected on the themes that materialized in the responses that I captured from each participant (Rubin & Rubin 2004). Again, in the end, I was able to gather forty narratives (with twelve women going “radio silent” before scheduling an interview time with me). Overall, the qualitative structure allowed me to be more flexible during the interviews, permitting for the change of topics, the ability to rephrase certain questions, and even allowed me to jump ahead or circle back to particular themes in order to clarify and underscore trends throughout the discussions.
Although I found the interview questions to flow fairly well during the course of the research, I did find I had to clarify certain questions, particularly the questions surrounding identities and what sexually experiences meant to participants. While part of this was due to the unquestioned status of heterosexuality and homosexuality as “human types” in the U.S. (to the point that some women could not figure out why I would even ask them about their heterosexuality at all), some people just never had the time or the space to reflect on their sexual experiences and what they meant to them over the years. This underscored the point that sexuality, for many, continues to be an unquestioned status quo.

At the conclusion of data collection, I had transcribed over 120 hours of interview recordings, removing all personally identifiable information that could point to the interviewees’ identities. I used the NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software to help code the emergent themes. Initially, when I was originally outlining the methodologies of this study, I suspected, based on prior research we discussed in Chapter 2, that I would encounter a few different types of narratives. First, I speculated that I would speak with individuals for whom sexuality was a given, something they had not had to think about before. A second group I expected to speak with was women who had more fluid interpretations of sexuality, and who chose sexualities that were neither heterosexual nor homosexual. Thirdly, I expected to find women who reported choosing a sexual identity, but would also voice desires and sexual acts that would transcend available binary discourses. In the end, I actually observed four distinct categories that were more nuanced than my initial expectations. The four narratives categories will be outlined in detail in Chapter 4.

VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, AND BARRIERS
One of the biggest assets of qualitative research is that the data collected is incredibly thorough. The in-depth results allow researchers to provide various examples from interviews to underlie and support theoretical frameworks. When clarification or more specificity was desired, I was able to easily adjust by utilizing follow up questions during the interview process to allow for clarification, clear up any misunderstandings, and even keep the interviews on track to avoid getting off topic (which, I think due to the sensitivity of the questions, some women utilized as a strategy to deal with the initial discomfort of discussing such personal details with a near complete stranger). In the case of this dissertation, the in-depth conversations with participants allowed me to collect detailed sexual narratives (or histories) regarding individuals’ perceptions of their sexual realities, experiences, desires, and identities (Plummer 1997). The dynamic and fluid conversations enabled me to capture much more data than surveys and questionnaires would have allowed for (as noted earlier).

I took additional steps during the interview process to try to preserve the validity of the research findings. The interview questions themselves were worded generally enough by design to help me avoid asking “leading questions” to get the responses I wanted, rather than honest ones. I also listened to each interview several times to ensure I was not misconstruing responses to key questions. One commonality across the interviews was that I had to ask questions surrounding identities and sexual acts multiple ways and at different times throughout the second half of the interviews. I believe this was partly due to the questions being so personal in nature. The other part, again, I suspect is likely due to people not having had time and spaces to reflect on the meanings of their desires and fantasies. Asking repetitive questions was a tactic I used to assess the continuity of the answers I received to screen if people were trying to tell me what
they thought I wanted to hear. I found asking follow up questions and rephrasing the same question in slightly different ways helped to expand and clarify participant responses.

In the past, quantitative researchers, historically, have used sexuality as an independent variable to create various parameters around sexual populations. However, when using binary sexual categories (hetero/homo), and assigning participants into one sexual category or another (regardless of their personal self-identification), researchers inadvertently reinforce rather than deconstruct sexual categories by underscoring the differences between sexualities rather than looking at the similarities that falsify the socio-ideological and institutional construction of sexual categories (such as the case in Black et al., 2000, and Laumann, et al., 1994)). These studies have also focused on “typically male” practices to explore opposite sex relations (with emphasis on vaginal intercourse, giving/receiving oral sex, and the anal sex) (Ericksen, 1999).

Quantitative research (with the exception of Laumann et al., 1994) has also not taken into account the interplay between sexual acts, self-identification, and desires as it interplays with sexual identity. Even when quantitative researchers have avoided assigning labels to participants, the studies remain unable to capture how individuals understand and interpret their sexual experiences. While quantitative studies have been invaluable to charting trends of sexual fluidity (Bright 1992; Chandra et al 2011; Hoburg et al 2004; Laumann et al 1994; Lever et all 1992), they have not been able to capture nuanced data regarding individuals’ interpretation of their self-identification or their understandings of fluid experiences. I feel these qualitative interviews I had the honor of taking part in addressed these gaps in earlier quantitative studies.

At the same time, I feel it is important to note some of the drawbacks to this study. Given the number of questions in the interviews and the necessity of finding different ways of asking the same thing, the reliability of the research is difficult to ensure, as replicating the exact
interviews I had would not be possible. However, to address this weakness, I strove to stay consistent not only in my interview questions and the types of questions/topics I explored with the participants, but also during the coding stage. Throughout the data coding, I endeavored to draw inferences that another person who was viewing the raw data would understand and arrive at similar conclusions (Berg 2007; Marshall and Rossman 2006; Rubin & Rubin 2004). By actively assessing my assumptions and the categorizations I made throughout the narrative collection process, I tried to improve the reliability of the research.

In order to try to avoid undue influence in the interviews (although there was no way for me to ensure my personal representation had no bearing on the responses I received) I utilized an unconditional positive regard (asking questions in neutral/friendly terms and being agreeable to responses regardless of their content), in the style of Kinsey’s original research (1948; 1953). A related issue I experienced during the interviews was the impact that my personal gender/sexual expression played in speaking with the women who partook in this study. Since I present as what is referred to as a “visible masculine” lesbian, it is likely some of the women I spoke with were not fully forthcoming about their feelings on same sex sexualities, especially if they found them distasteful. At the same time, it did serve as an asset to gaining rapport and trust with women who reported same sex intimacies. I do suspect that some participants felt more comfortable and safe sharing their stories with someone who they assumed had similar experiences. In general, I did pay careful attention to how I worded questions to avoid inflammatory questions (i.e. not asking if someone was homophobic, but rather if they could picture themselves kissing someone of the same sex, etc. or how that makes them feel, or even ask their opinions regarding same-sex intimacies portrayed on television).
One reaction I had anticipated before starting the interview process was that some participants might not have much to say, especially if they had never put much thought into their normative sexuality/desires. This was to be expected, as within heteronormative societies, heterosexuality is such an embedded assumption that many people do not stop to question the construction of sexual binaries (Fuss 1991; Jackson 2006; Sedgewick 1990; Warner 1993; Wittig 1992). To address this issue, I started the interviews with more personalized questions regarding current relationships, past relationships, even collecting funny vignettes about relationships gone wrong and stories they have heard from friends.

When the women did not have much to say about their identities, I spent more time asking and exploring details about their friendships with non-heterosexuals and any interactions they have had with non-heterosexual populations, and whether they were positive experiences. Even if individuals did not recognize their interactions to be “coercive” and believed sexuality to be an innate characteristic, the narratives still captured the struggles women encounter today while navigating the boundaries of sexual categorization throughout their lives by highlighting their exposure to, and interactions with, “fluidity” even if they were not personal experiences.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Before I started the data collection phase, I applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University at Albany’s Office of Regulatory Research Compliance. During the transcription process, all personal identifying information was either deleted or replaced with pseudonyms. Once audio recordings were fully transcribed and coded for anonymity, all audio files, both on the audio recorder and on my personal computer, were deleted, and the files “electronically shredded.” Transcriptions were only done on my personal computer, which is
both password protected and requires facial recognition to gain access. By personally transcribing each interview, I was able to maintain an additional level of confidentiality for the women who were brave enough to speak with me. To further protect privacy, my computer was locked at all times that I was away from it (even if I just ran into the room next door). The audio recorder was kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home, with the key in my possession at all times.

Certainly, for many, discussions of sex and sexuality are considered not only personal, but sometimes controversial. Although sexuality is a frequently discussed topic within many, if not all, institutions in some form or another, it is deemed a sensitive topic by IRBs because of the conflicting opinions and intimate subject matter. Due to the potential emotional nature of the interview questions (as they could inevitably bring up negative experiences, consensual or not) I took steps in the research design to prepare for the potential problems that may arise during the interview process. First, before beginning the interviews, I provided both an informed consent form and a brief verbal summation of the topics to be discussed, emphasizing that the interview may bring up sensitive topics and can be ended at any point should the participant no longer wish to continue the interview. I noted, to each participant at the start of the interview, that they may revoke their consent to participate in the study at any time, and if they did, I would delete all data and not include their interview in the study.

To maintain confidentiality, I obtained verbal consent before starting each interview. The informed consent form also contained the contact information for the Institutional Review Board, the University Counseling Center, and a 1-800 number for the Capital District Psychological Services Center should the participant experience any emotional distress during or resulting from the interview. While I did not have any incidences where the women expressed distress during
our interview, every single participant I spoke with did touch on some degree of past sexual assault, molestation, intimidation, or abuse. From this, it became abundantly clear to me that although some women could escape the confines of sexual binaries, the normalization of coercion through physical force and sexual exploitation for many women is still very much endemic in our society, even after more than forty years have passed since Rich’s conceptualization of compulsory heterosexuality (1978). Though some facets of compulsory heterosexuality may have changed over time, the physical force and sexual victimization of women continues to be the reality for many across the U.S., as this small subsection of research seems to strongly indicate.

In regards to the above ethical and research design concerns, before I began this dissertation research, I conducted a pilot study with a shorter interview schedule for my master’s thesis. These interviews, despite addressing different research questions and hypotheses, were similarly focused on the disjuncture between women’s self-identification, desires/fantasies, and behaviors (the study was eventually published; see LaMarre 2010). The results produced detailed data and helped to lay the foundation for this larger study. From the preliminary study, I was able to refine my consent form and research materials, and found additional resources to provide participants with should they find the questions upsetting. Further, I demonstrated the effectiveness of these interview methods in yielding intricate responses and obtaining detailed sexual narratives across various identity categories. Finally, my prior research has shown that the noted barriers to qualitative, interview based research can be overcome in an ethical way. These precautions and previous interview experiences I feel improved the reliability of the forthcoming results.
In the next chapter, Chapter 4, I begin detailing the results by reviewing the demographics of the research sample. Then, I organize the narratives into four categories to better understand the themes that emerged during the coding process. The categories developed from the meanings and interpretations the women placed on their sexual identities. I provide examples for each of the classifications to emphasize the different ways that women adhered to, experienced, and operated outside of static identities. While many of the participants had degrees of fluid experiences and desires, the meanings women attached to their fluidity varied widely. For some, acknowledging and embracing fluidity provided a freedom that they did not have in their youth. For others, fluidity was a lifestyle, a way to maximize their sexual enjoyment. Yet, there were also women who felt binaries were a biological state, or served as a community and a culture unto itself.
CHAPTER 4: THE PEOPLE

Whatever else a story is, it is not simply the lived life. It speaks all around the life: it provides routes into a life, lays down maps for lives to follow... It may indeed be one of the most important tools we have for understanding lives and the wider cultures they are part of.
~Plummer (1997)

DEMOGRAPHICS AND IDENTITIES

This study took me further across the U.S. than I had imagined at its outset. Originally, the game plan was to speak with self-identified women across the Northeast to get to know them, their intimate histories, and the role that sexual identities played in their lives. The goal of the research remained the same; to explore individual sexual narratives focusing on sexual fluidity and the boundaries of sexual binaries that women navigate. While the study stayed true to its intentions and research questions, I was able to reach a wider audience than anticipated as I began traveling for work to different job sites across the U.S.

Through five years of gathering data, I went to different construction projects in New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, Illinois, Indiana, Alabama, Arizona, and New Mexico. While this slowed the pace of gathering interviews, the positive side was that the pool of available participants to speak with in person grew as I touched down in different areas. Everywhere I went, I brought a stack of flyers with contact information should I come across a bulletin board in a local coffee shop, sandwich shop, diner, library, gym, or even bars. All the while, I posted the call for participants in online listservs searching for new groups of people to round out my sample.

Although it took far longer than intended, the result was that I was able to speak with people at a myriad of places across the country. Some, I spoke to in the back, remote corners of
coffee shops. Others, in breakout rooms in libraries or even a private training room at a gym. For a few participants who had heard about the study through word of mouth via my own networks, I was invited to speak with them in their homes or apartments. A couple of people were even generous enough to speak with me in conference rooms at the hotel I was staying in at the time as they resided nearby. In the instances where distance presented a barrier or a viable location was not accessible, I was able to speak with people on FaceTime or Skype, sequestered in a quiet, private room of my house/hotel.

At its conclusion in early 2019, I had spoken with people from or living in eighteen different states (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: Participant Location Map**

![Participant Location Map](Google 2022; retrieved 11/21/2021)

Their ages ranged from 19 to 74, with the youngest identifying as a bisexual cosmetologist, and the oldest a self-identified, retired straight woman who is open to having sexual experiences with a woman should the opportunity arise in the retirement community she newly relocated to.
While some people were just starting college or graduate school, others had skipped college and went straight into the workforce. With taking my study on the road came the unexpected chance to speak with more people outside of local networks, which enabled me to more easily recruit women who were not of typical age or education that are often found in studies regarding sexuality. Much of the research on fluidity has been conducted either directly among or around colleges and universities (Bogle 2008; Budnick 2016; Fahs 2009; Hamilton 2007; Hoburg, Williams, & Crawford 2004; Payne 2010; Rupp & Taylor 2013, 2014; Stombler & Martin 1995; Thompson & Morgan 2008), with participants falling within the 18 to 28 age group. In contrast, this study captures the experiences of both college and non-college educated women across various age and racial/ethnic groups.

As Rupp and Taylor (2014) note, “It is also critical that we learn more about the opportunity for same-sex intimacies in the sexual fields common among those not going to college,” (229). While many had attended college, 80% of the participants were far removed (8 years plus) from their college experience, and 68% had professions not related to education or research (the other 32% were primary, secondary, or college educators or administrators). The professions of the women ranged from nurses, EMTs and healthcare professionals, state and federal workers, educators, professors, writers, librarians, bar tenders, food service workers, administrators, advocates, trainers, vet techs, construction workers, beauticians, to corporate managers and environmental scientists.

Of the forty interviewees, 17.5% were between the ages of 18 and 24, 17.5% were between 25 and 34, 25% were between 35 and 44, 15% were between 45 and 54, 7.5% were between 55 and 64, and 17.5% were between 65 and 74 years of age (see Table 1). The hardest age group to recruit for ended up being the 55-to-64-year age range. The three women within this
group heard about the study through two friends, and reached out to me to participate. No one in this group responded to the flyers or calls for participants I had posted. This could be because of where I had posted the flyers (coffee shops, gyms) or the forums I posted within were not ones that this age group frequented, but it is most likely just by chance that I was unable to gain more participants in that grouping.

**TABLE 1: Age of Interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24 years old (n = 7)</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34 years old (n = 7)</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44 years old (n = 10)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 54 years old (n = 6)</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 64 years old (n = 3)</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 74 years old (n = 7)</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total women over 55 (n = 10)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note the first age category only has a 7 year increment due to the minimum age of participants in this study of 18 years old.*

Similar to the typical demographic composition of cities in upstate New York (which is not a surprise given 70% of those spoken to either currently or at one point resided in New York state), 67.5% of the participants identified as white, while the other 32.5% identified as women of color including Black, Latina, Middle Eastern, Asian (Vietnamese of Korean), or Multi-Racial (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2: Race/Ethnicity of Interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race &amp; Ethnicity</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (n = 27)</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American (n = 6)</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina (n =2 )</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial (n = 2)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American (n =2)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern (n =1 )</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Women of Color (n=13)</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I was able to achieve some racial and ethnic diversity within this sample, however, it was not the equal split I had hoped to achieve at this studies’ outset. I admittedly had a difficult time accessing networks of women of color, especially while traveling. I had been hoping to oversample women of color in order to emphasize the complexity of intersections of race, ethnicity, and sexualities, as women of color, historically, are often left out of research surrounding sexuality, identity, and autonomy. However, it is worth noting that this is an important route for future studies to build our understanding of how intersectionality and racial marginalization play a role in shaping sexual experiences, desires, and identities.

Although there were many labels and identities noted during discussions with participants, they all initially self-identified (these identities were provided in their responses to the initial screening questions, which may have changed entirely by the end of the actual interview) under the umbrellas of heterosexual or straight (45%), gay (7.5%), bisexual (5%), queer (10%), lesbian (15%), pansexual and sexually fluid (17.5%) (see Table 3). It was not a surprise that the majority of respondents (55%) identified as non-heterosexual, as I would have expected non-heterosexuals to be more likely to respond to the study in general, for several reasons. First, as I was a visible lesbian (or at least had a visible non-cisgender presentation), LGBTQ individuals who heard about the study via word of mouth from people who had already participated may have been more likely to reach out to me. It could also be that some of the posters were designed with pride colors, and were more likely to grab the attention of members of the LGBTQ community. Also, it could be the case that LGBTQ individuals felt they had more to say about their intimacies than heterosexuals who saw the same advertisements, as LGBTQ individuals arguably spend more time navigating and questioning sexualities in general.
TABLE 3: Sexual Identities of Interviewees by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Heterosexual/Straight</th>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Bisexual</th>
<th>Queer</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Pansexual/Fluid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 34 years (n=14)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 54 years (n=16)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 74 years (n=10)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For purposes of clarification, it should be noted that Table 3 represents the initial self-identifications the women made when they first responded to the call for participants. Many, by the end of the interview, had refined their identification beyond gay/straight/lesbian. Regardless of these self-identifications, 15% reported only ever having sexual intimacies with men, 5% reported only having sexual intimacies with women, 52% discussed having sexual intimacies at different points in their lives with both men and women (not necessarily at the same time), 23% noted that they have sexual fantasies about women and would have sex with a woman should the opportunity present itself, and 5% reported having sexual intimacies with non-binary individuals (see Tables 4, 5, and 6 for additional age and racial/ethnic breakdowns as it relates to intimate experiences and initial participant sexual identifications).

TABLE 4: Sexual Histories of Participants by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Intimacy with Men Only</th>
<th>Intimacy with Women Only</th>
<th>Sexual Experiences with Men and Women</th>
<th>Fantasies / Open to Sex with Women</th>
<th>Intimacies with Trans/Non-Binary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 34 years (n=14)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 54 years (n=16)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 74 years (n=10)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 5: Sexual Histories of Participants by Race & Ethnicity
TABLE 6: Sexual Identities of Interviewees by Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race &amp; Ethnicity</th>
<th>Intimacy with Men Only</th>
<th>Intimacy with Women Only</th>
<th>Sexual Experiences with Men and Women</th>
<th>Fantasies / Open to Sex with Women</th>
<th>Intimacies with Trans/Non-Binary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (n=27)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women of Color (n=13)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings are in line with many of the publications noted in Chapter 2 that indicate identities do not necessarily match up or tell the full story of an individual’s sexual history (Diamond 2008A; Rupp & Taylor 2013; Savin-Williams 2005). The participants’ self-identifications versus their actual experiences serve to highlight the conflation of a wide range of sexual practices into socially constructed categories such as gay, straight, and bisexual in order to be recognized within contemporary U.S. discourses.

Again, the average interview was between two and a quarter to three and a half hours. The shortest interview, and the only interview under 2 hours, lasted an hour and forty-five minutes. The short duration was not necessarily due to the interviewee being unwilling to answer particular questions. In fact, she shared a great deal of personal information when it came to her intimate preferences and experiences. However, when discussing identities and how sexuality interacted with institutions, I found that she did not have much to say. From the discussion, I concluded that her identification as heterosexual was an assumption so embedded in her life that, for her, there really was not that much to say. So while I could glean that her religious
upbringing had an impact in reinforcing the binary restrictions of sexual identities, she herself had not ever had to question or reflect on her self-identification as a heterosexual.

The longest interview took approximately four and a half hours. This was as much due to the participant having a lot of thoughts and experiences she wanted to share as it was owed to my struggles in keeping the interview focused without going on tangents that were unrelated to this research. The women’s reasons for participating in the study varied. Some had never had a forum to talk about their experiences or share their histories. Others seemed happy that someone cared to know their story and was receptive to hearing their viewpoints without judgement. A number of women contacted me solely because they wanted to lend their support to a doctoral candidate, as they were familiar with the difficulties in gathering participants (either through personal experience or that of their friends and family members).

One woman went so far as to say that talking to me was a form of rebellion for her, as it was taboo to speak of sex and sexuality in her home country. For the retired women I spoke with, some just thought it would be a fun and exciting experience to talk about their intimate history at that stage of their life. Two women noted that it was not the first research study they took part in, and said they generally liked participating in research. Although they had been in cognitive or psychological research studies before, they had positive experiences and wanted to contribute to another study, regardless of the topic.

Despite the personal nature of the interview questions, no one outright declined to respond to any questions (although it is likely they edited their responses to a degree based on their comfort level). Interestingly, the one question people seemed the most surprised about, or the most hesitant to answer (judging by the length it took to get responses), was about their personal fantasies and what thoughts or scenarios aroused them. It seems the desires people were
more likely to think about (as opposed to act on) were the ones people held most privately, to the point where I would have come back to the same questions surrounding fantasies multiple times and in different ways to garner responses.

Although I did not witness any participants become upset by the interview questions, it is likely that they could have been somewhat triggered given that every women I spoke with brought up at least one sexually coercive or abusive interaction or relationship. While I purposefully did not discuss or question instances of non-consensual relations, each woman did, at different points in the interviews, bring up a negative experience they had.

All of the women I spoke with were fairly forthcoming about their different relationships and sexual interactions, although a handful contacted me via email after our talk to share further intimate details they had not felt comfortable discussing during the interview. For example, one lesbian identified woman wrote to apologize that she had not brought up her enjoyment of anal sex while on the phone with me, but indicated it was something she felt was embarrassing or harder to discuss than the other intimate details she had shared at the time of the original interview. Again, for quite a few women, identities were assumed in general. There were gays and straights, and maybe there were some people in between. But it was not something people had reflected on or thought about more than “I like men, so I must be straight” or “I’m attracted to women, so I’m just gay.” Only the politically active or fluid identified women took the time to reflect on the historical specificity of sexual identities or questioned that they were anything more than a natural or biological order.

EMERGENT THEMES
As I spoke with one woman after another, a series of patterns began to emerge regarding the interplay between self-identifications of sexuality, lived experiences, and the very sexual acts and behaviors people reported enjoying the most. While initially many of the women I talked to did not seem to have much in common with one another, all their stories served to highlight the complexity and contradictions of intimacies and sexual identities today. Unsurprisingly, the adoption of sexual identities was by no means a thing of the past for a number of women I spoke to. However, the reasons behind donning, or shunning, an identity label varied from person to person. And while the sexual acts and behaviors participants discussed were far from anything “new” in the history of sex in society, some of the participant’s interpretations and ability to present a fluidity that exists outside of the binary status quo spoke to the weakening pressures to identify as either/or (heterosexual or homosexual) in the U.S. today.

 Granted, some women did not have much to talk about when it came to their sexual identities. A few even looked at me like I was asking completely asinine questions. One, Emma, went so far as to ask what kind of an institution of higher learning would sanction research where someone’s sexual identity was even a topic that needed to be explored in this day and age. “Of course” she only had relationships with men, and she had never had to identify herself as heterosexual because, “well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?” The ability to never have to think about or question your sexual identity is a privilege that often goes unrecognized in a compulsory heterosexual order. That privilege, however, is not always a source of pride in following normative social scripts.

Take Tiffany, a graduate student who was on a student visa finishing her Master’s degree from a former soviet country in the Middle-East. In her case, heterosexuality seemed far less of a privilege and much more of an institution of fear and female sexual subjugation. To be
anything but a married heterosexual woman in her home town, according to her, put her at risk for unwanted advances, and in one case an assault from a would be suitor, should she attend social gatherings alone or stray from the gendered cultural scripts. The assumption of heterosexuality for cisgender women and the pressures to conform to socio-historical standards, by the accounts of the women I spoke with, certainly has not disappeared entirely in our society.

For other women, the need or desire to identify as anything but gay or straight was a purposeful decision, a critical rejection of the sexual norms forced on women, which held both great political and subcultural importance for them. When speaking with Ella, it was clear that a queer and genderqueer identity was central to her personal understanding and experiences of sexuality and identity. She spoke at length of the importance of recognizing and voicing more fluid conceptualizations of sexual and gender identities. Positing herself as queer and correcting peoples’ assumption of her heterosexuality was a way for her to fight against institutionalized binary sexualities. On the other hand, Shirley reported being attracted to “women who are proud to be women” and self-identified as a “proud lesbian woman.” Her lesbian identity took center stage in her life, to the point where her friend groups and social activities were centered in gay and lesbian communities. To identify as a lesbian no matter where she and her wife were, no matter the company they were in, was a way of working against the years of oppression and second class citizenship that “gay women” in the U.S. have faced.

Yet, there was another group of women I spoke with for whom sexual identity was wholly irrelevant. When I spoke with Mary, she said if she had to choose a sexual identity for the purposes of our discussion, she would go with “sexually ambiguous or bi-polyamorous” but overall she reinforced her dislike of adopting sexual categorizations at all. In her life, she no longer felt a need to identify as anything when it came to her sexuality. She enjoyed sex with
men, women, and transmen, and said the entirety of her sexual experiences, eroticisms, and pleasures “could never be summed up by one word, one identity.” To do so would “downplay my own sexual satisfaction by erasing some of the things I love the most, none of which have anything to do with the gender or sex of the people I’ve slept with.” In the case of Chloe, there was a long stretch of time that sexuality had no meaning for her at all; no feelings, no physical relations, and no romantic attachments.

By the time she was 29 and still a virgin, without a history of sexual or physical intimacies; “I was working towards coming to terms with being asexual for the rest of my life.” Though Chloe now has a girlfriend and is enjoying the physicality of their relationship, sexual identity in general continues to hold no appeal or importance to her. “In the grand scheme of life, it really isn’t important at all, is it? It has no impact on how I live my days out, how I interact with my family, with my partner,” Chloe relayed. Although she understood, from her academic background, the history behind the social construction of sexual identities, in her adulthood she found virtually no reason to identify as anything other than Chloe.

Alexis, another women I chatted with, was incredibly candid about her sex life. Her boyfriend was bisexual, and it hurt her to see that he never felt safe talking about his desires around his family or friends. She was the first person he had ever told, outside of the men he had intimacies with in the past (and even then, she doubted they ever voiced it). Pansexuality was a sexuality she could personally identify with, as attraction for her could not be limited to one type of gendered/sexed body or another. For her, it was the sexual acts that were most important. Having group sex with her boyfriend and other men and/or women was something she found incredibly arousing and satisfying. At the end of the day, if a person touched her clitoris in the right way, whether they were using their hands, their tongue, or a sex toy, and she found their
body and personality attractive, she could enjoy sexual relations with “an infinite number of people.”

Instead of understanding sexuality as who you are attracted to, Alexis felt it was all about “what gets you off, you know?” Kelly, another participant, spoke about her experiences in the bondage scene in her current city. “What can I say, I love being whipped! But that’s not something I can normally talk about …” While she began by downplaying her experiences at the start of the interview, saying, “Maybe I’m just your average straight woman!” it became clear as our chat went on past the three hour mark that the importance for her identity was less about “the who” she was engaging in acts of bondage with at the local club, and more about the fact that she found sexual enjoyment in the role playing and power dynamics that were central to the bondage community. “I guess at the end of the day, if someone is in a sensory suit, it doesn’t matter what’s underneath as much as it does the power play between us at the time.” For women like Alexis and Kelly, sexual acts and subcultures held a much larger role in their understanding of their sexual identities and histories, far more than the labels of heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual ever could capture.

CONCEPTUALIZING COMMONALITIES

How do we begin to dissect these varied accounts and sexual histories to answer the questions outlined in the previous chapters? No two participants’ practices and histories were the same, even among those who alluded to being “as vanilla as it gets.” For those who adopted the same sexual identity categories, the stories and experiences varied as wildly as the weather in upstate New York from person to person. However, their vignettes and shared glimpses into their sexual behaviors and partners did gradually reveal four (as opposed to the three I initially
anticipated in Chapter 3) different groupings, or sets of shared meanings, among the women I spoke with. While some understandings lent themselves to the argument that we continue to live in a compulsory heterosexual order, other narrative histories signaled a level of freedom connected to their rejection of sexual identities altogether. What the participants did have in common was that they all struggled, in different manners, with the often conflicting interplay of sexuality identities, acts, and their private fantasies and desires.

To better understand the differences and commonalities observed throughout this study, and in an effort to investigate the central questions of this research, I will present the sexual histories as being part of four categories: institutional identifiers, politicized identifiers, identity irrelevance, and sexual proclivities. These categories are meant to address the central questions of: When do people feel compelled to identify within binaries? Are there spaces where people are more likely to continue to adopt dichotomous sexual identities? Or are there places and communities in contemporary society where the coercion to adopt sexual identities, and the social marginalization of non-binary identities, has lessened?

**TABLE 7: Classifications by Sexual Identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institutional Identifier</th>
<th>Politicized Identifier</th>
<th>Identity Irrelevance</th>
<th>Sexual Proclivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual/Straight</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual/Fluid</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above classifications (see Table 7) were not predicated necessarily on how individuals identified sexually. For instance, although ten self-identified heterosexuals were categorized as institutional identifiers, lesbian/gay or bisexual individuals could have fallen into
that category as well should their narratives meet the criteria used as the foundation of these groupings. Pansexual/Fluid narratives, however, due to the inclusivity of the identities, only fell into two categories, identity irrelevance or sexual proclivities, among the people I spoke with. As a caveat, before I explain these four categories in greater detail, the intention is not to further burden individuals with additional labels to contend with. Rather, the purpose of these classifications is to better understand and explore the rationale behind the adoption of binary sexual identities in today’s society, and the ways that institutions and gendered/sexual marginalization continue to compel individuals into taking part in, and adhering to, a compulsory heterosexual order.

**Institutional Identifiers**

Earlier I started sharing some of the details from my interviews with Emma and Tiffany, two heterosexually identified women. Outside of their adoption of the label of heterosexuals, the two could not have had more different backgrounds. But what struck me were the ways that heterosexuality continued to be institutionally reinforced in their lives. For Tiffany, growing up in the Middle East, where she was set to return to the day after our interview, there was practically no choice but to adopt a normative heterosexual identity and cis-gendered presentation. To do otherwise would potentially result in swift and severe backlash from her family and friends, even to the level of physical violence and assault.

To be heterosexual for Tiffany was more than just a sexual identity. It was literally the only way of life for her back home, a detail that was not lost on her after having studied abroad in the U.S. for the past four years. Normative heterosexuality was so pervasive that there was literally no way to even speak of, let alone live, any alternatives. At home, heterosexuality was
not only strictly institutionally reinforced across social organizations, such as the police/neighborhoods/larger cultural norms, but was controlled on an individual level with swift consequences should anyone not publically conform (often ending in physical violence and public harassment).

Emma, on the other hand, likely would not have faced such severe consequences had she decided not to identify as heterosexual. Perhaps some of her friends would have bristled, maybe her parents would have been unhappy with her and there could have been distancing between herself and some of her loved ones. But the underpinning of physical harm and extreme social regulating of her sexuality was absent from our talk. As I spoke with Emma, what became clear was that for her, heterosexuality was the only option, the only way for her to go through her life. While discussing her favorite sexual acts, she said that she found penetration to be wholly unenjoyable, and that she had never had an orgasm while having penetrative sex with her boyfriend(s). What was most physically pleasurable in her relationships was “snuggling … and I like big make out sessions!” Despite not being a physically pleasurable experience for her (regardless of which male she was having sexual relations with), she saw penetration and oral sex with her boyfriends as “kind of necessary”, even central, to their sexual relationship.

Here, I use the institutional identifier classification to highlight the perceived limitations that Emma communicated to me. Emma was one of a group of heterosexually identified women who saw penile penetration as being a requirement of heterosexual intimacies. Without the physical “complementarity” of opposite sexed bodies, one could not truly be heterosexual. Acts that were identified as being physically central to heterosexuality became a duty for some women to enact a fully normative heterosexuality and be successful girlfriends and wives.
Other self-identified heterosexual interviewees voiced similar aversions to penetration with partners, yet they did not see the act itself to be a necessary part of heterosexual intimate relations in the same way that Emma did. Instead, penetration, although an option, was not a requirement to be a “true” heterosexual. Some used or added sex toys to their intimate routines with partners, and others would more often have oral sex than penetrative sex, and still saw these as heterosexual sex acts. Emma’s perception of heterosexual sex was one of a compulsory nature, where men and women complimented each other physically and therefore penetration was a requirement for normal heterosexual relationships.

In this manner, institutional identifiers had narratives that were severely constrained by social institutions and normative sexual behaviors, to the point where identifying as anything other than heterosexual was quite simply not an option. Among these women, an argument could be made that they remained constrained by a larger compulsory heterosexual order. For Tiffany and Emma, the institutions that shaped their perception of sexual identities and sexual experiences varied. In the case of Tiffany and a few others I spoke to, religious institutions played a strong role in reinforcing, and sometimes forcing, normative heterosexual relationship scripts.

For Emma, heterosexuality was understood through the lens of the heterosexual imaginary, where being married and having kids was the ultimate and defining goal of intimate relations (Ingraham 1994, 2008). The objective of dating was to find the one true love to “settle down with” and eventually raise a family. In a similar vein, other women talked about the role their strict family upbringings had on shaping their understanding of what it meant to be a heterosexual. Regardless of the social institution that had the most impact in these women’s
lives, it was clear that normative heterosexual expectations held a coercive power over how they interpreted their sexual experiences and desires.

Political Identifiers

Shirley and Ella had different takes on the importance of sexual identities and what they meant to them. For Shirley, who came of age during the AIDS epidemic in the 80s, to be gay or lesbian when she was growing up was to be labeled by the greater U.S. society as sick, diseased. Although she dated boys in high school, she never had intimate relations with them. When she got to college, she had one close male friend who she would eventually have sex with, despite what she felt was a decided lack of sexual chemistry. In her words, “it was a one and done”, as much as her parents at the time encouraged her that he was “the one.” While she suspected she was gay in high school, growing up in a southwest conservative state, she did not feel comfortable coming out of the closet at the time. Later on in college, Shirley joined the LGBTQ organization on her campus and started building gay and lesbian social networks. Today, she identifies as a “proud lesbian” and is incredibly active in her community’s gay and lesbian groups. In fact, her and her wife’s social groups are almost exclusively LGBTQ at this point in her life.

Though she has friends who identify as sexually fluid, and is familiar with the concept of pansexuality, for her, donning a lesbian identity personally and publically (save for a few spaces, like work), has a greater importance to her than just signaling that she enjoys the intimate company of women. For her, a lesbian identity was a political statement, one that she felt was important to convey in light of the polluted discourses surrounding gays and lesbians she grew up with. To self-identify as a lesbian was a purposeful choice that signaled more to Shirley than
just who she preferred to have intimate relations with. It was a way of honoring those who came before her, the institutional barriers and social marginalization they faced, and identifying with a larger sub-culture and a community outside of the family and friends she grew up with.

Ella, on the other hand, referred to herself as “an old stone butch soul.” But when it came to her sexual identification, she shrugged off “generic” labels of gay and lesbian and spoke about the important of being queer. Ella was familiar with the history of gay and lesbian movements in the U.S. and had been very active throughout her career in advocating for LGBTQ rights. While she was a staunchly lesbian identified butch in her youth, today she actively identifies as queer to honor the queer theoretical movement she was a part of during her academic career. To be queer for Ella meant to reject the socially constructed categories of gay/straight, and to work against the heteronormative order she grew up with. She very much aligned herself with the “personal is political” approach when it came to her sexual identity. Again, her public projection of a queer identity was less to signify her gendered sexual desires, and more about upending what she saw as a socially oppressive sexual binary system.

Over the years, Ella came to adopt a genderqueer identity, as well, which was important to her so that she could “further fuck with the oppression I grew up with.” Although she’s familiar with sexual fluidity and pansexual identity movements, for her to identify as queer is to signify not just a fluid understanding of sexuality, but a political one, as well. To a degree, similar to Shirley, the severe cultural oppression of non-heterosexuals in the U.S. (and corresponding violence) Ella was personally familiar with spurred her to adopt lesbian and queer identities over time to fight against, and provide visibility to, the marginalized communities she is a part of.
One other person in this grouping was an educator, but the remaining nine women categorized as politicized identifiers had varied occupations and upbringings. Even though most noted or recognized that sexuality is likely fluid for the general populace, based on their own experiences, their sexual identities held a greater political meaning that lent support to social and sexual movements of the past (from queer theory, to lesbian feminists, and beyond). As opposed to being coerced into adopting gay, lesbian, or queer identities, these women self-identified as LGBTQ because they wanted to support and convey the messages of the larger movements they were a part of. Hence, identifying sexually for these women was tied closely to identifying with a particular set of sexual politics. As we will explore in the next chapter, in some ways, political identifiers actually had some underlying commonalities with institutional identifiers in terms of the reinforcement of binary constructions of sexualities, albeit for different motivations and with contrasting institutional influences.

Identity Irrelevance

For the first two groupings we have discussed, sexual self-identification was about signaling either being a part of normative social grouping or a purposeful affiliation with a marginalized sexual community regardless of the variance in gendered sexual encounters. The third category, which Mary and Chloe fell into, presented an outright rejection of static sexualized identities and categories altogether. Chloe, as an example, had a unique progression in her conceptualization of her sexual identity over the years. When she was younger, she wondered if she was a lesbian because she did not have the same feelings for boys or present normatively female like the other girls. As she got older and still did not feel compelled to pursue a relationship (even through college), she started to wonder if she was asexual.
By 29, Chloe had resigned herself to focusing on her career goals and spending time with her family. However, a few years later, after hanging out with some friends, she let them make an online dating profile after “putting away a few bottles of wine.” A few coffee dates which yielded no chemistry followed, but eventually the final date she scheduled in the app yielded “sparks, for the first time ever!” A year later, Chloe was still dating the same woman, who had moved from a large city to be closer to Chloe in a quieter corner of the same state. Identity, to Chloe, was always evolving. While she noted she would probably only ever pursue relations with self-identified women, today, sexual identity has little use or place in her life. Though she had to somewhat “come out” to her parents when introducing her girlfriend, “instead of being upset, they seemed thrilled that I was dating anyone at all, ha-ha!” Today, Chloe chooses to eschew sexual identities altogether. Other than correcting people’s assumptions that she has a boyfriend when she divulges she’s in a relationship, she has not felt a need to affiliate with any sexual categories, mostly because she spent so long trying to figure out “where [she] fit[s] in.” Moreover, trying to identify in general was “always a moving target” which left her with the feeling that, after having lived so long without a partner or identity, there “isn’t really a need for it in my life.”

Mary also had taken on various sexual labels throughout her life. In detailing her experiences with sexual identification Mary noted, “Yeah, I used to be the super gay kid, from like 16 to 18, and then I dated a Trans guy. And then after that I guess I started sleeping with whoever I’m attracted to these days. I don’t have those blinders or anything …I’m a pleasure seeker.” Perhaps because of her experiences with non-binary sexual partners, or in part due to her emphasis on pushing the boundaries of her sexual explorations, identities held little importance for Mary. While talking about her sexual partners, she discussed the “eroticism of
genderqueer” individuals who blurred the lines of gendered and sexed binaries. Leaving labels behind allowed Mary to push her personal limits of sexual enjoyment without “the hang-ups that come with trying to reduce your sexual spirit into a category.” She further noted, “as far as finding my sexuality I don’t know if I feel like I have to have a definition, if people ask me I’ll say I’m sexually ambiguous.” In terms of what attracted her to people sexually, Mary said it was all about presentation and confidence. At this point in her life, sexual identity is something that she has left behind.

For those who fell into the identity irrelevance category, there was an embracement of the fluid, situational nature of the sexual attractions they had experienced at different points in their lives. In addition, they were hard pressed to think of any times where they even needed to publically identify as gay, straight, or otherwise in their current place in life. While some said if they were asked outright and had to choose a label, they may pick queer or pansexual, but overall, they did not feel that those categories did justice to either their sexual experiences or adequately acknowledge the fluid nature of their intimate histories. As a result, they preferred the terms of “sexually fluid” or “sexually ambiguous.” What distinguished the women who conveyed an irrelevance towards sexual identities from political identifiers is that for them, their sexuality was not political. Rather, it was a freedom of sexual exploration and regular acknowledgement that their desires and attractions were not static across their lives.

Sexual Proclivities

The remaining category expressed a similar disdain for, or at least a lack of interest towards, sexual identity categories in their lives. What set them apart from the previous women I introduced was a focus on physical pleasure and/or specific sexual acts that were far more
important to their conceptualization and practice of sexuality than the gender or sex of the people they were having intimacies with. The passion for particular sexual proclivities (or the communities built around them) was identified by this grouping of participants as taking precedence over who they were engaging in sexual acts with. Not all individuals I spoke with who made note of particular sexual acts they enjoyed the most fell into this category. Instead, it was only the people who rejected labels and designed identities around these sexual acts that were put into this grouping. To further exemplify the sexual proclivities classification, we will delve into Kelly and Alexis’ stories.

Alexis did not feel that she had a type per se. To her, sexual attractiveness was all about how people presented themselves, noting “I don’t really go for any one type. I think a bunch of different types are attractive.” While she defines her relationship with her current bisexual boyfriend as monogamous, they do engage in sex with other people, both together and separately, as long as the ties remain sexual only in nature and not emotional. For Alexis, having a relationship with someone that was understanding and open to her desire for sexual exploration was key to her happiness within a relationship. As long as she and her boyfriend were truthful with one another and communicated their wants and desires openly, she found their relationship to be the most successful she had ever had (and the most sexually rewarding). Her previous boyfriend did not understand her need to try new things and judged (and at times, derided) her for her attraction to women.

These ultimately were the reasons she moved on from that six year relationship. Alexis’ desires for women, and sharing that desire with her current boyfriend, were extremely important to her overall sexual satisfaction. When talking about her enjoyment of group sex and different sexual acts, it was clear that Alexis did not identify with a particular sexual community such as
“swingers” or “voyeurs”, unlike Kelly. However, the two were similar in that the sexual acts they engaged in were reported to be far more important in their definition and practice of sexuality than the sex (or gender) of the people they engaged in those acts with. Exploring her most intimate desires, regardless of who she was exploring them with, was freeing for Alexis, and was a way for her to work through past traumas.

Kelly was a little reluctant, understandably, to talk to me at first about her sexuality and intimate relationships. In fact, within the first ten minutes of our chat, she said she was just “your typical, average American straight woman in her early thirties.” Having grown up in the NYC metropolitan area, she had been exposed to and seen so much in her sexual relationships over the years. Very little surprised her when it came to sex anymore. She was currently dating a few different people and she was happy not being in a, “super committed, super serious relationship right now.” Kelly went to her first sex club when she was in college, out of state. While she didn’t partake in the events, she was intrigued as an invited bystander. When she returned to the city after college, she gradually started attending some of the local BDSM clubs.

At first, she attended mostly in a voyeur role, not to “get off but to learn, to get a sense if it was a place” she belonged. This was a part of herself she did not share with many people, “after all it’s not like you can talk about your enjoyment of being whipped and chained, restrained while over dinner with your family and friends.” After a couple years passed, Kelly started making connections and networks within the local bondage scene. Today, although she only dates men publically, in the bondage scene she is a part of “you don’t always know who is behind the mask, behind the leather, behind the [sensory] deprivation suit. Sometimes, I myself cannot always see who is [stimulating] me.”
The BDSM community allowed Kelly, in a similar way to Alexis, to be free, to explore her deepest desires and fears in a place where she felt safe, welcomed, and unjudged. It was for that reason Kelly shrugged off sexual identity labels privately as the interview went on, because when it came to her sexual enjoyment, being a part of the bondage community and playing the role of a masochist was integral to her sexual fulfillment. Outwardly, at least with her mostly orthodox Jewish family, Kelly presented as a “stereotypical heterosexual woman.” However, outside of her family relations, and in practice, Kelly’s sexuality and pleasure was more than a binary sexual label could explain or capture.

Adhering, Embracing, Rejecting, and Finding Alternate Identities

Surprisingly, the women I spoke with fell fairly evenly into these four groups. The largest number of women fell into the sexual proclivities category, with institutional identifiers as the second largest group of interviewees (see Figure 2). The smallest number of women were categorized as politicized identifiers, but the smallest and largest groupings were only separated by a total of 4 women due to the small sample size obtained.

FIGURE 2: Categorization of Participants
In the next chapters I would like to investigate the women’s intimate histories further to better understand the similarities and differences between the four categorizations observed, and how the theory of institutionalized heterosexuality may better explain some of the participants’ varied accounts and understandings of sexualities in contemporary U.S. society.

In Chapter 5, I start by examining the narratives of the women who were categorized as institutional and political identifiers in greater detail, and explore the rationales and institutional relationships behind their self-identifications. Surprisingly, while at first seeming to juxtapose one against the other at the time I was conducting the interviews, upon the completion of the coding process I found that institutional and politicized identifiers had quite a bit in common in regards to the ways their varied cultural affiliations served to reinforce their adherence to homosexual/heterosexual binaries (with the exception of the queer narratives, which will also be discussed at length in Chapter 5). For example, some of the women closely observed religious scripts and doctrines that linked heterosexuality and penetrative sex (for reproductive purposes) to being a good sexual citizen. Despite whether or not they had sexual intimacies with women at one point in their lives, they still held their heterosexuality as the defining facet of their overall selves. But membership in other institutional enclaves, such as gay and lesbian clubs or scenes, similarly contributed to the women adopting static homosexual identities, regardless of their actual varied sexual histories. Again, the rationale behind these self-identifications was wide-ranging, but the overall result was the same; reinforcing a binary sexual order (with the exception of the political queer narratives).

Chapter 6 will examine the narratives of the women who did not regularly adhere to binary conceptions of sexuality; those women for whom sexual identity was irrelevant and those
who reported that particular sexual proclivities outweighed the need to identify within any sexual typology. Similar to Chapter 5, this chapter will explore the relationships these women reported having with various institutions, and the similarities between their experiences and reasons for their (lack of) sexual identification. Quite a few of the women in these groups put a stronger importance on the sexual acts they engaged in, much more than the gender or sex of the people they engaged in the sexual acts with. While these women did also have strong ties to particular institutions, the cultural groups they were a part of centered on sexual communities where freedom of choice, power play, and dominance or submissiveness was the focus, as opposed to a binary sexual identity based on the gender/sex of intimate partners. Both Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the intersections of age, religion, work, and race and ethnicity within individual sexual narratives, and map out the ways that different demographic factors may further impact the adoption or rejection of sexual categories.

To conclude, the final chapter of this research, Chapter 7, will revisit the ways that the larger theoretical framework of institutional heterosexuality may be useful in understanding the differing and complicated sexual histories observed in this study. Additionally, the conclusion will review the general trends across the four identifier categories, including the themes across their institutional interactions. Additionally, we revisit the research questions posed at the beginning of this dissertation, and explore both the limitations and contributions of this study to the broader field of sociology. Finally, we will close with suggestions for future research and touch on some final thoughts regarding sexual narratives and their utility for supporting and informing sociological theory.

Perhaps the theory of compulsory heterosexuality should be revisited in terms of its contemporary relevance, or at least a situational specificity, in the organization of sexual
identities in the U.S. In the end, I believe some of these women’s stories indicate that the world we live in today has allowed for the formation of select spaces where socially constructed identity labels can be rejected, where sexual pleasure can take precedence over binary categorization, and where new understandings of sexual identity can be formed outside of the historical confines of a compulsory heterosexual order. It is without judgement and with great admiration that I share the narratives of the self-identified women who participated in this study, who were brave enough to take the time to speak with a stranger about the most intimate, most vulnerable, and often times most unspoken parts of their personal lives.
CHAPTER 5: EMBRACING SEXUAL IDENTITIES

“The message I got ... was [that] liking girls would make you sick if you were a girl. And the other thing was, this was in the 50s, and I never heard anybody talk about lesbians or gay people or use any other words than faggot and queer, those were the only two words I heard. And that was always about guys so they never talked about women not even derogatorily so the message to me was that is the worst thing you could be. ~Frances, 71 years old

The previous chapter focused on the demographics of the women who participated in this study and how they identified sexually. To begin organizing the sample, and explore the reasons why women identified within or outside of binary sexual scripts, the narratives were then divided into four categories (institutional identifiers, political identifiers, identity irrelevance, and sexual proclivities). These groupings are intended to highlight the broader commonalities in how the participants sexually identified (if at all). Again, the purpose of the classifications was to underscore the rationale behind the adoption or rejection of fixed sexual identities among the women in this study.

To continue reviewing the findings of this research, and in order to explore the overall question of whether or not sexuality continues to be constricted by a system of compulsory heterosexuality, the next chapters differently divide the interview sample into two broader groups; those who chose or placed importance on sexual identities (Chapter 5) and those who did not (Chapter 6). This chapter will focus on the narratives of the women who reported adopting or adhering to sexual identities (institutional and political identifiers). Regardless of how institutional and political identifiers defined or understood their sexuality, they had one thing in common; they all voiced a purposeful desire to sexually identify. In order to answer the main question of whether there are examples of compulsory heterosexual regimes in these women’s experiences, we will examine the stories of institutional and political identifiers with the
following sub-questions outlined earlier in mind; how do women interpret their fluid experiences? What roles do institutions play in regulating sexual binaries? Are there some spaces where women experience less pressure to adhere to the confines of binary sexual attraction, even if they still adopt a static binary identity?

Before looking into the interpretations of fluidity among the participants, I want to note that regardless of the social construction and historical specificity of sexual identity labels (through their integration into cultural discourses, laws, and social scripts) these identities have come to hold great meaning on a personal level. A sexual identity can inspire a sense of pride, a feeling of belonging and place in the world, and even serve to establish a family away from home. Take Shirley, for example. The lesbian and gay individuals in her Mardi Gras group, over the past five years since she moved to the Gulf Coast, have become part of her extended family. “We like to talk about family of choice and that is our family of choice.” Alice, while taking a large sip of her iced coffee, noted that being a queer identified woman is, “Something I am, something I believe in, not something I chose necessarily.” On the other hand, for Lori, being a good Catholic meant marrying her husband and having children; “I’ve always been straight, even though I’ve asked for forgiveness over the years for straying from what I learned in Sunday school.”

Being a “true” heterosexual or homosexual has become engrained in religious doctrines and social movements across the world, all of which have great significance (and potential consequences) for individuals. That said, for those who sexually identified in this study, sexual identities played a major role in their sense of self, albeit in different ways. The next section will explore the experiences of both political and institutional identifiers with a focus on what sexual
identity means to them, how they interpret their fluid sexual experiences through a fixed identity lens, and investigate the ways in which institutions interact with their chosen sexual identities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

A key commonality that emerged during the coding process between institutional and political identifiers was that they both adopted static identities regardless of their varied sexual histories (with the exception of the three queer narratives). At the end of the day, belonging to a sexual identity group was of utmost importance for all of these women when understanding and portraying their intimate histories. To some, the identities were reflective of only having had monosexual experiences in their lives, and thus became somewhat of a foregone conclusion for them. Yet others chose a sexual identity regardless of the myriad of sexual/intimate experiences they had with both men and women.

This is not a surprise in light of prior, extensive research findings which have demonstrated that most individuals have some level of fluid sexual experiences over their lifespan (Baumeister 2000; Bart 1993; Bell and Weinburg 1978; Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Bright 1992; Chandra et al 2011; Coons 1972; Diamond 2008; Golden 1987; Hoburg 2004; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948, 1953; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1994, 1995; Laumann et al 1994; Lever et al 1995; Paul 1985; Plummer 1997; Rust 1992, 1995, 2000; Savin-Williams 2005; Sophie 1986; Stein 1997; Storms 1980; Thompson and Morgan 2008; Weinburg, Williams, and Pryor 1994).

Overall, of the nineteen women who were politically or institutionally identified, fourteen had some degree of intimacies with (or sexual fantasies involving) the same sex. This includes eight of the political identifiers and six of the institutional identifiers. Again, all ten of the
institutional identifiers donned a heterosexual identity, while the political identifiers had sexual labels that ranged from lesbian and gay to queer or genderqueer. Of the nine political identifiers, all but one had intimate experiences or sexual relations with both men and women at some point in their lives. The remaining four participants were institutional identifiers who had only had sexual intimacies or desires/fantasies with/about the opposite sex.

That only four out of the ten heterosexually identified women reported solely having intimate experiences or fantasies/desires for the opposite sex is not surprising given prior research, and supports the aforementioned authors’ findings regarding the fluidity of women’s sexual narratives (regardless of their sexual identification). Altogether, fourteen of the political and institutional identifiers noted some type of fluid sexual experiences with both the same and opposite sex regardless of how they identified at the time of the interviews (eight of the politicized identifiers, including the three queer identified participants, and six of the institutional identifiers).

What follows in this chapter is an exploration of the stories of the fourteen political and institutional identifiers who reported some level of sexual fluidity and the five women who reported having no sexually fluid experiences or fantasies. Specifically, in the first section, how did the fourteen political and institutional identifiers interpret their fluid intimate experiences and fantasies within the framework of their reported sexual identity? The second segment explores the narratives of the five women with non-fluid histories and how their perspectives on sexual identities differed from the fluid participants’ stories. The third section reviews the interplay between identities and experiences while focusing on the interaction with social institutions that served to reinforce static sexual identities among the non-queer women who reported static sexual identities. The fourth segment of this chapter revisits the histories of the three queer
identified women, noting that these were the only participants among the two groups (institutional and political) to purposefully shun binary constructions of sexuality and sex/gender by adopting the fixed moniker of queer. The fifth and final heading returns to the fundamental question at the heart of this study – is there some suggestion or evidence (at least within the confines of this sample) of continued compulsory heterosexual regimes in the narratives of the institutional and political identifiers, or are their experiences better explained by the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality?

FLUID EXPERIENCES, STATIC IDENTITIES

Interpretations of Fluid Experiences among Political Identifiers

A commonality across the politically identified women was the expression of pride in the lesbian and gay identity and social movements. Their chosen identities meant more than signaling monosexual desires. For these political identifiers, several factors influenced their adoption lesbian or gay sexual identities. This section explores why politically identified women chose static identities regardless of the fluid sexual experiences they had throughout their lives, and the common themes unveiled during our discussions.

When Shirley (40) was growing up in the southwest, it “was no time to be gay, I’ll tell you that.” It was not until college that Shirley came out; “I was very chameleon like, I knew how to get along with [different groups of] people … But I knew ultimately I was an outsider to that [heterosexual] world and I think that I was lucky in that I had an outward [cis-gender] appearance where I could do that.” Blending with her peers was, at times, an isolating experience for her. She had her first intimate encounter her senior year of high school; “She was my coach, and no one knows that because it was super highly inappropriate, obviously. But I think I was
way more interested [in her] because she would let me come over and I thought it was all super
grown up and she had other lesbian couples there. And I think I was more attracted to that world
than anything, I just wanted to be in that world [LGBTQ].”

Her freshman year of college she had sex with men for the first time. “Um the first time
was my freshman year of college I was 18ish, 19 maybe, he was several years older, I thought he
was really cool. I knew I didn’t want to be with men but I was like maybe this is what I got to do
to some degree so I had sex with him. It was absolutely like, like doing a grocery list in your
mind … I was really checked out, I was like let’s do this so I can say we’ve done this.” Given
her lack of attraction to men, Shirley qualified her lesbian identity with the following; “Um, I
think people are at different ends of spectrums sometimes but if there’s a gay to straight
spectrum and zero is the most gay, I’m like negative 34. I’m past that even, haha. I just can’t get
on board with it, wanting to be with a man.”

A general lack of sexual attraction to men was similarly reported by Frances (71),
Miranda (24), Carmen (67), and Somer (28) throughout their lives, despite having had
consensual sexual intimacies with men at some point in time. This lack of sexual desire for men
was a large part of their rationale for identifying as lesbians rather than bisexual or fluid. Another
explanation put forth by the women for identifying as lesbian despite their intimate experiences
with men is that they felt coerced to some degree to have sex with men in order to fit in with the
heterosexual norm. For Frances, her husband was a cover to hide her desires for women during a
time when you could lose everything for being “outed.” “By the time I got to college Rita Mae
Brown had gotten kicked out of college for being a lesbian, and everyone knew that. And I
thought there’s no way in hell that’s going to happen to me.” To deflect her families’
questioning, she quickly married; “I was very clear in my head being like phew no one will ever ask me again if I’m funny [gay] or something.”

Shirley similarly felt compelled to have sex with men in college when she noted, “I was like maybe this is what I got to do to some degree … I was like let’s do this so I can say we’ve done this” Those sentiments were also echoed by Miranda, who identified both social norms and pressures from her friends and peers as a reason she decided to have sex with her high school boyfriend. “All my friends were having sex then, and I felt like if I didn’t try to go all the way with him I would be out from our friend group because he’d probably find someone else who would. And I thought that it made me a good girlfriend. It was a really weird, not unpleasant, but unsatisfying experience for me and one I never repeated.”

It was not until Miranda’s junior year of college that she would recognize her difficulty in finding “the right” boyfriend she had sexual chemistry with as being due to her predominant sexual desires for women. It would be another two emotionally wrought years later for Miranda before she would make peace with her “100% attraction to women.” Carmen similarly saw her past intimacies with men as a way to fit in before she came out in college. In summation, for these political identifiers, having sex with men was sometimes socially compelled/expected or provided a way to avoid the social consequences of being labelled as a homosexual. Other times, having sexual intimacies with men was a way to prove to themselves (and others) that they were “truly” gay. Miranda and Ella, for example, spoke about how their friends/family members had said things to them like, “How do you know you’re a lesbian if you’ve never had sex with a man?”

A final reason of note why these participants identified as lesbians despite a history of fluid sexual experiences was central to their categorization as political identifiers. All of them
had reported a depth of knowledge about the history of lesbian and gay movements in the U.S., and had personally experienced incidences of oppression based on their desires for women. They were all familiar with the struggle for LGBTQ rights in the U.S., and were proud of fighting for the freedom to love who they wanted. Having to correct societies’ assumption of their heterosexuality was to varying levels a painful experience when they came out to their families. Claiming a lesbian identity was a way to take pride in their desires for women now that they had finally, “found [their] place in this world,” as Carmen put it.

For Frances, Miranda, Carmen, Shirley, Somer, and Brenda (55, whose narrative will be discussed at length in the section addressing the experiences of non-fluid histories), the ability to live openly as lesbians was something they had literally and figuratively fought for during their lifetimes, and they took great pride in LGBTQ identities and subcultures. The historical ties to LGBTQ movements were essential for political identifiers in this study. Even though they each acknowledged the likely fluidity of human sexuality in our discussions (to varying degrees), each of them ultimately felt that identifying as a lesbian was tied to their pride and appreciation for the women that had sacrificed their very safety (both physical and economic) so that they could live in a time when same sex relationships would be legalized and socially recognized. A sense of pride, community, and monosexual desires for women led the politically identified lesbians to take on a homosexual identity regardless of their history of intimacies with men and women over the course of their lives.

*Heterosexual Understandings of Identity amid Sexually Fluid Experiences*

Monosexual desire was also a reason cited by the six institutionally identified women who had fluid sexual/intimate histories to explain their choice of the heterosexual label.
However, other themes emerged from the narratives of institutional identifiers that differed from the political identifiers. In addition to citing an overall attraction to the opposite sex, they also dismissed their same sex experiences in some cases as “one offs” or “extenuating circumstances” that led to them having sex with women. Yet others noted fantasies for the same sex, but due to not having acted on them, they retained a heterosexual identity until they had an opportunity to bring their desires into physical practice/reality. What follows are their explanations for choosing fixed heterosexual identities amid sexual histories with both men and women.

Megan (70) described herself first and foremost as a “sexual being … although one who doesn't have sex very often, anymore at least!” To Megan, sensuality and sexuality had always been a fairly private experience outside of her two marriages. In talking about her identity, she noted;

I feel for the most part identity is more of a private thing, it kind of depends who you are at different times in your life. For me, I see myself as a straight woman. But honestly, I’ve lived so much life, met so many different people. I really do think that, really for anyone if the right person came along, it wouldn’t matter what sex or gender or anything they were if you took out all the rest of the hoopla and garbage [stigma]. And I feel the same way about myself. I do find women attractive, you know, I’ve even watched a lot of videos with women having sex over the years and thought about it [when masturbating]… but I’ve never particularly met one who you know, tickled my fancy. But I’ve thought about it, probably a lot at different times since I knew what a lesbian was. And even today … if the right woman were to walk into my [retirement community] I’d wine and dine her in a heartbeat, hah!

The deciding factor for Megan’s heterosexual identification was her lack of having had a physical sexual or intimate experience with another woman. Her first husband was supportive, but ultimately their friendship was not enough to sustain their relationship for the long haul; “It was kind of amusing because, it was like he was a lesbian trapped in a man’s body. As in he was completely happy, or wasn’t happier, than when he was performing oral sex, but when the time
came [for penetration] it didn’t really work. He couldn’t get hard, and that was something I need.” Although her exhibitionism days were “behind now,” she did revel in having sex in public spaces such as parks, cars, and other places around the large metropolitan area she lived in for most of her life.

When expanding on her desires and fantasies surrounding women, Megan noted, “Don’t get me wrong, I still prefer men after all these years. But, and I’m being honest here, I’m attracted to the sensuality of the female form … but maybe I just haven’t found the right one … If I met a woman who I was very attracted to and had a nice personality I wouldn’t have a major problem or be uncomfortable having sex with her. So, my response – I’m still looking for the right one [laughs]!” Given the absence of having a physical sexual relationship with a woman, Megan identified as heterosexual. If she ever did, she said she would probably then say she was bisexual.

Megan’s interview had several similarities with my discussion with Amelia (52), who also identified as heterosexual but voiced having been sexually attracted to women over the course of her life. Having gone through three “failed, and frankly, looking back, abusive” marriages, Amelia had no interest in dating or sex at this point in her life. When I asked her how she identified, she said, “Well, I mean, I’m a heterosexual. That’s just what everyone assumes, I couldn’t say anyone has ever really asked me, especially since I’d had a kid when I was twenty.” Still, Amelia had met women she felt sexually attracted to over her life, and shared having internal fantasies of sex with women.

Growing up in rural area, “everyone was always in everyone’s business. Honestly, even if a woman had told me she was attracted to me, my family was so into my business after my first marriage ended horribly, and I couldn’t figure how we would have been able to hookup.” A lack
of opportunity or finding the right woman may have been the only thing standing in Amelia’s way to having an intimate relationship with a woman, not unlike Megan. Although Amelia did recognize the fluidity of attraction to both men and women over her life, recalling her first girl crush in gym class in high school, the deciding factor in labelling herself as a heterosexual came down to not ever having acted upon her desires. “At this point in my life, Nicole, I’m going to tell you. I may just consider myself asexual after all that I’ve been through. Am I attracted to people still? Yes, yes sometimes. Do I want to go down that road of emotional involvement and entanglement? No way.”

What differentiated Lori (42), Sarah (65), Laura (68), and Emma (22) to some degree from Megan and Amelia is that, in addition to having had private desires and fantasies surrounding sex with women, these four spoke about same sex intimacies they had in the past (despite adopting a heterosexual identity). Lori (42) spent quite a bit of time talking about how important her family is to her. After a string of “dead end, going nowhere” relationships, she met her husband of eight years when she had broken up with her ex-boyfriend and moved into a new studio apartment in a duplex attic. Friendly neighbor conversations in the back yard led to cookouts and walks together, and after her relationship went south he “eventually he asked me out, and I [told him] it’s about damn time!” When first touching on her heterosexuality during the interview, Lori talked a lot about the role that faith and her Catholic religion played in her life. “I’m pretty private about this kind of stuff, it’s not something I’m used to talking about. But my two kids are my treasures, probably the proudest moments of my life was becoming a mom two times.”
A second cup of coffee later, after discussing her relationship with her husband and how it had changed over the years from being passionate to family driven, Lori opened up about one sexual relationship she had during her senior year of college;

I met this person, they were funny and charming and just, well, they were really sweet but full of life, you know? And I was dating a guy at the time, but he lived over ten hours away. So I started spending more time with this person, and I don’t know. It was wrong. But I really fell for her. [Pause] And yes, I did say her. I fell in love with a woman, and it was wrong. But I felt very drawn to her, I can’t really explain it now … And she ended it after a few months because of a lot of drama that happened I … I don’t even want to get into that, but it ended bad. I still can’t believe I did that. Sometimes I still think about it … I mean, I care about her to this day although we haven’t spoken since … But there’s never been any other woman I was attracted to or wanted to touch since or whatever.

Despite having a self-described “intense” emotional and sexual relationship with a woman in college for the better part of a year, Lori maintained her heterosexuality. “Um, honestly, I’ve never been attracted to any other woman, and I’ve never thought about other women, any woman, again like I did about her … It was just her.” In talking about her heterosexual identification, she placed a great importance on being able to have a family with her husband, reproductive sex, and being what she defined as “a good of a Christian as I can be. All I can do is ask for forgiveness, stay the path, and be a good mom.” When I asked if she had regrets about her relationship with the unnamed woman, she said yes, but politely declined to expand on her response.

Sarah (65) was a self-identified heterosexual who had, “well I guess you could say I had a wild past, haha!” She discussed a myriad of sexual relationships she had with men in college. “What can I say, it was the 70s, I was at a liberal university and I was, I was finally free from my conservative family, right? It felt like almost every other day we were having bonfires in the woods behind campus smoking [marijuana] and partying.” A common theme among the parties Sarah described was women kissing other women. “And I want to be clear, I have nothing
against lesbians. I probably, at that time, kissed more girls than I did guys … all just to catch a guy’s eye. They couldn’t look away! … And I’m all about supporting the LGBTQ movement. It’s just for me, kissing those other girls was like kissing my best friend. Comfortable, safe, but no sparks, no … haha, well no light my fire, baby!"

Somewhat like Lori, it was a lack of desire for women and a lifelong monosexual attraction to men that led Sarah to identify as a heterosexual. The main difference to her was that she had only made out with women and never had an emotional relationship with one. Although she did not rule out the possibility of meeting a woman she felt sexually attracted to and would want to have a romantic/intimate relationship with, even at this stage of her life, she, like Megan, noted, “I fear those days are more and more behind me, but my mantra has always been never say never, you know?”

Another institutional identifier who reported having same sex intimacies in their past was Laura (68), who also identified as a heterosexual. However, her sexual history, like many of the previous woman I spoke with, was more fluid than a heterosexual label captured. Laura went to school at a private women’s college in the late 1960s/early 1970s that was only a few hours from her mom and dad. In high school, Laura did not really date or think about sex. This was due in part to her strict father, who had a “no dating” policy when she lived at home. In tandem, she was busy with her studies, having had dreams to become an environmental scientist. “I guess I had always thought about women, was attracted to women, heck, I even dreamed about women at that point in my life.”

During those years, at least in the safety of the insulated campus, Laura was an out lesbian (at least among her inner circle). “And it was easy, it was a space where there were other women who even if they didn’t say it, you knew [they were open to dating women].” But for
Laura’s lesbian relationships, “in hindsight, 20/20, right? I probably only really ever went to 3rd base with my girlfriends. It felt safe in the company of women … but I wouldn’t say for all my dating … it wasn’t really about sex. I cared for the emotional relationship more [than the sex].”

By her senior year, as Laura started thinking about the future, she started hanging out with one of the male college administrators to talk about what life “in the real world” would look like for her.

After graduating, lack of access to a lesbian community in her rural area led to a bit of a crisis for her as friends one by one moved away; “In the real world, I didn’t know, couldn’t figure out how to date anymore.” She had stayed in touch with the male college administrator after graduating, who she would go on to have a brief sexual relationship with (for the first time). “I wouldn’t say I enjoyed [it] or didn’t, but it got me thinking about settling after I got my degree … made me think for the first time about kids.” Several years later, she met her future husband who she now has two children with. “I don’t know, he really wanted kids, and I really wanted kids. He was handsome, and honest, and we had a lot in common. Today, I don’t think about women, I’m not really attracted to other people either way … and I wouldn’t even say it’s the physicality that’s important to me with him [her husband]. Today, it’s about our kids, keeping them on a healthy and happy path.” Identity, for Laura, was at this time centered on having a family and raising children, similar to Lori. However, the physical intimacy mattered less to her than the emotional “partnership” she has with her husband.

The last of the six institutional identifiers who reported same sex behaviors over their lifetime was Emma (22). Emma had just finished her undergraduate degree from a large state university in the northeast, and was taking the summer to figure out “what I want to do with my life. It’s really daunting, to be honest.” With no plans to stay in academia, and unsure what career path she would enjoy the most, she expressed a lot of anxiety about the future. In talking
about the freedom away from home she enjoyed (and was “dearly missing” being back at her parents’ house), she spent a lot of time relaying the details about her sorority and the myriad of parties she attended via her affiliation with the Greek scene on campus. When I asked her if hookups were common among the sororities/fraternities she frequented, she answered with a resounding, “Oh yea, definitely. At least for me and my friends, it was all about the hookup.”

At first, when I asked Emma about having had same sex experiences, she spent a lot of time detailing her “love of the penis” and great joy she derived from giving oral sex to her boyfriends. “It’s all about power to me. Drawing it out, making them beg. Literally having them in the palm of my hand at my mercy. It’s so hot!” When I inquired about her strategy for securing sexual partners in what sounded like a competitive environment in her former party scene, she spoke about how she and her “sisters” from the sorority would start kissing each other to draw the attention of their “mark” (male suitor) that night. When I asked if she derived any enjoyment out of kissing the women, who she said were too numerous to count over her collegiate career, she said “I mean, I never kissed a woman outside of our parties. So I wasn’t attracted to them or anything, just trying to get the attention of the guy I liked. Kissing my sisters was a means to an end, and I’m pretty sure they felt the same way. It was comfortable, but I was never turned on by it. What did turn me on was the attention from all the guys watching, and how they’d get all riled up.”

After Emma detailed more examples of her sexual “conquests” during her undergrad, I asked her if she had ever had a threesome with a man and a woman at the same time. While she did not expand at length, she did say;

Yes, but it was only one time. And I was really trying to make the guy I was sort of with at the time happy. And I was really drunk … I was really wasted. Probably the most drunk I’d been without like passing out. But it was for him, not for her. And yea I
touched her a little bit but basically just to get the guy [going]. But I didn’t and wouldn’t do that again. It went too far for me.

Emma’s rationale for adopting a heterosexual identity revolved around pleasing and attracting male partners rather than her own sexual satisfaction. What differentiated her from Lori and Laura who also had sexual relations with women was that Emma did so not out of her attractions for women, but out of her desire to make her partner at the time happy (and likely also due to the drinking culture she partook in at the time). The result was that her narrative drew comparisons from Essig’s (2000) writings on heteroflexibility, where same sex behaviors are engaged in for the enjoyment of men. In a way, this was similar to Sarah’s stories of making out with women in college to elicit attention from the men she was attracted to.

In summation, there were several themes that emerged from the six institutional identifiers who experienced fluid desires or sexual encounters. One theme was that fluid experiences served to reinforce their “true desires” (in this case, for men). Two examples were Megan and Emma’s narratives, where intimacy with women served the purpose of drawing the sexual attention of men. The theme of monosexuality was also observed among the institutional identifiers with fluid sexual histories, where a lack of desire for women on a full time basis (or lack of having had physical intimacies with a woman) led to the dismissal of same sex intimacies. The theme of family, and the socially reinforced perception that having a “healthy” family necessitates a heterosexual relationship, was also apparent among these institutional identifiers’ stories. Raising a family was closely tied to some of the participants’ self-worth and being a contributing member of society in their eyes. Having a traditional heterosexual family became a source of accomplishment, the penultimate goal of a good sexual citizen.
Final Notes on Adopting Static Identities among Fluid Histories and Desires

To conclude this section, for the fourteen institutional and political identifiers with fluid narratives who experienced some level of fantasies or sexual physicality with both men and women, several themes stood out. For politically identified women, the varying degrees of coercion to have heterosexual sex at some point in their life served to solidify their monosexual attractions to women. As was the case for some of the institutionally identified women, their lack of overall sexual attraction to women served to reinforce their “true” desires for the opposite sex. This was similar to how political identifiers felt their few sexual experiences with the opposite sex reaffirmed their overall homosexuality.

The sense of pride in sexual communities was, however, unique to political identifiers. Yet, the pride in communities was somewhat paralleled in the institutional identifiers’ pride in their normative heterosexual families. For some of the institutional identifiers, they felt at ease with some degree of physical intimacy with women but lacked an emotional attachment or eroticism for women’s bodies. Others, still, felt an attraction to the same sex but without acting on it (short of having intercourse) retained their heterosexuality, even while being open in their 60s and 70s to having sex with women for the first time (should the situation present itself).

A final similarity of note between political and institutional identifiers was the assumption of heterosexuality. Among the political identifiers, it was a false assumption that at times required “correcting” and was something that had to be navigated. For institutional identifiers, it was just the way things were, something that was not often questioned, even in the face of sexual and intimate experiences with the same sex. The same pride in community that was found in the stories of the political identifiers was directed towards heterosexual families and marriage for institutional identifiers (at least in this research sample). The next section shifts
CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF SEXUAL IDENTITY IN NON-FUID NARRATIVES

Next, we will review the histories of the five women who did not report having fluid sexual acts or desires throughout their lives (out of the 19 political and institutional identifiers). In some ways, their accounts of sexual identity were quite similar to those discussed earlier. The theme of monosexuality across all five women and the pride in identity for the one lesbian identified woman in this group was just as salient for non-fluid narratives as the fluid narratives. However, there were some differences that emerged in the histories and conceptualizations of identity shared by Brenda (55), Tiffany (38), Amy (23), Jamie (29) and Jill (43).

When I asked her about her sexual identity, Brenda responded “Well ok, I definitely identify as lesbian, gay, like a lot of people want to differentiate gay has to be a male, but I don’t see it that way.” In discussing her identity as length, she noted;

I identify as a lesbian, I am sexually attracted to women. I can look at the male body and find it attractive but I don’t want to have sex with it. There are several men I can look at and think they are good looking but know I don’t want to have sex with them. Saying I find women sexually attractive is really important to me. And it’s something I had to learn I guess growing up, I knew I felt differently and there were things about women I was attracted to especially in middle school, all the hormones are flowing and there are certain teachers I was attracted to and I didn’t realize I was attracted to them at the time but I wanted to be near them and spend time with them and wanted their attention. Then growing up I would look at a woman differently, and even long before I was with a woman if I would masturbate I would think about being with a woman, even before I’d been with one, I would still think about that and imagine that.

Being a lesbian was an import part of Brenda’s sense of self, one that she “spent time with myself over the years and finally realized [she’s] lesbian.” By her 20s, Brenda was sexually
active with women, and taking part in the larger lesbian culture became an important part of her life and happiness. As far as being open with her identity, Brenda said, “… I very much have a fuck it attitude, in fact I dare someone to say something to me or tell me I’m wrong or I’m going to hell or anything like that. I absolutely do not hide it, I don’t even consider hiding it.”

Having come from a privileged background, and a fairly supportive family, Brenda never had shame about her lesbian identity, despite it taking her awhile to personally understand her desires for women. Today, being a part of the LGBTQ community is a large part of her life, as she spends much of her free time with her local LGBTQ friends and community in her southeastern home (in a notable gay enclave). Brenda highlighted the importance of nurturing her ties to LGBTQ networks with the following;

It’s important to me to have a group of friends that are also gay and lesbian (although I don’t choose my group of friends based solely on that). So I guess the culture of sexuality is important, um, and I think some of that is being a minority in this day and age where things are still looked down upon, rights are still being given and taken, that it’s important to stick together as a culture which ultimately is based on the sexual side of it. But I don’t know that my personal identity within is based on that.

The importance on the culture and history of the LGBTQ community was similar to the other eight political identifiers discussed earlier. What differentiated Brenda from the earlier political identifiers is that she cited a “definite biological factor” behind her desires for women in a way the remaining political identifiers with more fluid sexual histories did not express. “I can’t help but think biology has something to do with it. I’m with Lady Gaga, to be honest. I do think we were all born the way we are. And I was born a gay lady.”

When asked to expand on these thoughts, Brenda relayed, “Um ok, so the sexual identity thing, I think it’s important for everyone to identify within themselves however they want to
identify … I support them [identities] all but I just don’t know them all. I think it’s important individually to identify what’s important for [people] and to make amends with themselves … I think it’s important for me to recognize that I am a lesbian and be ok with it.” She further noted, “For me, it’s just who I am on the inside. It’s baked in to me [being sexually attracted to women]. And it’s always been that way … it’s something I had to learn I guess growing up, I knew I felt differently and there were things about women I was attracted to especially in middle school…” In the end, having had lifelong desires for women since she could remember led her to the conclusion that her desires had a biological component.

For the four heterosexual institutional identifiers in this group, they shared the opinion of Brenda that sexual desires and identities have a genetic basis for them. They also detailed some of the particular social pressures they dealt with to be normatively heterosexual over the course of their lives. Next, we will briefly touch on Tiffany (38), Amy (23), Jamie (29), and Jill’s (43) accounts of sexual identity, specifically, their heterosexuality.

For Tiffany, even thinking about same sex intimacy in her culture was cause for fear, and given the lack of visibility or LGBTQ culture in her country of origin and the laws against same sex intimacy, “It was never an option for me or for my friends in school growing up. No one talked, spoke about it. It, was, it was not even thought to look at women that way.” Tiffany had come to learn more about the LGBTQ community during her time studying in the U.S., and noted, “I do understand more now, I do not judge here. I have met some [LGBT individuals], they were nice and we had fun talking sometimes at events, things on campus.” However, for her, “I never, I never think like that. About women. I never have looked at them [in that way].” Although Tiffany herself did not cite biology or genetics as a basis for her attraction to men, the
cultural norms and regulation of sexuality at home certainly did have an impact on her experiences and understandings of sexuality.

Amy had a similar perspective regarding the role of her families’ culture, as she grew up with her first generation Vietnamese American parents. When I asked her how she identified, she laughed for a few minutes and replied, “Sorry, I mean when I emailed you I did say I was straight. I mean, for me, it’s kind of a no brainer.” She went on to say,

My friends are mostly straight but I do have two gay friends I occasionally hang around with. I never really liked hanging around women that much, I think they are too gossipy and jealous. Aside from two of my close girlfriends, I mostly hang around with guys … but my sexuality, um, I guess I never really thought about it before. I think everyone just knows [I’m straight]. No one has ever asked, and I don’t really go out and say anything about my sexual identity. I’m not trying to be rude, but I just never thought about it.”

As for her mom, “[She] was already planning my wedding before I was even born, haha, I swear. Even my grandma asks me on the phone when I’m going to get married, and I’m only 23, and single at that! But that’s how they are. They want me to have babies as soon as possible, all they want is grandchildren.” I asked Amy to talk a little bit more about the role of her heritage as she understands it growing up in a first generation Vietnamese American family, she expanded, “Um, geez. Very strict. And it was such a funny turn. [Because] I wasn’t really allowed to date in middle school, in high school. My parents said it would get in the way of my education. And then I go off to college, and then they start asking me if I’ve found a husband yet!”

Homosexuality was never even spoken about in her home, even when Amy brought up the landmark case that legalized same sex marriage in the U.S., her parents changed the subject altogether rather than discussing as a family. “I think, it’s just like, not something they were familiar with. And I know that when they were growing up, sexuality wasn’t like a question. So that’s kind of the vibes I grew up with. Conservative until college, haha!”
Albeit having a very different experience growing up with her family in the U.S. from Tiffany’s story in the former soviet Middle East, the cultural impact of her family certainly played a part in her experience of sexuality. It is noteworthy that Amy was not the only participant who did not have much to say regarding her heterosexuality. Additionally, she was not the only participant in this study to discuss growing up in a family where sex and sexuality was not discussed until she moved out. Jamie, when asked about sexuality and identity, said; “I don’t know, you know, I … growing up we just didn’t talk about [gay] stuff. Maybe we had gay people in our family but if we did it was probably never said [out loud].”

When I asked Jamie if she thought growing up in a Korean American family impacted her take on sexuality, unlike Tiffany and Amy, she said, “Oh, I never thought about it like [that]. I mean, really, not really. My few close friends growing up had kind of similar families. So I don’t know, they were just so worried about fitting in. I think they were worried when we moved [to a much smaller and rural area] that I was going to get made fun of. So indirectly, maybe they worried too much about everything I did.” When discussing her identity, Jamie kept her response succinct; “I don’t know. I mean, I like guys. I always have. And that’s maybe just how I am. And I do wonder, wonder sometimes. Maybe there is something to do with genes. Like, maybe we’re all wired different ways and it’s just how it is.”

Jill would echo Jamie’s sentiments when it came to the role of biology in sexuality. “I don’t know about other people. I mean, I’ve met everyone [in the city she has lived in her whole life], all kinds. Takes all kinds, haha, all kinds! So sure, yea I support them all. My family never did. But it doesn’t bother me. But I can’t really relate.” When I asked her to explain how she felt about her own sexuality, she offered the following;
It’s just, it’s just me. I mean, like, this is the most I’ve ever talked about being a heterosexual, um, so, um. I mean I don’t know what to say haha. It is a part of who I am, maybe not what I am. Some people think it is what you are, I don’t know. But it is a part who I am and I don’t think it was ever something I chose. It just is for me. And so I don’t really know what else to say, and I’m sorry I don’t think I am answering your question at all on this, haha.

Overall, Jamie, Jill, and Amy had the shortest responses when we reached the interview questions regarding sexuality and identities. Identity was, if not taken for granted, almost an afterthought in our discussions. No one had asked them about their sexuality before, and the declaration of their heterosexuality was as far as they articulated when it came to their personal sexual identities. That heterosexuality should have been a foregone conclusion, and was seen as the unquestioned status quo, speaks to the continued normative status of heterosexuality and its prominence in the U.S.

For these five women, sexual identity was a given, something that did not warrant exploration or questioning. It was a natural inclination or disposition since they were born, or just part of who they were without further thinking. Interestingly, the biological explanations for heterosexuality were largely absent from the fourteen political and institutional identifiers with fluid experiences. We will revisit Tiffany, Jamie, and Jill’s stories further in the next part of this chapter, where the focus is shifted to an exploration of the specific roles that institutions have played in reinforcing the participants’ sexual identities across the groups of institutional and political identifiers.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPACTS

Not all of the institutional and political identifiers could pinpoint interactions with social institutions that reinforced sexual binaries one way or the other. Often times, especially for
institutional identifiers with no history of fluidity (four of the ten institutional identifiers), their
gender was just “how it was” and was something that they had not dwelled on much, if at all. However, a deeper exploration of the narratives revealed that some institutions played a central role in reinforcing the notion of static sexual identities. The institutions that emerged through the interviews, and played a principal role in the narratives, included families, religion, marriage, and government/politics. The impact of each varied from woman to woman, but it was clear that political and institutional identifiers continue to be regulated (to varying degrees) by U.S. social institutions.

This section will explore the selected stories of a sampling of the participants as they interacted with various institutions throughout their lives. The first subsection will explore the interplay of institutions among the political identifiers. Examples are drawn from the stories of the LGBTQ identified Cassy, Frances, Miranda, and Shirley (all gay/lesbian identified with the exception of Cassy, who identified as queer). The second subsection explores the experiences of the institutional identifiers Tiffany, Laura, Jill, Jamie, and Lori (all heterosexually identified) to underscore the ways that institutions regulate heterosexuality on an individual level.

Institutional Regulation & Interactions among Political Identifiers

Growing up, Cassy (44) never felt like she fit in with her family, whether it came to her desires for women or otherwise; “I was never super close with my biological family, I always felt like the black sheep of the family. I went to private schools so I never grew up with a lot of friends around me.” She could not relate to the privileged kids she spent her formative years around in a major suburb in the northeast, a feeling that did not improve after she was sent to boarding school at fifteen years old.
It wasn’t until college that Cassy “found [her] people”, and became a part of the larger “queer community”. While discussing the challenges of growing up in an affluent area, it was clear Cassy’s feelings of alienation stemmed from not being around anyone with similar interests, including anyone who openly challenged gender and sexual norms. “Everyone around me always just did what they were told, assumed everything they grew up with was right and true. I could never swallow it, though. It just wasn’t in me [to conform].” This led to strained relations with her parents from early on, and likely played a role in her moving across the country and eventually settling far from where she grew up. By the 1990s, Cassy was first exposed to LGBTQ history through her involvement in the queer Zine movement. It was a history that would later go on to inspire her career in academia.

Cassy was not alone in feeling alienated growing up, among politicized identifiers I spoke with. Frances, coming of age 40 years earlier than Cassy, was exposed to regular berating of homosexuals from her family. She discussed the pain of hearing her family referring to gay men as sissies and faggots at length. But the absence of discussions surrounding female same sex sexuality, and without any early terminology/slang for lesbians, her family left an impression that being attracted to women was literally unspeakable:

And the other thing was, this was in the 50s, and I never heard anybody talk about lesbians or gay people or use any other words than faggot and queer, those were the only two words I heard. And that was always about guys so they never talked about women not even derogatorily so the message to me was that is the worst thing you could be. And I thought there’s no way in hell I’m ever going to tell anyone or act on it because there’s no one else like me anyway.

When one of her family members first questioned her sexuality after she graduated from college without having a boyfriend, “rather than say yes I am and come out and tell them yes and I have
loved women all my life, I called this default guy I hadn’t talked to [since college] and asked if he still wanted to get married and he said yes and we got married three months later.”

It if weren’t for her ex-husband outing her during their divorce proceedings and the consequent legal battle that resulted in her kids being taken from her custody, she may never have come out to her family, even after her divorce. “All of that impacted me in such a profound way, losing custody of my kids taught me very clearly, for 20 years that I was in the closet I was so afraid to tell anyone who I was, because they would leave me. And then I told someone who I was [gay] and I lost my children. So that just validated it to me …” While they would eventually make peace with Frances’ sexual identity years later, her mother was estranged from her for a long time. Thankfully, in what was a small showing of support at the time, her father quipped, “Well if I was married to him [Frances’ ex-husband], I would be a lesbian too”, and “he moved on, just like that. It was interesting and I hadn’t expected that reaction from him. But the rest of my family, to be honest, was pretty unbearable for a while.”

Family, whether it was her ex-husband, mother and grandfather, or others, was extremely denigrating to gays and lesbians, something that had a lasting emotional impact on Frances and undoubtedly delayed her coming out. Although she would eventually get her kids back and repair much of the damage that had been done earlier in her life, looking back, her family contributed to a sense of fear, self-doubt, and polluted discourses surrounding her lesbian identity (whether knowingly or unknowingly). Even though she came of age almost 40 years after Frances, Miranda experienced a similar sense of seclusion and loneliness surrounding her lesbian identity.

Sex was never really spoken about in Miranda’s family. Growing up along the northeast coastline in the 1990s, heterosexuality was the norm among her family, friends, and suburban
neighborhood. Although her family did not go out of their way to speak badly of lesbians and gay men, they often asked questions about what boy she was dating, and consistently asked her brother about his girlfriends. Rather than being brought up in a home filled with open fear and loathing for homosexuals, it was one that was fairly silent on the issue altogether.

Heterosexuality was an assumption, even for herself internally, until she went to college. “I never had a [sexual] interest in women, I guess. I dated plenty [of guys] in high school, had sex with my boyfriend my senior year because that’s what everyone did.” Moving five states away for college afforded Miranda distance and more freedom than she’d had prior, “although I should say, my parents weren’t overbearing. They trusted me and gave me a lot of freedom compared to a lot of my friends.”

College provided Miranda more diversity than she had been exposed to in the wealthy suburbs (similar to Cassy), and some of the first lesbians she had encountered in her life. Her senior year, she started hanging out with a lesbian who was on the same sports team. After a night of drinking and celebrating a win with her teammates, Miranda kissed her at a party. “I was really nervous at first. Ok, to be honest, I was really, really drunk. I didn’t have a playbook for this sort of thing. I didn’t really think about it or plan it. I just did it…” While she would eventually fall in love with and date the same woman for four years, “after graduation, it was really hard when we had to go our separate ways.”

The stress of graduation and having a long distance relationship was tough on Miranda, but the hardest part “was not telling my parents we were dating.” After dating the woman for two years, Miranda “hated the lies, I couldn’t hold it back anymore” and came out to her parents. Although surprised, they continued to support Miranda and her partner before they would eventually breakup. “Looking back, it seems silly I didn’t tell them sooner. But it was private,
and I didn’t know for a very long time if I was really a lesbian or not. And once you come out, there’s kind of no going back.”

In Shirley’s case, she came out in her 20s while she was still in college. For as long as she could remember, she “[has always been] attracted to someone who is very comfortable, proud, connected to being a woman.” Despite recognizing her desires for women early on, she still had sexual relations, albeit short, with men during her first year of college. Particularly, in her freshman year, her parents encouraged her to date one of her male high school friends who ended up going to a nearby college;

We had been friends in high school, we were in colleges near each other. And he, we had a good friendship, he was super witty, I thought he was a super cool guy. I was never attracted to him sexually but I thought he was a cool guy. His whole deal was I don’t care who you want to be with, I think we would make a great couple professionally. So let’s make that deal. And I was like eh I don’t know about that. But we did have sex, I was just like this is super lame.

Then, “after I had sex with him I was like you know what, I’m out. I can’t do this anymore, I’ve given it a good try and now I’m done.” From then on, Shirley only dated women. At first, she did not tell her parents. But after starting to bring some of her girlfriends from college home, her mom finally asked her outright if she was a lesbian.

I said yes. And um, you know, so she called my dad into the room and he was like alright, he wasn’t really as invested in this being horrible, like I don’t think he loved it but he was like eh, eh you know? He was not an overly emotional person ever so that probably made him super uncomfortable. My mom immediately started crying, it was just like we’d had a death in the family … And they still helped me financially, that was never a question that they’d stop. About a year or so after that I moved to the south east, so in that time period in the first year to two years after I came out we didn’t talk a whole lot … And then I think over time, time changes people and I moved away, I moved a long way away … So I think they had some soul searching that I didn’t know about [to come to terms with it].
Now married to her wife, Shirley was thankful to have her family at her wedding, even if she and her siblings were not super close due to their age differences. As for some of her family members, “They probably think I’m going to hell, I mean I don’t know if they do or not, but they don’t say anything to me about it and they accept my partner, so that’s it.” Similar to Miranda, even if it was not what her family had anticipated for her, they still supported her, whether emotionally or monetarily.

While these are only a few examples, many of the political identifiers faced varying degrees of backlash when they came out to their families. Although eventually they would work through their familial estrangement, correcting their families’ assumption of heterosexuality held consequences and no small amount of family and emotional drama/trauma. To an extent, it was this very backlash that, later in life, would lead the political identifiers to place great importance and pride in identifying as lesbian or queer having overcome adversity when correcting the heteronormative expectations of their families.

Moreover, having to process the familial rejection after coming out also necessitated that these women created their own support networks outside of their immediate families, sometimes referred to as chosen families. For Frances, throwing herself into LGBTQ activism at the time helped “heal a lot of the wounds and mistrust I had in people after the fallout from my coming out and messy divorce.” Shirley, although she reported having mended the relationship with her mom, spent almost all of her free time participating in her local LGBTQ Mardi Gras group, who had become her “family of choice.” Cassy found a place to belong outside of her family by exploring her fluid desires during the queer Zine movement of the 1990s. These different communities under the LGBTQ umbrella provided a sense of belonging, and took back the shame and stigma that had been attached to their identities prior.
The construction of American families continues to be, on the whole, an institution that is largely based on the presumption of heterosexuality. For Frances, this meant complete isolation from her immediate family and ex-husband once she came out of the closet for many years after the fact. In Miranda’s case, heteronormativity was reinforced not only within her immediate family but also the larger suburban neighborhood to the point that it never occurred to her until she moved away that she may not be heterosexual. Cassy similarly had to move far away to break the normative heterosexual expectations of her family. The foundation of the family as being rooted in heterosexual assumptions is perhaps best exemplified by the continued need for all of the lesbian/gay/queer identified participants to have to “come out” to their families to correct the normative expectation of heterosexuality.

Although women of all ages had a similar coming out story, the impact of disclosing their LGBTQ status varied greatly based on their age and the time period when they came out. While it seemed emotionally draining and trying on Miranda when she disclosed her desires for women, her mom, dad, and brother continued to support her and her same sex partners. In Shirley’s case, although her mom grew distant for a stretch of time, she still had her parents’ financial support during the estrangement.

This was in stark contrast to Frances’ experiences, where the added governmental regulation at the time cost her not only custody of her children, but her very livelihood. Being an out lesbian meant that Frances would lose her children after a very public and painful custody hearing. To be gay then, in her home state in the southeast, was synonymous with being a sick, delinquent individual and automatically disqualified her from not only having a socially legitimated family (as she could not marry a person of the same sex at the time) but also was used as justification to remove the family she had from her until years later. A gay or lesbian
identity was read by U.S. federal and state regulations as being sick or perverted, and therefore those individuals were not fit to raise children or have families.

For the younger gay/lesbian/queer identified participants, having the right to marry and legally have a same sex family has led to a profound shift in the experiences of gays and lesbians on an individual level. That aside, more recent trends have signaled a potential and disturbing shift amid the return of governmental interference and regulation of LGBTQ bodies and relationships. Two examples of this are Florida’s “don’t’ say gay” regulations in primary education facilities and Texas’ criminalization of families who try to help their children access gender/sex transitional therapies.

Regarding religious institutions, while many of the political identifiers spoke of having faith and beliefs in a higher power of sorts, none of the women I spoke to in this category were currently participating in an organized religion. What they did note was having negative experiences in their respective religious institutions when they were younger, whether it was Catholicism, Judaism, or Evangelical sects. Rejection of their sexuality by religious institutions in their younger years, at least among political identifiers, led them to eschew organized religion in their adulthood. That said, it is worth noting that there are many organized religions today that do not discriminate against LGBTQ individuals and families.

Ultimately, as far as this research is concerned, after having had to work through the institutional adversities and assumption of heterosexuality they faced when coming out, adopting a static lesbian/queer identity later in life, regardless of their sexually fluid histories, was a way to pay homage to those who had fought to be socially recognized and legitimated before them. For some, it was also a way to combat the shame and negative stigma that had been attached to the identity when they were growing up. Undoubtedly, the institutions of the family, religion,
and government (whether in place or absent at their coming of age) had a great impact on the political identifiers in this study by either rendering non-heterosexual identities invisible, illegal, or by stigmatizing and out-casting non-heterosexuals.

Institutional Identifiers & the Regulation of Heterosexuality

In this subsection, we will review the stories of a subset of the institutional identifiers and the ways their sexual narratives intertwined with institutions. We will start by revisiting Tiffany’s history, who, not unlike Cassy, Frances, Miranda, and Shirley at certain points in their lives, did not speak much about her relationships, if ever, with her mother or brothers. The reasons, however, were not symptomatic of being in “the closet.” Rather, it was the cultural restraints that she faced when she was back home in the Middle East, in a post-Soviet nation.

In my culture, women should not hang out with men much when they are single. Sometimes it’s ok now, but even when I was a kid my mom was very strict, my grandmother was strict in high school. Bad behavior for a single woman to be with a man. And right now, my grandma is asking “when are you going to get married?” They controlled me a lot, said I had to be home by six. Even when I moved to the city to live with my aunt, even she was controlling of me!

Both unmarried women and men are expected, regardless of their age, to live with their parents until they marry. Dating in her home country was completely different than in the U.S.;

It’s completely different dating [at home] ... it doesn’t matter maybe if the girl likes him or not, it’s if the man likes her. And he makes the proposal. And there’s a big bride kidnapping problem. Like without talking with you, they will steal and kidnap the woman, and again those kind of problems. Some women get along with their husbands after kidnapping, but some, most of the women don’t and they have many family problems, and most of them are divorced … now the young generation [in my country] don’t want to get married … But guys want to get married, right now, from my observation, ... but in my generation, right now, it’s getting better, less kidnapping, maybe only in the rural places, but guys want to have dating. But some parents still do matching.
At home, undoubtedly families and government/religious institutions have a profound impact on controlling individual sexual relations. Same sex physical interactions and homosexuality as it is experienced in the U.S. are not viable options in Tiffany’s country of origin. To be “outed” would lead to public humiliation, beatings, arrest, and worse, both at the hands of local authorities and family and friends. To underscore the taboo status of homosexuals where she grew up, Tiffany shared that her language does not even have a direct translation for homosexuals.

Tiffany further discussed the gendered dynamics of her culture, and her relationship with her mom and brothers in greater detail;

Back home I live with my mom and my two brothers. Our apartment is very small, kind of two rooms … So without their parents they [young adults] can have their sexual lives, but only in the big cities. Also we may tell parents that we are dating some person, but if it’s not true relationship, serious relationship, we don’t inform our parents. Until the person makes a proposal, they don’t say anything to parents … I think my relationship with my mom, I didn’t tell her my secrets most of the time because, uh, she, uh, I don’t blame her. Now I can understand her because of how my father was, she kind of, didn’t think about girls’ problems and didn’t talk much. I think she was just busy with her own problems, maybe that’s why I began to learn how to be a lady from other girls … But now that I’m older, I think we are starting to have a better relationship, now that she’s not with my father … Although she loves more my younger brothers, especially my youngest brother.

Families, for Tiffany, were the first line of control and regulation of sexuality. The second line of control was the larger religious and governmental regulation of both women and non-heterosexual relations.

Growing up in the U.S. afforded a very different familial experience for Laura. To her, heterosexuality was tied to her joy and purpose of being a mother. Before meeting her husband, Laura worked as an environmental scientist, traveling the country. Although she’d only ever dated women in college (“there was no way I was dating anyone when I was still living in my
father’s house and certainly not at that point in time when saying you were had serious consequences...”), once she started working in the field and traveling, her desires and priorities started to change. She met a “very handsome nurse” who she started dating after several months. These days, “I guess I’m really straight. At this point in my life, I don’t think I’d date another woman. I love my husband, and my kids are everything to me now, even though they are all grown and successful in their own right.”

Being a stay at home mom for years and raising two “very responsible” children fulfilled an important role for Laura, and was personally satisfying. The very values her strict Catholic (and sometimes abusive, as she described him) father instilled in her at a young age would eventually become important to her happiness later in life. While she had sought to escape her sheltered upbringing, and dated women in college, her lack of strong physical attraction to any sex/gender, and the importance of having her “own family”, contributed to her eventual identification as a heterosexual.

While Laura’s immediate family was sexually suffocating for her in similar ways that Tiffany discussed, the repercussions for violating sexual/gender norms for the two likely would have been drastically different. For Tiffany, sex before marriage or same sex intimacies could result, at minimum, in complete social ostracism, and at most, violence and subjugation against her physical person at the hands or authorities or family members/neighbors. If she had come out in college, Laura’s family may have distanced themselves from her and showed strong disapproval, but there likely would not have been the same physical or legal backlash.

Tiffany and Laura were not alone growing up in strict religious or cultural households. Jill (43) and Jamie (29) both touched on the silence and marginalization surrounding same sex
intimacies in their immediate and extended families and communities. Growing up in a major metropolitan city, Jill was surrounded by her local Black community and church.

I never had a problem with gays and lesbians, I mean I grew up in [a huge city], and there were all kinds [of people] around all the time. I knew from a young age, you know, about homosexuals. And also, I knew from the noises and whispers of my family and sermons at church that it was totally not okay [to be gay]. I mean, yea we knew who was gay. I mean, the church choir director, come on? He was up there popping his pussy every Sunday. Everybody knew, everybody ... But it was like they just didn’t, you know they didn’t talk about it. There would be looks between my mother and grandmother, and stuff you know? You knew, you wouldn’t ask, and they sure as hell never brought them [their partners] around.

Growing up, heterosexuality was never a choice for Jill; “It was always when are you going to get married, ooh he’s cute why don’t you go out with him? … When I expressed an interest in playing basketball in college, my dad said in passing, ‘You aren’t trying to get closer to those dykes, are you?’ That was the end of that for me.”

Jill’s experience of homophobia among the African American community is not a surprise given the extensive research that has shown that race and ethnicity further complicate the experience of being LGBTQ (Collins 2004; Durham 2002; Goldman 1996; Nagel 2000; Somerville 2000). Jill noted; “It always made me glad I liked guys, found guys attractive. I didn’t even like it when people said stuff and I wasn’t even gay … but what if I was? Imagine how that would have been, my own mom, dad, aunts, uncles, and cousins, everyone I knew growing up.”

Jamie’s (29) family, too, was very controlling, having come of age in a “very strict [Korean] household, I guess. I don’t know how else to say it. Very controlling, I mean like what I wore was a constant topic of discussion daily, even my shoes.” According to Jamie, finding a
suitable Korean husband today, now that’s she’s moved to a more populated, local city, is her “mother’s full time job, I swear, haha!"

In school, Jamie tried to fit in as best she could with the rural kids in her area (her family moved beyond the suburbs to find a “quieter life” when she was in grade school). Doing so meant conforming to her parent’s strict no dating policy, and waiting to engage in sex until she was married. “I like making out a lot, love making out a lot, haha and that was something I spent a lot of time doing in college, unknown to my dad.” As far as her experience in high school, “Like what is it they call it, I learned about it in school. Model Asian? That’s kind of it, you know, I had to be perfect so we could fit in better with the popular families.”

To revisit Lori’s story as a comparison to Jamie’s, her mom was a devout Catholic, a single mother in a suburban area. “We weren’t poor by any means, ma always made sure she could take care of us. We were really lucky. I never met my dad, and from what [her mom told her] … I don’t want to. But you know, single mom, raising me and my younger brother, we looked forward to dinners together, to going to church together.” Homosexuality was not spoken of in her household, anything that came on the news or otherwise was “changed immediately.” On trips to their local city, “my mom made a point to point out the gays, somehow. Like never literally pointing or whatever, just like a ‘you see that? I can’t believe they are out like that, holding hands. You think they will still hold hands in hell?’” The choice for Lori was clear; to be straight. Homosexuality and hell were also inextricably linked by her local priest, whose services she would attend as often as she could. Undoubtedly, these experiences made navigating her same sex intimate experience in college difficult, pitting her sexual desires and emotional connection to a woman against her religion and family she cared deeply about.
Across my discussions with the aforementioned women in this section and subsection(s), families, religion, and government continue to play a role in regulating and normalizing heterosexuality and sexual/gender roles. Each of these institutions shaped the women’s perception and understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender from an early age. Across the institutional identifiers, families reinforced the normative status of heterosexuality, encouraging the women to enter into the institution of marriage and families. Similarly, religious institutions played a role in equating good sexual citizenry with heterosexuality and families/procreation.

For the political identifiers reviewed in the previous subsection, donning a lesbian, gay, or homosexual identity put them directly at odds with the institutions that told them they were wrong or shameful. Again, even today, families continue to be a stronghold for the regulation and perpetuation of heterosexuality. As these narratives demonstrate, heteronormativity (Warner 1993, 1999) and the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham 1994, 2008) continue to exist as a founding principle of American families and many religious institutions. The social and cultural normalization of heterosexuality in the U.S. remains even with the increased visibility and portrayals of LGBTQ experiences and legalization of same sex marriage.

QUEER STORIES AND LIVING BEYOND BINARIES

In this final section before the chapter summary, I will revisit the three queer identified narratives from the political identifier group to explore their stories at length. Although we began talking about their experiences earlier, the three queer identified participants’ (Cassy, Alice, and Ella) narratives diverged from their political and institutional identified counterparts in an important way. Although they chose a sexual identity, their queer identity did not necessarily reinforce binary conceptualizations of sexuality as did the rest of the political identifiers. Taking
on a purposeful queer identity reflected both their understanding of, and affiliation with, the queer theoretical movement and a desire to eschew binary structures of sexuality and gender altogether. Here, we will focus on how their stories transcended sexual and gender binaries in ways the other political and institutional identifiers did not.

Two things Cassy discussed at length was her love of music and her love of the queer community. After graduating college, Cassy headed to the west coast to “… be a part of the queer community, be a part of a punk rock band. I wanted to have my first girlfriend, so that was basically my 20s. I just wanted to be a queer punk rocker.” A year after the move, Cassy “met my first girlfriend right away, we played music together. I just had an amazing time being part of the local queer music community, just working a couple day jobs and living and working in a little queer bubble. It was a magical time.” Far from the family and town she grew up in, Cassy finally found a place where she felt “home.” I found it interesting that Cassy went from being a punk rocker to an academic, given the years she spent in the “underground, queer punk scene.” Talking about the transition for her also unveiled the underlying importance of her political identity as a queer person.

Yea, it’s actually pretty interesting because a lot of the women I played music with hadn’t even gone to college and all had working class backgrounds. The women I played music with were just kind of obsessed with the past, women in punk in the 70s and 80s. But I wanted to know more about the community, started seeing documentaries about queer women in the holocaust or what life was like for the queer community during WWII. It brought up a lot of intellectual questions for me. I was a part of the Zine culture that was really big at the time. I had gone to a small liberal arts school, most didn’t go to grad school at the time. No one ever mentioned it to me, I didn’t come from an academic family. I never really knew it was an option until I was in my late 20s. I actually ended up going to a free career counselor and did a lot of brain searching thinking about what I wanted to do and what inspired me. So I ended up starting my master’s degree in the humanities in the west coast, just to see what I thought of going back to school not sure where it would lead. And I just loved it right away, it was a place that was easy to rise to the top and won scholarships and stuff and I felt really validated.
The cultural awakening for Cassy was more than just a path to sexual freedom. In discovering and learning more about the queer community and herself, Cassy would eventually find her path in educating others about the LGBTQ community.

Ironically, Cassy met her first boyfriend through a publication in a queer Zine. “My first Zine was about being queer and coming out, and he wrote me because he was like I think I’m bi. So he lived on the West coast so my junior year of college I flew out to meet him. So in two weeks I went from having my first kiss to having sex for the first time. And we were together for a few months…” After moving to the West coast after graduating, Cassy’s sexual awakening “took off!”

I think when I moved to the West Coast [to a big city known for sexual liberation] and got my first girlfriend, it brings back memories of going to the famous sex shop around the corner together that was right by my rent controlled apartment. And I bought my first dildo and strap on, it was a glittery strap on and I was all excited. And she was younger than me but she was a lot more experienced and stuff. So I’d say that’s probably when sex first started to get fun and adventurous, when I was having queer sex, obviously, haha.

Today, Cassy expressed feeling physically isolated from the queer culture that meant so much to her. Yet, her queer identity remains an important facet of who she is, going so far as to correct people’s assumptions of her heterosexuality (with the exception of her job, where she drew the line at discussing her personal identification/affiliations).

When I asked her if it was important to her to correct people’s assumptions of her heterosexuality based on her cis-gender appearance, especially now living in a more remote, less queer friendly town, Cassy noted;

Yes, of course, all the time. I mean this hasn’t come up in our conversation yet, but I’ve had partners who have been transmen and genderqueer folks as well. My first girlfriend was actually my only girlfriend I’ve ever had. Since most of my attraction has been for
masculine people, so sex identifications or assignments, queer always has made the most sense to me. I guess I could use bisexual, and I guess the term pansexual is probably more resonant now, but that term doesn’t have much meaning for me. I didn’t feel like I needed a new label, so I still use queer to identify myself. Especially because it has the affiliation with radical/progressive politics, and that’s important to me, too.

When I asked Cassy about the importance of being queer, she noted; “It’s something I think about a good amount. I mean I would still like to be in queer relationships but I’ve been living in places lately where it’s difficult to meet other queer people I could connect with. I’m queer, but I’m with someone who doesn’t identify with or understand the queer world. We have typical ‘straight’ sex ... But identities, it’s a subculture for me that I grew up in, that I was reading about and wanted to be inundated in learning about it. I just value the culture. It’s about a lot more than queer sex, it’s about the connection to the larger queer culture for me personally.”

These days, Cassy maintains her presence and connection to the queer community via the queer friendship networks she built over years which spanned the country. Although no longer part of the queer punk music scene or burlesque community, Cassy expressed, “prioritizing queer friendships, [and] I just started some interdisciplinary queer groups … I’m connected to all these other queer folks and people who are interested in the community and these issues, too. I can’t imagine living in another way … If I didn’t prioritize queer friendships, I don’t even know who I’d talk to here.” At the end of the day, Cassy preferred spending time with “with my chosen queer family over my biological family.”

For Ella (56), a queer identity was a political statement, a practice, and a chosen family. Growing up in a large suburb outside of a major northeast city, Ella was exposed to the queer community at a young age (and she also had a lesbian identified aunt). “I mean, my aunt being a lesbian was no secret. It was not even a thing the family talked about. There was my aunt and her
partner who’s been around for what, 30 years? Ever since I can remember. So it was like, I don’t, I guess it wasn’t a big deal in my family, it just … was.” Coming out for Ella, “wasn’t really a big ordeal. I mean, there was my aunt so nothing surprised anyone anymore, I feel like she went through all those pains for me [when coming out] at a dangerous time. But also, according to my brothers, my attempts at dating men were ‘just plain sad’. So to say it was no surprise for my family was an understatement.”

When she went to college at a large nearby large university in the 80s, Ella came out to her family officially, “again, not really a big shocker there” and identified as a butch lesbian. Coming out and building her own queer networks became vitally important to Ella in college. “Every weekend, it was another drag show my crew went to or the newest clubs before they got shut down or put out of business. I couldn’t get enough, it was the best time of my life!” It wasn’t until Ella decided to go into graduate school later in life after seeking a “meaningful career change” and ended up taking a course on sexualities that featured some of Judith Butler’s works that she questioned her lesbian identity. “That’s when I started questioning being butch. And I thought you know, if gender is a performance, then really maybe what I truly am is genderqueer. And ever since, I’ve identified as genderqueer. I mean, society says I’m a lesbian, or gay, or queer in a derogatory way. But … that freedom of gender expression, that’s become so important to me.”

At this point in her life, the weekends became “all about drag” for Ella. “I mean I was always pretty masculine, my mom was hard pressed to get me into a dress. But like, the first time I did drag, performing as a leather man, it was like I was having another coming out epiphany, haha! And that was something I didn’t share, didn’t tell [my family] right away although they are cool with it and all. It was like, it was just for me at that time if that makes sense.” The most
rewarding part of participating in drag culture for Ella was not just having another family to lean on, but to “challenge those ideas out there, to push the limits of gender until it was something that no longer divided people but brought them together.” When I asked her how she identifies today, Ella took a few minutes to compose her thoughts.

You know I want to say this carefully. Because like the research on sexual identity is pretty clear in my mind. It’s fluid. I mean, yes I would say I’m only attracted to women, but I like masculine women and feminine women and transwomen and everything in between. And I always felt I was a lesbian when I grew up, strongly identified with that culture. But you can’t be a lesbian without acknowledging the fragility and construction of gender. And then I started having [sexual] relationships with transmen, transwomen, and drag performers. And then I had to ask myself – how does being a lesbian fit into that? And I decided, you know, that maybe it didn’t. And then the genderqueer movement started to show up in academic journals and stuff and I thought, that’s it. That’s me. I’m genderqueer. And to me that’s not just my gender identity, that’s a queer sexuality, too. If gender is a performance, so is sex. And if having sex is a performance that incorporates gendered performances, then what is queerer than that? And so, if you’re following me still, um [pause] that’s why I identify as queer. Or as a queer. Or as a genderqueer. [Laughs]

Similar to Cassy’s narrative, queer became an identity that incorporated both academic discourses and acknowledged the fluidity of fantasies and relationships that Ella had across the gender and sexual spectrum. Since lesbian was a term that implied static, monosexual desires, they felt the term “lesbian” did not fully encapsulate their sexual or gender identity.

The final queer identifier in this study was Alice (45). Alice grew up in a more rural area than Cassy or Ella, several hours removed from the nearest city. When she was growing up she did not have a lot (“if any”) of LGBTQ role models. However, she expressed that from a really young age, she knew she was different. “I dated in high school, tried to be the popular and the outgoing girl. I was into trends, haha I remember I went through a Goth phase at one point in the 90s. But like now, looking back, I knew I was different than 99% of the kids I grew up with.” By the time she went to college in a major northeast city, Alice was ready to explore her sexuality
and the queer scene. Having had crushes on women as long as she could remember, she looked forward to having more freedom to date and “find my inner sexual self.” Alice would come to find her chosen family and community in the early roller derby scene. It was through roller derby that Alice began traveling and making larger LGBTQ connections and networks. Eventually, she was exposed to different types of sexual communities beyond LGBTQ.

When I asked her to talk about her desires, fantasies, and identities, Alice spent quite a bit of time discussing the “daddy” community and what it was like for her as a “high femme.”

I was always into fashion. Always. And then when I graduated and moved to a city and started being part of the roller derby team, I really stepped up my feminine presentation. Now, I realize I’ve always been a high femme. Even going to the grocery store, you’ll never catch me in sweatpants, no way. Always dressed to the nines, wearing [high] heels. Even if I’m cooking alone in my house I have my frilly apron on … Part of being a high femme in the queer community is my attraction to butch women, and nicely dressed nerds and baby dykes. There is nothing hotter than a thick glasses and a bow tie, haha! And then, eventually, I came to date a dyke who liked to be called daddy. And to be honest, ever since then daddy kink has become really important in my sexual relationships.

Daddy kink is a community built on role playing and fantasies surrounding domination/submission, and typically includes a masculine presenting person as the “daddy.” To be clear, this community does not revolve around pedophilia or the idea of incest. Instead, it is about exploring power and control within consensual adult sexual relationships.

Although in her personal life and career Alice was anything but submissive, in her sexual fantasies and acts, she much preferred to be the submissive partner. Submission had become central to her sexual satisfaction, to the point where Alice noted she would not be with a sexual partner who was not into or at least open to a “daddy kink-centric sexual relationship.” When I asked her to expand on her connection to daddy kink culture, she explained;
Every day at work I’m managing people and telling them what to do. And what I realized after my first daddy relationship, was that in the bedroom, I don’t want to be in control anymore. I like a daddy to take control, ask me to take more. With my current partner, I won’t cum until they tell me to and it’s the hottest thing for me. Giving up control, it just does it for me with a partner I trust … I don’t think I could settle for vanilla sex anymore [laughs].

Given the importance she placed on participating in daddy kink culture in her most recent sexual encounters, I asked her if she could place a greater importance on the sexual acts associated with daddy kink culture than the significance of identifying as a “queer lady.” In the end, while she sexually enjoyed daddy kink, it was more of a “community of practice, not so much an identity that I see myself as. So, it’s like what I enjoy, not who I am or see myself as if that makes sense?”

When I asked her to expand more on why she identified as queer instead of a “high femme” lesbian or otherwise, she said;

Honestly, I have had a lot of sex in my life. If someone asked me my number [of sexual partners], I would probably shrug at them. I always like a variety. But the one constant for me, whether I was dating transmen, non-binary individuals, or bull dykes, or stone butches, it was always female masculinity or masculine energy that I was attracted to, regardless. So, to me, in owning my sexual identity, it has to be queer because it’s the only thing to me that incorporates all of my desires and sexual acts and fantasies. It’s just queer. And I’m proud to be a queer high femme.

Again, with an early collegiate background somewhat similar to Cassy and Ella, although she did not go on to have a career in higher education or study sexuality/queer history specifically, it was a movement that she felt captured the totality of her “sexual being.”

In the sense that the three queer identified women in this study specifically noted their connection to the queer theoretical movement and the identity politics it encompassed, they have been categorized in this study as political identifiers. Their affiliation with queer movements and emphasis on sexual politics aligned their narratives more closely with the political identifiers in.
this study than fluid identified participants. What set the queer/genderqueer identified women apart from the other political identifiers was their attraction to or affiliation with genderqueer/gender fluid communities and histories of attraction to both men and women (including Trans identified individuals). The queer identifiers sought to incorporate their range of sexual intimacies into a broader queer identity, rather than reinforcing monosexuality and sexual binaries. For Cassy, Ella, and Alice, their political sexual identity of queer was an effort to destabilize, rather than reinforce, static sexual binaries that serve as the foundation for sexual marginalization. This important differentiation aside, the queer narratives had similar familial relations and experiences with religious institutions as the rest of the political identifiers as noted in the earlier subsection “Institutional Regulation & Interactions among Political Identifiers.”

SUMMARY: CONTINUING COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AMONG INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL IDENTIFIERS?

Now that we have explored the narratives of the political and institutional identifiers, the prevailing question driving this research remains. Are there signs in the personal sexual narratives of women in this sample to suggest the continuation of a compulsory heterosexual order? The answer to this is more complex than a simple yes or no. For instance, it could be possible that in some institutions and communities, sexuality may be more regulated by a compulsory heterosexual order based on fear and oppression. But it could also be true that in other realms, perhaps there is more freedom from the social backlash and regulation that a compulsory heterosexual society would require.

To find indications of a compulsory heterosexual order, you would expect narratives to conjure images of an incredibly repressive “closet” where being out could cost you everything,
such as your job, livelihood, family relations, and even risk being jailed. Fear of social backlash is also a tenet of a compulsory heterosexual order, where physical violence and the threat of it are enough to keep people and their relationships in the closet (Rich 1993). Again, a key tenet of compulsory heterosexuality is the coercive forces at play that reward people for adopting normative gender and sexual identities and punish those who do not (Butler 1997; Seidman 2009).

In looking at the sexual narratives collected over the course of this study between institutional and political identifiers, only a few evoked the specter of a compulsory heterosexual order. Two of these examples include Tiffany’s and Frances’ stories. For Tiffany, her culture was one of pervasive fear as a woman. Threats of violence and assault by the men she interacted with were constant, and to have a relationship of any kind outside of marriage was to put not only yourself at a physical risk, but also at risk of being disowned by your family. Tiffany’s mother had been forced into an unhappy arranged marriage by her parents, and even though that would have a negative lasting impact on her mother even after her parents’ divorce, her mother continued to hold Tiffany to the same strict, gendered social expectations that she was at her age.

Had Tiffany been gay, according to her own words, she would have had to move permanently to the U.S. in order to even think of having a same sex relationship. Even for just having been friendly to a boy at a friend’s party nearly led to being raped by him that same night, a fear that Tiffany carried with her on the eve of returning home should she encounter the same man again in her hometown. Having a same sex relationship, by her account, was an impossibility, with heterosexuality so tightly regulated there was not even a word for homosexuality, gays, or lesbians in her language.
In Frances’ youth, she had to find immense courage to file for a divorce during a time that divorce was widely seen as a “dirty word.” The nuclear, two parent family was in full force at this time in U.S. history. To be gay and divorced was almost unheard of, if only because so few people could be out of the closet without severe repercussions. In her case, Frances faced the worst of her fears when her ex-husband outed her during their divorce proceedings. Frances lost custody of her children and her family became estranged from her for a long time. In addition, she lost her job, home, and even had to live out of her car for a number of years. It would be a long, painful time before Frances re-gained custody of her children, and it took even longer still to repair the damage that had been wrought by her ex-husband. Had her ex-husband not done so, it is likely it would have been a long time before Frances publically identified as a lesbian knowing the severe backlash she would face from family and friends at that time.

Tiffany and Frances’ experiences are examples of what living in a compulsory heterosexuality order is like. Frances had nearly everything taken from her by the courts in the 1950s, and was at such a low in her life she had contemplated suicide. “If it wasn’t for the hope of getting my kids back, these poor kids who did nothing wrong, right? I still can’t [wrap my head around that], that they would have traumatized my kids like that. But again, if it wasn’t for them I don’t think I could have made it through that time of my life.” Tiffany did not even have to be gay to be fearful at home. Just being a single woman put her at risk for social ridicule, gossip, and unwanted sexual advances. To be caught in even a heterosexual relationship outside of marriage at home would have led to her being shunned by her family and friends at the very least, and put her at great risk of physical attack at worst for not adhering to normative sexual scripts.
When talking about her experience in the U.S. for the past four years, Tiffany noted throughout our three hour discussion that those pressures were absent during her time in the U.S. In fact, Tiffany was free to date for over a year before she met her current boyfriend. While she often had to have discussions with him regarding the cultural differences and boundaries she had, when they made the joint decision to start having a sexual relationship, she did not fear reprisal or keep the relationship secret in the U.S. On the other hand, for Frances today, she and her wife travel the world as an out couple. “I tell you, I’ve been just about everywhere. We love to travel, love to travel. And you know what? We don’t hide our relationship anywhere we go. Even places you think would have an issue, everyone has always been nice to us. So no, I don’t hide anymore. I’m not afraid anymore. Those days are behind me now.” Although during her marriage, a compulsory heterosexual order was in full effect, at this point in her life, Frances gets to celebrate having pansexual, gay, and Trans identified family members and support them in a way that was “unthinkable” in her youth.

Also worth noting here is the complexity of the narratives of the non-fluid accounts of institutional and political identifiers. While again there seemed to be an absence of severe social and legal coercion to adopt to normative heterosexual expectations, there were some patterns in their stories that harkened to a compulsory heterosexual order. The first and most salient theme when speaking with these women was the socially constructed complementarity of masculinity and femininity, as well as discussions of the role biology plays in their sexual attractions. Amy, Jamie, and Jill had similar thoughts regarding what was sexy in men. All were attracted to “traditional” tenets of masculinity; strength, dominance, decision making, and being the head of household (or “breadwinner”).
As far as biological underpinnings of sexual desires, Brenda concluded her thoughts on sexual identity by saying she was fairly certain her attractions for women were something she was born with. She could not recall a time when she did not feel drawn to women, leading her to conclude that there was a biological basis for her sexual identity. Biological understandings of heterosexuality were mirrored in Amy, Jamie, and Jill’s narratives as well. While there may be lessened coercion to conform to sexual binaries to varying degrees, there was certainly indications that gender binaries continue to uphold normative heterosexuality, and may represent some degree of continuing compulsory regulation of heterosexuality.

In conclusion, although the political and institutional identifiers still somewhat adhered to binary sexual and gender identities (with the exception of the queer identified women discussed prior) few of the current accounts had signs of a fully compulsory heterosexual order. Although Shirley and some of the other lesbian identified women expressed having more distant relationships with family members immediately after coming out, none were kicked out of their homes, had economic support withdrawn, or faced physical violence or legal action from coming out (from friends, peers, or the police). While coming out was by no means easy for many of the women I spoke to, the repercussions were often short lived and would eventually be overcome. No one lost their best friends when coming out or were socially ostracized as would be expected in a compulsory heterosexual order for not adhering to binary sexual or gender expectations.

That said, sexual regulation could still be found in certain institutions, such as religion and the work place. The most common place for the lesbian/queer identified women to hold back their sexuality was at work. Some women felt that it was not safe to be out at work, and could potentially impact their employment or ability to be promoted in the future. Others, due to their geographic location, did not want their neighbors to know or judge them. For the women who
reported having fluid sexual experiences with women but steadfastly adhered to a heterosexual identity, religious beliefs were often cited as a reason for abandoning or negating their same sex attractions and fantasies. Many, although certainly not all, religious institutions continue to equate good sexual citizenry with heterosexuality and procreation.

Yet, even the straight identified women in this study had more room to stray from normative heterosexuality during their lifetime (even if they conformed to normative gender binaries), in ways that it was almost impossible for women to do so before the 1970s. In their accounts of their sexuality in the late 90s and 2000s, many of the women were able to have sexual intimacies with other women to varying degrees. They were able to do this without the fear of being arrested, of having their families never speak to them again, or have to hide their relationship in public. Colleges and bar scenes continue to provide spaces for varying levels of same sex exploration with minimal judgement or lasting impacts (as long as it is perceived to be a performance for the males in attendance). Although there are indications in these narratives that gender and sexual binaries continue to be perpetuated throughout institutions (necessitating a coming out process to correct normative heterosexual expectations), individuals may be experiencing less backlash and pressure on a personal level to conform to them throughout their lives. This would lend itself more to the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality rather than compulsory heterosexuality (Seidman 2009).

To further explore whether we are living in a society regulated by institutionalized normative heterosexuality (rather than a compulsory heterosexual order), the next chapter will center on the narrative accounts of women who live their lives outside of, or in between, sexual and gender binaries. In this section, we will review the similarities between participants that fell into the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivity categories. Key to understanding their
significance in this study is that the gender or sex of their partners was not a prominent part of their understanding of identity or enjoyment in sexual intimacies. While the political and institutional identifiers in this chapter (with the exception of the queer participants) inadvertently reinforced sexual binaries, the accounts in Chapter 6 largely transcend these constructs. Chapter 6 will start by exploring the narrative trends in the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities categories. Next, the chapter will survey the institutional interactions and spaces for fluidity that emerged in the interviews with the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities histories. Then, Chapter 6 will end with a summation of themes among the non-binary sexual identifiers.
CHAPTER 6: ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES

*I think words for the most part are made up, like Valentine’s Day is a made up holiday. We make words to pacify and categorize people.* ~Monica, 46 years old

In Chapter 5, we reviewed the narratives of the women who chose fixed sexual identities (political and institutional identifiers) with the goal of understanding how their sexual experiences and fluid encounters interconnected with their conceptualization of sexual identity. Next, this research will shift its focus to shedding light on the women who did not adhere to binary sexual categories or don static sexual labels. For these participants, identities and sexual typologies held little importance in interpreting their sexual identities. Instead, these women felt that particular sexual acts, communities of practice, freedom of choice, and/or the rejection of monosexuality and monogamy were of utmost importance when defining their sexuality.

What follows is an overview of the twenty-one identity irrelevant (nine women) and sexual proclivity (twelve women) categorized narratives to explore their differing interpretations of sexual identities amid sexually fluid experiences, participation in “kink” communities, polyamorous relations, and participant reported fantasies and desires. The first subsection will address the women for whom sexual identities transcended binary conceptualizations. The second subsection will explore the sexual acts that superseded the importance of the sex or gender of sexual partners. What mattered most to these women’s sexualities, if not the sex/gender of their sexual partners, and how did their accounts differ from the interviews examined in Chapter 5?

The second major section in this chapter will review the institutional interactions of the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivity narratives. What roles did institutions have in
impacting their understanding or experience of their sexuality? Were there instances of institutional regulation where they felt they could not express their sexuality or desires? In what ways did institutions serve to limit their fluidity, and what spaces embraced their sexualities? Did they navigate these institutions differently from the institutional and political identifiers?

The final chapter segment will summarize the similarities in experiences between the groups and review the findings that were distinct for these two categories (identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities). We will also explore some of the potential institutional factors that may have impacted the individual experiences of sexuality among the groups discussed.

**DESIRE BEYOND BINARIES AND SEXUALITY CENTERED IN PLEASURE**

*Non-Sexed, All Sexed, and Fluid Attractions for the Identity Irrelevant*

Early on in my discussions with the women for whom sexual identity labels held little relevance, what struck me was that each of the women in this subsection identified themselves in uniquely different ways from one another. The only common thread that joined their nine histories was that they all understood their sexualities to be neither heterosexual nor homosexual. In addition to rejecting the principles of monosexual attraction, many of these women also rebuffed the heteronormative ideal of monogamy. For example, take Ashley (36), who stated during her interview, “Well, um, I didn’t always identify as pansexual or polyamorous. Prior to moving [across the country] ten years ago now for [work], I guess I was just your ‘average straight girl’ to the world. But today, I enjoy different, uh, types of intimate relationships with many different people. Gay, straight, Trans, and everything in between, really.” Another two women in this category identified as fluid and had relations with men, women, and trans/genderqueer individuals. Two others I spoke with identified as queer and “former lesbian,
now queer". One woman even stated at the start of the interview that, “Well, I guess people see me and say I’m straight. But, I mean, yea, that’s not really me, no. I guess no one ever really asks me, they just, um, well they kind of assume.”

By the end of the data collection stage, it was clear that sexual identity meant more than binary labels, monogamy, or monosexuality could capture for this group of nine women. While at different points in their lives they found it necessary to choose a label, at the time of their interviews, they all conveyed feeling that sexual categories held no personal importance for them. Other personality traits (such as humor, kindness, confidence) and non-gender or sex specific attractions were found to be more important to their sexual satisfaction and sense of sexual selfhood. Additionally, polyamory, group sex, and non-monogamy were also highlighted as being of greater import to the identity irrelevance narratives. What follows are excerpts from their stories that they were generous enough to share in exchange for a cup of coffee/tea.

When I spoke with Jasmine, she had just turned 30 the week before, and was finding herself to be “more introspective than usual.” She spent a lot of time talking about her current partner, who she had been romantically involved with for over four years. “Yea, so we met, um, four, uh, four and a half years ago I guess. I had sought out a, a spiritual community because I was feeling like I wanted something greater than myself, um. I was raised Jewish, that turned into nothing, and um I was working at a religious hospital but the denomination didn’t draw me and I felt like I wanted something, something else, and something that was missing.” It was there she met her long term, most recent boyfriend, but it was not a “love at first sight situation like you read in the romance novels.” Initially, they struck a friendship while playing music together in the local non-denominational church. After a period of time, he came to develop romantic and sexual feelings for her which she had long felt herself.
It was the first “mature” relationship Jasmine had where, “I feel like with him, this is the first relationship I’ve had where if we are not together I know I’ll be OK. Relationships I’ve had in the past I thought ‘if we don’t stay together I’m going to be ruined, I’m going to be a mess’… I feel more myself more than I ever have before. I don’t feel like part of a unit. I feel more independent.” At first, she described being insecure with her boyfriend and struggling with jealousy. Over time, she built a trusting relationship with him where she “shared more with him than anyone else I’ve ever known!”

As their relationship unfolded after the first year or two, Jasmine learned of her boyfriend’s struggles with sex and substance addiction. They also had their first discussion about polyamory and non-monogamy.

When he first brought up non-monogamy as something he was interested in … I didn’t know what that’d look like for me. It was both something that was hard for me to think about, I immediately got jealous, but also after I thought about it more, and it was something that was fun to think about. But I didn’t know at that time if it was something I’d really be able to do in practice.

It would be another year before Jasmine and her boyfriend would start discussing what having a non-monogamous relationship would look like for the two of them; “um so we started out as being monogamous but it was not because we [were] forever and ever committed to that. Um we really started on the path [of polyamory] experimenting with telling each other when we found other people attractive. Um, and when we find someone else attractive, it was really fun to me. And that’s when it became more real to me.” She expanded, “… and the more I thought about it [polyamory], like my sexuality is my sexuality, and his sexuality is his sexuality, like, I’m not only going to be attracted to him, um he won’t always just be attracted to me. So that’s something that we kind of talked about, and spent time figuring out ‘what does that look like’ for us.”
The first time they brought a third person in to their intimacies was a few months shy of four years together. “I was um, I was out with a friend and was kind of buzzed and was finding her very attractive. And like, felt like, um I wanted to kiss her [laughs]. You know, that’s not something I would have acted on three, four years ago, but I brought it up [to my partner] and was like if this is something I entertained how would it make you feel? And um my partner was ready. And, um, it turned out so was she.” To date, Jasmine and her partner had not incorporated a regular additional partner into their sexual intimacies, but had several threesomes with different partners at the time we spoke. Their “adventures in polyamory” were only kept on a sexual, physical level (Jasmine noted “the emotional stuff, um the emotional connections, I’m still not sure how I feel sharing that with another”). However, they continued looking to incorporate more sexual partners into their sexual relations. “I’ve been talking to him a lot, um, lately, about inviting a man [to have sex]. I’m really excited about it. My partner is in to it and all, but I told him I’d let him decide when [he was ready].”

While I was ready to circle back to discuss her take on sexual identities, Jasmine stopped me and asked if she could talk about another important facet of her sexual relationship with her boyfriend of over four years. “It started out on accident, really. I was just messing around, joking, pretending to mimic a character in a movie we had just seen. But then he was all in to it, and he came up behind me and … and since then we probably role play at least once a week.” Costumes, props, and spur of the moment story lines “keep things lively … it’s the most active sex life I’ve ever had [haha]!” What intrigued Jasmine the most about role play was, “that we can be anybody. And I hate stress. And I’m so stressed in the [medical field], there is always something that stresses me out. But when we start [role playing] it all goes away. We can create
our own [story lines] … and there’s something so intimate about that to me. Something only we will have together, something that no one else could recreate.”

At the very beginning of Jasmine’s interview when I asked her how she identified, she noticeably paused before she said she was “well I guess people see me as straight.” After she shared her relationship history with me in greater detail (we talked for over four hours that day), I circled back and asked her again, in light of her evolving relationship, role play intimacies, and threesomes, what was most important to her sexual sense of self. She replied, “I think the element of fantasy, even if I’m not specifically acting out a role or a part, can totally make [our sex lives] richer. And, um, you know inviting people to explore our [physical intimacy] has also brought a lot to our relationship.”

I reworded the question on identity and asked her to think about it from a personal standpoint, outside of her relationships or how people saw her; what was truly important to her sexual identity? Was it important to her to be a heterosexual, homosexual, or otherwise? What did identity mean to her?

I guess like [heterosexual] it’s just how people see me when I’m with my boyfriend … Um, I’m huge on, I, um, you know [pause] even though I was raised in a pretty conservative family um logistically and politically, um I’ve always been really big on individual definitions, individual rights, I want people to be able to do what they want to do [since I could not growing up]. I want to know how people like to be addressed. It’s very important to me to use people’s pronouns correctly, that, that’s stuff is really important to me. And when I think of being gay or bisexual now that I’ve enjoyed sex with women, I just get such bad feelings … the things my parents used to say, telling people they would burn [in the afterlife]. So, no, Nicole, [labels] are not that important to me. They frighten me, to be honest.

What was central, then, to Jasmine’s sexual selfhood? “I mean I guess you know [sighs] if you are checking boxes, [laughs], I may be, you know, mostly monogamous emotionally but sexually attracted to men and women, a cisgender female, in a polyamorous explorative relationship. But
… Um, I feel like, like I want to be open to the options now that there’s other things out there if that’s how I um, if that’s how I transform, you know? Cause, um, I don’t know if I’m always going to be where I am, um. So yea. Maybe I’m open? Yea, I’m open. Open ended, open to new things. Open to men and women sexually, maybe one day emotionally. And that is what is important to my identity [right now]. Openness.”

Beth (40) likewise explored sexual polyamory with her ex-husband, sometimes to her enjoyment and sometimes not. Growing up in a small town in a very rural area, Beth became a mom at an early age, before she graduated high school. “Blessed” with a supportive family, Beth has no regrets and thoroughly conveyed the joys she’s experienced raising her daughter. She noted, “I never felt like a teen mom, you know, I ended up having just the most wonderful experiences being the mom to this kid.” Marrying the “baby daddy” and trying to make the relationship work for five or six years through multiple infidelities and constant instability, however, was extremely challenging for her emotionally. After her daughter was born, “I was still working, I was going through … like my marriage was, uh, a hot mess and a half, um, you know he was, he was a really bad cheater, he was very emotionally and mentally abusive, you know it wasn’t just cheating …” While her family was still supportive during this time, the relationship took a great emotional toll on Beth.

It was during the early stages of breaking up with her husband that she first experienced a threesome (first with a woman, and then with a man). “During the time when I was breaking up with my ex and he was seeing other women, he convinced me, and I enjoyed it, but … he kind of convinced me and another girl we could live in a polyamorous situation. And it was not an enjoyable situation … I mean I enjoyed the sex with her … frankly I liked her more than I liked him. She was nice! But … the drama with him was over the top. It wasn’t healthy for anyone …”
Shortly after the explorations in polyamory and multiple sexual partners entered their relationship, a “total emotional meltdown” on the part of her husband at an otherwise enjoyable New Year’s Eve party was the last straw for Beth.

It would be a long time before Beth started dating again; “So when my daughter was five, my relationship with her father officially ended. And I really, really highly, really realized that I was not in any way emotionally or intellectually smart enough to be in a relationship. [Sighs] I knew I didn’t want another relationship like him, but I also, I really, really liked being a mom. And I really liked having time to devote to her.” Part of focusing on herself meant working towards her degree and career goals, where she would go on to work in non-profit advocacy;

Um and so it, that worked out and I, it was you know my daughter was 8 or 9 and I started at a larger community college full time. And the whole time, I would flirt with people here and there, but I really just, I just was figuring out who I was. I enjoyed being there for my daughter all the time, I had plenty of friendships, I didn’t lack for social interactions, when I was, I was part for many years of a big Pagan community and we did family events and Sabbaths and you know holidays, and you know I had a very rich and diverse group of friends … And so I graduated with my bachelor’s degree, and I applied to an opening at a local non-profit … It was everything I wanted it to be …

Once she felt “settled, settled with myself and at peace with, um, with myself” Beth was ready to get back in the dating scene.

She started with dating apps, but did not have much luck finding someone who was looking for a serious, committed relationship at the beginning.

Yea, so I um started on the free one just under the girl seeking guy because none of these sites allowed you to do both. There was no bisexual or pansexual section. It was this and you were looking for that and that’s that. There was a saying at that time ‘women are just one dick pic away from dating girls.’ And I laughed really hard because that’s what it was for me. I was looking for guys and getting the most disgusting propositions. Like beyond, there were one or two guys who chatted nicely but it was very, very friendly and very, I just did not want to date them in any way. And then the other people who started off with a decent chat very quickly wanted to have sex with my “fat flaps” with multiple people, or wanted to feed me or just, just disgusting shit [laughs].
Although the experience of online dating was not initially rewarding for Beth, one day, “I was like you know I’m not, I don’t find myself particularly attracted to gender. I very much, when you have sex with people it’s a very small part of your relationship. But the rest of your relationship you have to get a long and be able to problem solve together and be able to have discussions about finances and what you’re going to do for dinner. And none of these things you do with your genitalia. You do those things with what’s in here [points to head]. So I just kind of said OK guys are disgusting, might as well see if girls are less disgusting. So on a whim I changed my profile and what I was looking for.”

Eventually, Beth would go on to meet her current wife on a dating app after having dated a few other women before coming across her profile. A first date and years later, after a “gradual progression” that was “well discussed, we really thought it out for how we could merge her life with mine and my daughter’s life,” they were now looking forward to moving out of state, ready to embark on a new part of their journey together. “This is what I’ve always wanted, just to have a partner and a family. You know? It’s not that I, you know, life is not bells and whistles. Anyone who thinks that, you love the good romantic comedies but that’s not what life is.”

Sexuality and sensuality, for Beth, was a long journey. First, a journey to come to terms with her personal insecurities. Then, an expedition to escape an extremely (in her words) unhealthy and abusive marriage. At this time in her life, Beth said she was “more at peace” than she had ever been, with herself, with her family, and with her Pagan spirituality.

So, given her history, how did Beth come to identify and see herself sexually today?

If I were given a form I had to check a box and bisexual was there to check, I would probably check bisexual. But then I heard another [term] where it, it was that you’re attracted to the brain of the person, their personality, and I forget what the term was
they’d coined where you really don’t care at all about their physical person. It’s more, it was something like, oh god I can’t remember what it was. But I thought that’s a better definition than bisexual …. Eventually, sex goes away in long term relationships, it’s such a small piece. What do you get along about, what do you talk about, what values do you share … that other term, I wish I could think of it, would be the better term for myself. Because I could walk into a whole room of people and be attracted to something about most of them, if I was blindfolded, I’d probably pick out any range of people who had god knows what in their pants. I think I’d be all over the spectrum … [Sexual identities are] really classifications for other people that, those, those terms are so that other people can understand you, but my feeling is that it really shouldn’t matter or mean anything to anybody else. Because you’re not in my relationship, whether I’m gay or straight, even extending the labels to religions and things like that, unless you’re in the relationship with me those things it shouldn’t matter to you. It shouldn’t be a way for you to qualify me, you should get to know me.

In the end, although she would choose bisexual if she had to pick a pre-established category on a form with no other alternative, fluidity, freedom of choice, and non-genitalia specific traits like personality and compatibility (and emotional maturity) in a partnership were most important to Beth. The concept of an identity based on the gender or sex of her partners held virtually no importance for Beth and the other identity irrelevant identifiers.

Not all of the participants assigned to the identity irrelevance category were actively polyamorous or open to polyamory in general, and there were a wide range of sexual experiences, fantasies, and stories among them, which the next four narratives illustrate. Mary (30), who we introduced earlier in Chapter 4, Anna (52), Ashley (36), and Charlotte (19) did speak about their “alternative relationships” (as defined by Charlotte herself) that included threesomes, group sex, and polyamorous situations at different times in their lives with men, women, transmen, and genderqueer individuals. Yet others, like Laurie, who was forty years of age when I got the chance to speak with her, did not report having many sexual relations at all. In fact, Laurie almost cancelled our interview at the last minute due to her lack of sexual experience;
Actually I was wondering about doing this because I don’t have a lot of relationship or sexual experience. My last technical relationship was over a decade ago. So like, I don’t, um, I don’t know if I’m going to have any information that you’re [looking for]. To put this out there … in case you want to end the interview, um … I really do not have much in the way of intimacy [to talk about] anymore. I have not like given up or anything, I’m just … at this point I’m not interested in dating and haven’t been in a long time. Like, I never got that into dating even when I was [younger], and like, when um, when I did I had horrible judgement like you wouldn’t believe… I have kissed women before too like not just men. So it’s not like I’m in the closet or something and that’s why I don’t [date] … and it’s not that I do not enjoy it, but whether it’s been with women or men, I just do not get as much from the physicality of relationships like [my friends] do.

Although she was not actively dating or having sexual partners at the time of our interview, Laurie’s narrative was not devoid of sexual enjoyment or fulfillment. As such, we both decided to continue the discussion.

When talking about her sexual gratification outside of having physical relations with men or women, she spent a lot of time outlining her use of pornography to achieve climax “at least once a day, sometimes multiple times in one day when I have a slow weekend at home by myself.” She went on to say;

I really, um, I guess I [pause] … sorry, um, and I hope this answers your question. And it’s super difficult for me to talk about this because I’m like a crazy private person, if you can believe that. But I saw the flier and … something in me said to talk to you … Um, but so getting back to your question. Um, I don’t know and this could be crazy [sounding]… I can only get off masturbating if I fantasize about like non-realistic situations, like role playing kind of stuff. Like really outlandish sexual situations that I know in my head are beyond the realm of possibility …. And then I can get off with um, with like toys or just manually [with her fingers], and really quick sometimes if the story line is good. If it is not something that is like is too real [to me], otherwise I lose interest and can't [climax].

When I asked her to expand on the types of pornography that aroused her, since she reported “not getting anything” from physical relationships, she noted that she watched a lot of animated pornography or pornography involving “historical” situations. After further discussion, Laurie
shared that, in the absence of a sexual partner, being able to read pornographic stories or watch pornography with “like otherworldly fantasy storylines, or like role playing story lines about olden times or the future, or even space” was what was most important to her sexual satisfaction. Her favorite sexual act was clitoral stimulation, although she noted, “I think I recently found my G spot, that was a game changer and something, um, about my body I’m still like working to figure out and stuff.”

The topic of asexuality came up a few times in our discussion. To an extent, Laurie does wonder if maybe she is asexual, and she was not sure that she would ever want to have sex with another person of any “gender, sex, or persuasion” again. “For me, I mean, I still desire people, still find people like hot or whatever. I can get aroused by people I see, too. So I don’t like hate sex or anything like that at all. So I just feel that identifying myself that way [as asexual] is not really fitting. I still have um, urges to be sexual. So I’ve settled on watching like super unrealistic [pornographic] situations alone just because that is what I enjoy the most and makes me feel comfortable.”

The main factor for Laurie not identifying as asexual is that she felt herself to be extremely sexual, but it was something that she was not able to enjoy with another person. She did note her two sexual encounters (one in college and once a few years after graduating, first with a man and then with a woman) were not negative experiences for her, but served to solidify that she would prefer to only be physical with herself. “At first I thought well maybe I just didn’t like having sex with [a man] that … and that was why I wasn’t in to it. So I thought OK, and I’d talked about it with my friends over the years, two close friends of mine are gay. And I was like OK I’m gay I’m just not in to men physically. And that’s when I had sex with a woman I met [at a gay club].”
This topic progressed into a broader discussion of sexuality and identity with Laurie. She explained:

I don't think anyone is 100% straight, I learned about Kinsey in college and his research really stuck out to me. I believe in the Kinsey scale. I wish they had a scale for people like me ... maybe it's because I'm educated on it a little, or maybe it's because I'm not that interested in physical relations with people, but sexual identity doesn't mean anything to me. Like when I was younger, I can remember being afraid I was gay, but now I know better. I don't think there is a physical reality behind sexual identities ... I guess for me they're just the easiest terms that people to use to define somebody’s sexuality. I don’t think it says a lot about a person that they are either or I just think they are terms people use to quickly come up with someone like they do with a lot of other terms that happens ... So I think it’s more for like society’s need to label people and that kind of stuff. So it doesn’t have a whole lot of meaning for me, especially now.

With all that said, and given her fantasies and enjoyment of watching “straight, gay, and anything in between” pornography, Laurie personally saw herself as “fluid.” “And like who knows, maybe one day I will start having intimate relationships and date again and enjoy being [physical] with someone, a man, a woman, or maybe someone who sees themselves as neither. I’m fluid, really, just not interested in it [sex] with other people right now … and to me, what all this means, is I’m fluid.”

Despite not having a long dating or sexual history, Laurie was graphic in expressing her desires and relaying the types of pornography that she enjoyed the most. Without feeling tethered to understanding her sexual identity in relation to the physical bodies of sexual partners, and being aroused predominately by fantasy driven pornography, Laurie did not feel the need to adhere to binary sexual identities. Sex for her was about freedom of arousal, and to a degree, freedom from physical realism. As such, this potentially allowed Laurie to understand her sexuality as being completely outside of socio-cultural definitions of sexuality. Laurie further rejected the label of asexual, as she was candid in talking about the types of images and fantasies
that aroused her on a regular basis. For her, sensuality was tied to learning her own body and self-pleasures.

In juxtaposition to Laurie’s narrative, Margaret (74) spoke in depth about her sexual intimacies over the years. She warned me from the outset that she thought our interview would run long; “I’m old now, but I have lots of stories, and I’m a very sexual person, so we’ll have lots to talk about!” She was kind enough to speak with me well over three hours, relaying how sex and sexuality had changed for her over time. Margaret reached out after hearing about the study over a weekly game night with her friends in the suburban, affluent retirement community she was living in. A friend had seen the flyer in a local, upscale coffee shop. “And I thought, well, if someone wants to know, why not? It’s not like I had any particular place to be today, and I thought if my life can help someone else, why not share? I have no shame [about my life]!”

Margaret grew up in a working class neighborhood in a major city in the northeast U.S. “It was tough, we did not have much. I look at my grandkids today, I am up to seven grandkids if you can believe it. They have everything. It just wasn’t like that for my family. It was all we could do not to get evicted. How to pay the rent was an argument every month for my parents.” Struggles with money made things contentious for Margaret’s family; “It was not a fun place to be. Honesty, I was looking for any way I could to get out of there.” Her first sexual encounter, in her words, “wasn’t romantic in the slightest.” Barely in high school, she fell in “puppy love, in hindsight … I never really knew or saw what love was growing up” with a significantly older guy who hung out with her brother. “He would look at me and smile, you know? And I thought he was handsome then.”

She ended up losing her virginity at sixteen in the back of her brother’s car, parked in an alley, with his friend who he had let borrow his car. “We had known each other for so long, and I
didn’t know what I was doing. My mom certainly never gave me ‘the talk.’ So we’d been kissing and had become secretly [romantic]. Well, it wasn’t great for me, but I would have done anything for him in those days, I thought I was in love … and sure enough, I got pregnant. Back then, I thought I was lucky when he offered to marry me. I thought finally, I can get out of here.” Margaret ended up dropping out of high school and moving to a rural county with her husband, where they would go on to have three more children.

I asked Margaret if she enjoyed her first marriage sexually, and how she felt raising a family at such a young age. “Hah, you know, I don’t think I was a good mom in the beginning. I don’t think I took the best traits of either of them [her parents]. And I said it [earlier] I didn’t know what I was doing … and my first husband, he passed away years ago now, but he was an ass. But I didn’t know any different. He was my first. I didn’t know what was out there at that time.” The physicality waned between Margaret and her husband. By the time she had her fourth child, “[my husband] was barely around. Traveling for work he said. I knew he was seeing other women. He worked [a government job], he wasn’t exactly a shrewd business man. Where the hell would they send him?”

Margaret again found herself trapped. “I was so unhappy, but I tried to keep it together for my kids. I loved them, I didn’t want them to grow up like I did, parents arguing, struggling to get food on the table. And I thought, I just have to get them grown, get them graduated, and then I can focus on myself.” Once her youngest was in high school and two of her four kids had moved out, Margaret was ready to finish her GED. After obtaining her high school equivalency, Margaret started taking classes at the local community college.

My daughter, you know, she’s special. She said ma you have to take classes. Put yourself out there. I was still young. I could still have a career. And I had this, I wanted to be independent. I was done relying on other people. First my parents, then my loser
husband. His charm wore off after the first year. Then he showed his true colors to me. Every, everything was a fight. I didn’t want to be trapped anymore. The yelling, the insults. I didn’t have my kids to use as an excuse after they all moved out. I had to take care of myself. So I went to community college.

She expanded on the state of her marriage and the resentment she had for her first husband, both because she felt he “practically abandoned me with four kids” and because of his infidelity. It was then that I asked Margaret if she had ever had sexual encounters outside of her marriage. “Well, in community college I discovered a few things. I learned it was never too late to learn. I learned what my clitoris and an orgasm was. And I learned that I actually really, really enjoyed sex, haha!”

Having given up on her marriage, Margaret embarked on a yearlong affair with a professor she met while at community college. “He was sexy. Lord he was sexy. And he was very professional, in dress and how he spoke … and smart. I used to stay late [after class] asking him questions just to hear him talk back then.” I asked Margaret if she enjoyed sex with the man who she came to call “the professor”;

He was sweet. He was really sweet to me, so gentle. He made me feel like I was all that mattered. And his body … I was so attracted to him … and I was so embarrassed [our first time] I remember being very wet and thinking something was wrong with me down there. And he had to explain that was normal for a woman [to be lubricated]! And I learned a lot from him. Not just the sex. But it was the first time I ever [climaxed], you know? The first time! I’d had four kids, and I had never [climaxed] … and that’s when I started to want to put myself out there more. It was a chore for me, it had always been a chore [having sex]. And then I find out in my 40s that I love sex!

With her newfound enjoyment of sex, and the confidence that came with attaining a degree, Margaret had the courage to finally divorce from her first husband.

With a new job, Margaret was able to be financially independent, and it was the change that enabled her to “truly begin” exploring sex and sensuality.
All of my kids had moved on to their own lives, I had all this free time outside of work. I was all about dating. I moved back to the city, I wanted to meet as many people as I could. I hadn’t ever gotten to date around before. Imagine that, in your 40s and never having had a dating life? It was new, it was exciting. And it was a better time to date than when I was in high school. I didn’t have any shame anymore, no one at home putting me down. I could enjoy myself!

Before we moved on in our discussion, I asked Margaret if she could talk more about what she enjoyed the most while exploring her sexuality post-divorce. “Um, it was about freedom. I got to make the decisions, decide who I wanted to have sex with. I just felt in control … I remember the first time someone went down on me. I wouldn’t let my [first] husband anywhere near there. But there was this one guy, and I am sorry but I cannot recall his name. He told me it was his favorite thing to do … well he promised I would like it, so I let him … and what can I say, I really, really liked it!” From then on, it became a “requirement” for Margaret in her future sexual relations.

Today, Margaret noted that in between going on dates (her second husband had passed suddenly in her mid-60s), she was very comfortable with her body and enjoyed using various types of sex toys (vibrators and “rabbits” were among the list). “It’s funny, when you are growing up you just assume sex dies at a certain age. Well now they have a thing called Viagra, and my doctor even put me on [medicine] to help me stay [lubricated] in my late 50s. I do date, a lot, and yes that means sex too… but I don’t want to get married again. I want to have fun, enjoy my friends and spend time with my family. And I’ve met all kinds of people. I’ve dated all kinds!” When I asked if she could talk more about the differences dating and having sex now versus when she was younger, she noted; “Well, I guess, I guess, the thing for me is there is no pressure. None of us look like we used to. It’s more, I think, more real. I can go up to men at one of our local functions and say ‘want to swing by later’ and after we’ll just have sex. So, more
direct, I think … and now I know what I want more than when I first started having sex. Then it was all about him [her first husband], making him happy. Now, it’s all about me. What I want … and I like that.”

Towards the half way mark of the interview, we had yet to touch on Margaret’s fantasies, desires, or thoughts on sexual identity. When I asked about what turns her on or what she thinks about during sex, she said; “Hah, well my first husband, I used to stare at the clock and wonder if it’d be over soon, haha!” Then, to my surprise, Margaret spent a bit of time talking about her desire for female bodies. “Oh, I mean, I think of all sorts [of things] when I touch myself and during sex. Sometimes I’m just so into my partner, I think about them [climaxing] and that really turns me on. Other times, I think about scenes from a movie [pornographic] or something I watched online.”

I politely interrupted Margaret and asked her if she felt comfortable talking about the types of pornography she enjoyed the most. “These days, I watch a lot of lesbian pornography. I am very, very attracted to the female form. I always was. Before I got pregnant [in high school], there was one girl that I kissed at a party once. Well, after that, we kissed any time I could get her alone until I left school. She had a boyfriend too, he was friends with my ex-husband. She had the most perfect boobs I have ever seen, to this day. Frankly, I was jealous!”

Having talked about her attraction to the female body, I asked Margaret if she had ever gone “all the way” with another woman, to which she laughed, heartily. “Hah, [you] didn’t see that coming did you? [Laughs] I suppose that depends on the definition. I’ve touched women’s boobs, I have kissed women wherever, whenever, I got the chance … I think the only reason I agreed to have group sex when I was single [in her 40s] was so that I could touch the women …”
After she spoke more about the encounter, and how she climaxed the moment she was able to touch the woman’s “nether regions”, I asked her if she had ever considered dating women. “She wasn’t the only woman I touched, I’ve had close friends over the years, even when I was married the second time, my husband knew … he wasn’t threatened. He knew, well, we talked about how I found women attractive. That’s when I first watched lesbian pornography, when I was with him … but, dating? I was married, the women I kissed were dating or married. Maybe I’m from a different era, I’m not, and I’m not ashamed or anything… I have gay grandkids and I’m very supportive and proud … I’ve even gone to Pride with them [in the nearby city]. I just never had the right situation [to date a woman romantically], I guess.” I asked Margaret if she thought she would ever date a woman, “Oh, well, now I’ve thought about that. And I think I would be happy … I expect I’d have a lot [to learn] if I dated a woman. And I think, but I think I could, yes.”

This brought us to an interesting discussion on what sexual identity meant to Margaret.

When I was just … a kid, I thought it [sex] was what I had to do for a guy I liked or loved. I didn’t know what I was doing, just that I was supposed to. So I did, and I ended up pregnant, married, miserable … I felt like I didn’t have a choice in anything once I got pregnant. I felt, I don’t know, locked in somehow. So identity … I mean I was married with kids, so I was normal, right? I was just straight. No one asked. No one questioned … I can’t remember anyone asking me if I was anything but straight. Even in [group sex situations], it was just kind of assumed I’d be more into the guy … but I never said it [that she was straight]. I think it’s just what people saw … And now? … I like it when people touch my clit. And I liked being penetrated. Anyone can do that … you don’t have to be with a man to enjoy those things. For me … I guess, and I am struggling … it doesn’t matter to me, has never mattered to me. Can I just say I’m, say I’m sexual? It [sex] changes, what I liked in my 20s to what I like now … you modify things as you get older. And I know what I want in the bedroom. So I communicate, it’s direct … I’m very clear in what I want with them [her sexual partners]. I wasn’t like that when I was young …

Sexual identity, to Margaret, did not mean much at this time in her life. She was a sexual person who enjoyed a myriad of sexual encounters, acts, and fantasies, none of which were necessarily
gender/sex specific. When she was younger, being a mother dominated her identity. But as she got older, being open about her desires, her sexual attractions to men and women, were what she enjoyed in her adulthood. Even monogamy held little reward or purpose in her retirement; “Hah, and dating is different. None of us just dates one person … no one is looking for someone to settle down with. We want to enjoy our time … why would I get married now? I can date, have friends, have companionship, have sex … have my privacy, have time to spoil my grandkids. I can finally do what I want … and that’s what I do now.”

Margaret’s journey was unique to the other women in the identity irrelevance category. Although she had desires for men and women, it was not until later in life that was able to fully enjoy fluid sexual encounters. At the outset of her sexual history, sex was an obligation. Her focus quickly shifted to that of being a mom at a very young age and taking care of her four kids. It was not until she was “freed” from her first marriage that she was able to enjoy sex for the sake of pleasure. From that point on, Margaret’s sex life blossomed to where she was comfortable with herself and could explore her innermost desires. The pleasure in her sexual encounters was not tied to one sex/gender. At this point in her life, Margaret valued enjoying sex over relationships, and was open to encounters with anyone she found attractive.

In sum, several themes set the narratives of the identity irrelevant category apart from the other groups in this study. First, there was either a lack of attraction to gender/sex, or an attraction to all genders/sexes. Many women spoke at length about a particular sexual act they enjoyed that was not tied to any type of sexed/gendered body. Secondly, many in this categorization expressed having non-monogamous, or sex/relationships with more than one partner, whether it was in the accounts of group sex or polyamorous relationships or threesomes.
Their sexual enjoyment, like Mary and Anna, was heightened when they were able to experience intimacies with more than one person. Thirdly, the understanding of their sexual identities/selves changed throughout their lives in ways that were unique to these identifiers, with fluid conceptualizations sometimes emerging later in life. Beth and Margaret, for example, starting out as teen parents led many to falsely assume their heterosexuality. It was only over time that they were able to explore their attractions for women. For Laurie and Chloe, they wondered at different times in their lives if they were sexual at all, and felt that perhaps they were asexual. Their (sometimes periodic) lack of sexual desires led them to eschew sexual identity labels altogether as they did not feel they “fit” their experiences.

These women’s sexual encounters and desires were not unique to the identity irrelevance group by any means. In the next subsection where we will review the narrative histories of the sexual proclivity interviews, group sex, polyamory, and desires for all gender/sex expressions were also observed. However, there was a key difference that emerged in the understanding of sexual identities between the identity irrelevant narratives and those for whom sexual proclivities became the center of their sexual identity. Although most of the identity irrelevance histories had sexual acts that were integral to their sexual satisfaction, for the sexual proclivity category, it was the sexual acts themselves that became the basis for their conceptualization of sexual identities.

*Sexual Acts as the Center of Sexual Identities – Sexual Kinks & Proclivities*

There were many parallels between the nine identity irrelevance narratives and the twelve participant stories that focused on particular sexual proclivities. For example, the women classified as having sexual proclivities strongly avoided binary sexual identity labels, opti...
more fluid understandings of sexuality that either did not rely on gender/sex or were focused on all sexes. There was also a wide range of initial identities they put forth at the beginning of the interviews, including lesbian, straight, pansexual, and fluid (that some would later revise or expand on). They similarly rejected monosexuality and monogamy to varying degrees. Several also discussed their experiences and enjoyment of polyamory and group sex. However, what set apart these twelve women’s stories was that they identified either the sexual acts, sexual roles, or particular proclivities as being more important than the gender/sex composition of the people they engaged in those acts with.

While the women in the other categories noted an enjoyment of some of these sexual acts and communities, the difference was that they did not adopt those acts as the basis of their sexuality. For these women, what they enjoyed doing became central to their sexual identity and served to replace binary understandings of sexual identity. A sexuality based on the acts they enjoyed the most necessitated the rejection of sex/gender of choice in their relationships. In this subsection, we will review the sexual proclivity narratives at length and the themes that linked their stories.

We first introduced Alexis (23) and Kelly (32) earlier in Chapter 4. Alexis, throughout the course of the interview, would go on to share that although she enjoys an emotional, monogamous romantic relationship with her boyfriend, the ability to engage in sex with other men and women was non-negotiable for her sexual enjoyment. Towards the end of our talk, Alexis noted, “I love [my boyfriend] and I hope we are together for a long, long time. I do see a future with [him]. And we can have that, because he’s down with my desires for women. He’s never been threatened when we have sex with other people. He’s been so cool about picking
sexual partners, and um, and he loves it too because he can still get off with other men and embrace his bisexual side.”

When I asked her if she would ever have another relationship without an openness to having sex with multiple partners, she was adamant that she would never be able to settle or be truly happy without having an open sexual (but not necessarily romantic/emotional) relationship. By her own definition, her pansexual identity was important, but not as important as being able to explore the multiplicity of her sexual desires within her relationships. Ultimately, by the end of our discussion, sexual polyamory emerged as the true basis of sexual identity for her at this moment in her life.

Kelly, to revisit her story, initially identified as an “average … straight woman,” but came to disclose that she was a regular participant in the local BDSM community. Although publically only dating men, she had often thought about and was aroused by women. Kelly had “never had, like, full blown sex with a woman”, but in the dungeon she frequented, taking on the role of a “submissive masochist,” she could have often been touched or whipped by women when she was in a sensory deprivation suit or blindfolded. She explained, “There have been quite a few times I was blindfolded, gagged, and put on an X cross [a St. Andrew’s cross]. Anyone in the community who was there could have taken part in whipping me or flogging my thighs those nights and I wouldn’t have known [if it was a man or woman].”

After discussing her experiences at length, Kelly concluded, “So, I think I can answer you a little differently, um … now that we kind of went through it … I would not be happy in my sexual life if I wasn’t a part of the S&M community, particularly the one I’m a part of. I trust them. It’s a safe space to explore [myself]. They won’t out me, and I won’t out them [it should
be noted everyone in the community were required to sign non-disclosure agreements]. We are there for each other when stuff goes on in life. We can act out our sadness, frustrations, pain … and collectively, I think it’s a turn on for everyone there.” In the end, tantamount for Kelly’s sexual pleasure and sexual identity was being a masochist and taking a regular part in the BDSM community.

Alexis and Kelly were certainly not the only women who identified a particular sexual act that they centered their sexualities on. I met Monica (46) at a dive bar while traveling for work, where she had come across one of the flyers I’d posted when I was in town. She was an emergency responder, and had recently moved from a major southwest city to a small rural town on the other side of the country. “It’s funny, it’s been an adjustment. I mean, there really isn’t much around here, I’m sure you’ve noticed. Trying to meet people here … it’s just been, uh, it’s been tough. People are nice, but, uh, there’s not exactly a lot of diversity. And in some places [outside of town] I don’t always feel super welcome, I guess you could say.”

When we began discussing love and relationships, she relayed, “I don’t think there’s one person for everyone or anything like that.” Currently, Monica was single but “dating regularly.” She had come out to her family as a lesbian when she was 23, but “not until I moved away from the small town I grew up in … and could do what I wanted and be who I wanted …” Over the years, her dating life has varied; “… I date some people here and there and nothing lengthy or long term more than 2 to 3 months … never mutually exclusive or monogamous or anything like that, it’s like hey we’re getting a long, having a good time [going on dates], but like nothing more than that. I just kind of do my thing.”
I asked Monica if she could take some time to talk about who she looks for and how she filters her dating prospects online. I also asked her if she currently was only dating women, or if she dated men as well at this point in her life. “Naw, I have dated some men recently, I guess you could say ... and with that, I mean, I love to try new things and do whatever. I mean, I guess there are certain things that I want to draw the line at ... but I’m a believer in don’t knock it until you try it so I don’t knock it. I’m very, very open, even though I preferred dating women in my 20s.”

After I inquired what she meant by “dated some men recently, I guess you could say,” she opened up about her forays in online dating and cybersex. “Finding women to date here [in person] has been uh, I guess like, unsuccessful, to say the least. The nearest gay bar is like two hours away ... So that’s when I turned to dating online. Then I realized [while dating online], there’s an infinite number of possibilities when you have cybersex... like I’m not limited to who I see when it’s all online…”

Over time, Monica had almost entirely stopped pursuing dates in person; “I spent time with myself over the [last ten] years and finally realized I don’t have to date in person. There’s a whole online community where you can date and have sex [all online] ... and, like, to me, it feels limitless. Now I have [cyber] sex with men and women, sometimes with a group of both.” In talking about how cybersex has changed her perception of sex, she noted, “I always felt super awkward about intimacy, didn’t know how to talk about what I wanted. I guess maybe I was really overly shy when having sex. But online, I don’t feel embarrassed, I feel less judged ... uh, I feel confident when I’m on camera with [partners] in a way I didn’t when I was with people [in person]. I’ve really gotten into role playing and dressing up ... there’s entire communities based on different fantasy cultures ... and that’s just something I’ve gotten into lately.”
Cybersex allowed Monica to get past the “mental blocks” she often experienced in person, whether it was when she had sex with men in high school or women in her adulthood.

I guess on like a mental side of it, I don’t, there is not one specific thing that I can immediately think about and go ‘ok I’m turned on’ … I find a lot of things to be sexy. So [I] started going to different sites, different forums for online sex … and I found that other people talking about touching themselves or what they wanted to do to me was a turn on … The physical fantasy side of it, um, I explored more [over time]. At first it was just sexting back and forth, no pictures, no videos. I found that I could get off just typing about what I was doing and what the other person was doing … and then I realized I liked talking dirty, could say things to my online partners I could never get myself to say in person … and then I discovered the fantasy side of things, I can be whatever I want … with role playing, I like being someone different every day … taking on another identity is sexy to me … it’s a safe escape … and like I can be completely anonymous. Like most never even see any part of my, uh, like my full face and stuff.

Today, Monica said she has a closet in her home dedicated to costumes and role playing props for her online “adventures,” including animal themed attire. Interested to know how her forays in cybersex entwined with her sexual selfhood, I followed up with a question about how she identifies currently, given she initially responded to the call for participants as a lesbian. “So, I think it’s important individually to identify what’s important for [you] and to make amends with that identity. If I dated in person, I’d probably still date women. But online … it doesn’t matter so much about gender, about sex, about what’s in someone’s pants. You can find doms [dominants] and subs [submissive] of all persuasions. I’m attracted to the roles, not people’s physicality … [with cybersex] I’m not limited by physicality, heck I don’t even see everyone’s parts [genitalia] most of the time on camera … so I don’t know if I’m answering the question, but sexual identity is different to me [now]. I have sex with men online, with women online, and like, uh, sometimes I don’t even know what the person’s sex is [if they are in full costume]. So that kind of identity [sexual identity categories] doesn’t mean anything to me … now I’m more at ease with sex than I have ever been … I’m open to all sorts of things I didn’t know existed
before I started in the [cybersex] community. So … like maybe I’m cybersexual, hah, is that a thing?”

Over time and through her involvement in cybersex forums and communities, from which Monica’s curiosity evolved out of the difficulties dating in the rural area she relocated to, sexuality became less tethered to physical bodies and sexual organs. Instead, they now centered on an exploration of fantasies, role playing, and sensuality that was not limited to genitalia or physicality alone. Similar to Jasmine’s narrative, Monica saw herself, rather than gay, lesbian, or straight, as “open to all things.” Before we ended the interview, I asked her if she now preferred online dating and cyber sexual encounters to in person relationships. She ended the discussion saying, “… now, I very much have a fuck it attitude … I’m more confident, more satisfied. I can have sex anytime I want and it’s the best [sex] I’ve ever had … I don’t know that I’d turn down a date in person … but I’m not really looking anymore, either.”

Although she did not specifically discuss having online sexual encounters, Evangeline (33) did speak at length about using dating apps to find sexual partners. “I don’t know, it’s just, it’s just helped expand my options beyond the people I’d meet at bars or whatever.” Evangeline’s first sexual experiences were in high school with “my best friend, a girl. We never talked about it … but we first started exploring touching each other, kissing, making out together. It’s so funny though. We never talked about it, never said we liked each other. We just had a connection … we explored each other, what we liked, what we didn’t, what spots would give the other goose bumps [when they touched].” In her adulthood, however, Evangeline dated mostly men, “it’s just easier to find men to date, I guess.”
Evangeline first realized that she enjoyed exhibitionism (specifically, having sex in public places) when she became a librarian after graduating college. “I would have this recurring fantasy every night when I got in bed of getting shoved against a book case, fucked from behind, [orgasming] while the books fell around me.” One day, she decided to act out her fantasy with her boyfriend at the time. “It was so hot, he was super nervous, and I thought I’d be nervous, but once we started doing it just like I’d imagined … hah and it didn’t take him long once we started [to orgasm] … I wanted to try it in even more places.” To date, Evangeline detailed having sex in various public parks and spaces in the metropolitan city she resides in on the east coast, including restrooms, an airplane, cars (both moving and parked), movie theaters, and even changing rooms at department stores. “I think about having sex in public when I masturbate, and it only takes me like two minutes [to orgasm].”

After she shared more about her history of sexual encounters, I turned the discussion towards sexual identities. “I guess people would say I’m straight. I mean, my family just assumes I’m straight, my friends … I don’t really share a lot [about her sexual encounters] with people. And if anyone sees me dating in public they probably think I’m straight … I’ve never publically dated a woman, but I have had sex with women during my life, like I said earlier … um, I’ve just never corrected anyone [when they called her straight].” When I inquired about what was most important to her sexual identity at this time in her life, Evangeline noted, “Well, um, and like, so I’m in my thirties … I’m not looking for marriage. I date, but like, I don’t’ know, like not longer than a year with anyone. I don’t want to get married, I don’t want to have kids.” When I asked her to think about what was most important to her, if “traditional” marriage and families did not appeal to her, she said, “Well, I just care about having a good time. I want to explore [sex] with other people. I like variety. I really like having sex in public, it’s a rush … and I prefer not to see
the same person over and over … I don’t really like anyone sleeping over at my place, spending the night. I like being clandestine, I like the mystery, the thrill … that’s what’s important to my sexuality, that’s what I care about. I don’t care about being gay or straight ... like, I guess now, I’m an exhibitionist, like that’s what I search for [in dating apps] …”

Evangeline did not correct people’s assumptions of her heterosexuality. In fact, when she first responded to the call for participants, she wrote in her short biography that she was heterosexual (similar to how Monica wrote she was a lesbian in her initial bio). Regardless, in our actual discussion, she set aside binary sexual identities to focus on the acts (exhibitionism) that were the most sexually satisfying for her. Outside of the purpose of social categorization, she did not believe sexual identities were true human types. She followed up with me after our initial discussion to add, “I think that orgasms to a large extent are your body’s response to physical stimuli. Maybe it doesn’t matter who, or what, is stimulating you. Maybe true sexuality is about what you enjoy, not who you enjoy it with?” Evangeline, Monica, Kelly, and Alexis were not the only participant to hinge their sexual identities on sexual acts rather than gender/sex of intimate partners.

Take Catherine (52), Stacey (64) and Patricia’s (66) narratives. While they did not belong to a particular sexual community like Monica or Kelly, they did have similarities in their understandings of how sexuality changes over time. For Catherine, who had been married to her husband for over two decades; “He’s a bigger guy and I like that … our sex life has probably been one of the few constants in our lives together [laughs]!” After talking about marrying at a young age and what it was like raising kids in her smaller, suburban neighborhood, her narrative was far “from the norm” when she started talking about her sex life. “My husband and I have
been able to maintain our sexual spark, I guess you could say. For us, that’s meant mixing things up in the bedroom … he’s always game for something new … and I think that’s why it’s always worked so well for us.”

When I asked her to clarify what “mixing things up” meant to her, Catherine talked about the many sex toys and clitoral stimulators that had become a mainstay in her relationship. “I probably wouldn’t have stayed with [my husband] if he wasn’t okay using those things. He was smart, once he knew what turned me on, he was game for it.” About sexual identity, she expanded; “Well, what I like, it’s not like a woman couldn’t do that, right? What I enjoy with sex is something anyone could do, you don’t need a penis or a [particular sexual] appendage for it. So I don’t know that I’m a heterosexual, although I’m sure … that’s how it looks being married so long with kids. But I don’t know that I’m a heterosexual. I don’t’ know that it’s a real thing. To me, my sexuality is what I enjoy. And what I enjoy isn’t something only one sex or the other can do … So I guess I’m not big on identities. I’m big on what I like … they don’t go around putting your sexuality on your tombstones or anything, you know what I mean?” For her, sexual identity revolved around her “massive, frankly” collection of “top of the line” sex toys, “which has been an investment, but honestly, I wouldn’t enjoy my sex life without them all these years.” Her collection included vibrators, clitoral stimulators, g-spot dildos, vibrating dildos, and an assortment of remote controlled toys.

Patricia had also married her husband young, just a few years after a last minute blind date (in her twenties) setup when one of her friends had to cancel and needed a stand in. Now in her late sixties, Patricia noted that she still, “finds something new I like in the bedroom every month!” She and her husband, who was now in his mid-seventies, “have slowed down, I mean,
your body changes, you can’t help that.” But that has not stopped them from having an active and “fulfilling” sex life, according to Patricia. “We’ll still watch pornography together, and I’m lucky enough that I still enjoy [penetration] after all these years.”

When we started on the topic of sexual identities, Patricia said, “I’ve never had sex with a woman. I kissed some girls back in my Catholic school days, though. I remember really enjoying that ...” She must have noted a slight change in my countenance, because she said, “What, does that surprise you? It’s still on my bucket list ... I’d love to have sex with a woman. I remember the girls I kissed were soft, very soft lips!” I asked Patricia if the thought of women aroused her or was something she fantasized about, and she continued, “Oh yes, definitely yes, I’ve masturbated thinking about women plenty of times!” I followed up with the question of what sexual identity meant to her today, even though she had only had sex with her husband throughout her entire life.

Patricia went on to say, “Sex isn’t about who you do it with. I think what’s more important is what you enjoy. So sure everyone thinks I’m straight. But no one’s ever asked me, and I like a lot of things. I love my husband, I love [clitoral stimulation], and I want to sleep with a woman. I think I would like sex with women. I think about it still. So I’m not really straight, am I? It’s just what people call me ...!” I asked Patricia if sexual identity did not matter to her, what did matter to her sexual self? “Well, you just have to push all the right buttons.” When I asked her to describe those “buttons”, she laughed and clarified, “I’m a G spot kind of lady. So G spot stimulation, licking my clit, that’s what I need ... listen, if anyone is skilled enough to learn my body to hit my spot, they are welcome in my bedroom, hah! I mean, my husband and I are monogamous ... so there’s never been an occasion to have sex with a woman. So ... and I don’t
know how to say it, exactly … but what is important to my sexuality, my pleasure I think is the word you used, is someone hitting my G spot, being connected with them, having them in tune with my body. I care about that [those acts], not about a label or being a heterosexual or a homosexual or anything in between.”

Although they did not belong to a particular sexual community, Catherine, Stacey, and Patricia all identified sexual acts that were most important to their overall sexuality, acts that were not gender or sex specific. In addition, they felt they could equally enjoy those acts with men or women, even though they had not gone “all the way” with a woman. Society may have assumed they were straight for being married to men and having children, but they themselves felt that binary identities had little personal meaning or investment to them. Sexual acts were far more vital to their overall sense of sexuality. For Hillary (36), like Catherine, sex toys were something she “could not live without.” Unlike Catherine, Hillary identified as fluid at the start of our interview, and purposefully rejected sexual identity categories given her history of sexual intimacies and relationships with men, women, and non-binary/transgender individuals.

Irene’s (47) story was also somewhat comparable to Catherine’s in that she quickly identified sex toys, oral sex, and clitoral stimulation as being “non-negotiable” to her sexual satisfaction. Due to medical reasons, penetration was not physically enjoyable for Irene. The lifelong medical issues she experienced changed the way she thought about sexuality and identity altogether;

So in college, I wanted to start having sex. We went to a lot of fraternity parties, and yes some of them were gross, but some of the guys were cool … and hot, hah! In high school, I just cared about good grades. I didn’t take dating seriously … and my doctors had always told me that I would have problems eventually [with penetration]. Knowing that [penetration] was not on the table, I guess, um, sort of changed how I thought about sex … it ended up … even though I never dated a woman, I still messed around with a couple
women. I’m married now, so, um, I think people see me as straight … but I know there’s many ways to enjoy sex, and they aren’t all about the penis … I think sexual identity is bullshit. I don’t think it’s about bodies, I think it’s about what we enjoy [the sex acts] … it’s really limiting, and depressing, if you think about sexuality like that [as being about gender/sex of partnerships]. There is so much more to do and to try and to like and that can turn you on. Personally, I don’t think gender/sex has much to do with what you like sexually, you know … and sexuality for me isn’t about the who, it’s about what makes me cum [climax]. The rest of it [my relationship] is about companionship, trust, making a life with someone. I think that’s separate from sex, from my sexuality, even though sex is a part of my relationship it’s just not what my sexuality is … and now I don’t know if I’m still making sense?

Irene’s health issues potentially forced her to rethink what sexuality and identity meant to her.

Sexual identity to Irene was all about what she enjoyed physically, not who she enjoyed the acts with. She did not align herself as gay, straight, or otherwise, aside from what society assumed being married to her husband.

The remaining participants in the sexual proclivities category also prioritized particular sexual acts as central to their sense of sexual identity, rather than the sex or gender of the partners they engaged in those acts with. Natasha (37), personally, was “not really invested in labels.” Before I even had the chance to ask, she began talking about how identity, for her, was about the sexual acts she enjoyed the most. “I don’t feel exclusively attracted to women even though that is the only gender I’ve ever been involved with on a serious [emotional] level, so I guess I don’t really have a specific answer [for her sexual identity].” As we spoke more about her history of intimacy, Natasha elaborated on the sexual acts that aroused her the most. She began by talking about how oral sex and penetration (with fingers or sex toys) were must haves in her sexual encounters.
Next, she started sharing details about some of her fantasies. I asked her whether her fantasies had ever crept into reality for her. That is when Natasha shared her enjoyment of anonymous sex.

Well I guess sex in different places has been a thing for me since I’ve been single for a while … I’m not, like, turned on by the potential to get caught or other people being there or watching or anything like that. I know for some people that’s a thing … but like it’s hot to me, a person I don’t know … having sex that doesn’t have a personal connection or commitment. I think, I mean, it has to do with there being no strings, and just being about pleasure. I just, I, well I [orgasm] harder, if there’s no emotional attachment … So I think that there’s an element of not having to think about what’s going to happen tomorrow that I find [arousing].

At the time we spoke, Natasha had a “handful or two” of anonymous sexual experiences over the past year with people that she’d met on an app geared towards sexual encounters. While she predominately dated women over the course of her life, when it came to “casual sex, I guess you could call it” Natasha did not have a preference for women or men. When it came to choosing sexual partners currently, although she filtered her choices by overall appearance, the gender or sex of her partners was not a factor for her casual sex encounters; “… if I’m having [casual sex] with someone that I don’t know, no strings or anything … that’s what I care about. That is what turns me on, like, the anonymity of it. Not what is underneath their clothes.” She came to value non-monogamy and sexual “flings” more than anything else at the time we spoke.

Willow (21) and Lisa (20) were among the youngest who had responded to the call for participants. Willow had made the difficult decision to enter the working world after graduating from a tech high school rather than attending college. She spent a lot of time hanging around with her high school friends who were a part of the local LGBTQ bar scene in the smaller northeast city she grew up just outside of. Willow was predominantly attracted to “the female
form” but had sex and relationships with men, women, and transgender/non-binary individuals. She made a point several times throughout the interview to reject “labels” and identify as sexually “fluid.”

Although it was one of the shortest interviews I had at just over two hours, the duration was mostly due to Willow’s straight forwardness and confidence when talking about her sexual history and the acts she found the most pleasurable. Currently, although Willow was dating a few different people, none of her relationships were monogamous or long term. “I have a few ‘exes’ who aren’t really exes I guess because we are still fucking on and off … and that’s okay.” In talking about her friend group and the venues she frequented, she noted, “It’s a little incestuous I guess, like not literally, but it’s like a really small community. But I guess that’s one of the things I like about it [where she lives].” We began talking about what acts that Willow was into currently with her sexual partners, and while casual consensual sex was common among her group of friends and acquaintances, group sex was on the “top of my wish list, I guess you could say. There is nothing hotter than watching the couple next to you be just as in to it as you are. I like to partake as much as I like to watch them [climax], too.”

Willow did not seek out group sex, necessarily, or subscribe to dating apps or community forums like some of the other women in this grouping. It was more “organic” for her in that when her friends and sexual interests/partners were hanging out together, it was common for people to “spontaneously start making out while watching a movie” and it would eventually end with the rest of the attendees having sex, as well. “Sometimes it’s like couples having sex next to another couple. Or like, sometimes it’s just like two people who just met who might start cuddling or move over to the futon because they hit it off, and then they invite others to join
them …” When I asked her if she could narrow down what was important to her sense of sexual identity, she said “Well, like, it’s fluid, you know? If I think something or someone is sexy, and like, it turns me on, I want to try it. I like trying new things, having sex with different people. There’s something sexy about everyone … it’s not about what’s in your pants. It’s about how you use it, how far you’ll go to explore the things that feel good …”

Lisa, personally, identified as pansexual. She had dated a transman, cis-gendered men, and mostly “pretty masculine” women, but was open to people of all types. “I don’t know, I guess, like, I … I just like the person, I’m attracted to people…not the wrapper they come in. Hah, does that make sense? I could care less what you wear or like how short or long your hair is…” Unlike Willow, Lisa did prefer to have monogamous relationships when she was dating, although she had casual sex without commitments “a few times.” What she found most sexually appealing and enjoyable was power and control in her sexual intimacies; “It was a couple years ago now, my girlfriend at the time taught me a lot about sex, she was more experienced than I was. And she bought me a glittery flogger. Um, that like, well hah that was it for me. Looking back, I think she wanted to use it on me but that’s definitely not how it went down.”

Since then, Lisa’s collection of sex toys, restraints, hand cuffs, floggers, and paddles has grown. Taking on the dominant role with her partners is “non-negotiable. I’ll just come out with it and ask, too. Up front … are you a dom, or a sub, or like a top or a bottom? Because I need a submissive, someone who is open to pushing their limits. I like to drive that power dynamic … it makes me really, really wet.” I asked Lisa if she could clarify if her pansexuality was key to her conceptualization of sexual identity, or if she felt there was something else that was more important for her sense of sexual self-hood.
Well, when I say I’m pansexual, um, that’s like me saying hey, I’m open to all kinds. So it’s like, just saying that it doesn’t matter your gender or your body parts. I enjoy them all … what is most important? Its, um, it’s the control. It’s telling someone else what to do, having my way, doing as I please … I’ll give you an example … My current, I don’t know, girlfriend, I guess, but we don’t use a label or anything. Last week I had her [restrained] on the bed. But that’s not what was so sexy to me. It was when I wouldn’t let her [orgasm] until I said she could … it was so sexy to watch, to be in control … so it’s being a dom [sexually dominant partner] that I would like define myself as, like sexually.

Sexual identity was secondary for Lisa, aside from signaling her openness and attraction to a multitude of people. For her, her status as the sexually dominant person in intimacies was the role that was most important to her sexuality.

Although this group of twelve women was extremely diverse in their age, experiences, and sexual enjoyments, one thing united their stories; their perception of sexual identity was built on the sexual acts or communities they were a part of. Overall, their conceptualization of sexual identities was not centered on the sex/gender of partners, but on specific sexual acts or sexual communities of practice. Some of these women were a part of larger sexual communities organized around specific sexual acts or roles, like Monica, Kelly, and Evangeline. Others, like Alexis and Willow, just enjoyed having group or polyamorous sexual encounters that were not necessarily tied to a sex club or online dating forums. To Catherine, Stacey, and Patricia, although they had originally identified their sexuality within socially constructed binaries, over time they described how they placed the importance on the sexual acts they enjoyed, not the gendered bodies of who they enjoyed them with. Not only were they open to having sexual encounters with women if the situation presented itself, but it was something many of them had regularly fantasized about.
What unified the two categories in this chapter, sexual proclivities and identity irrelevance, was a rejection of binary sexual labels based on gender/sex. Albeit for different reasons, the narratives in this section overwhelmingly rejected the idea that heterosexuals and homosexuals were true human types. In the next part of this chapter, we will move from exploring the accounts of sexual pleasures and identities to reviewing the institutional themes that emerged from the narratives of sexual proclivities and identity irrelevant participants. How did their accounts and interactions with institutions, like family, religion, and work, potentially impact or limit their understanding of sexual identities?

INSTITUTIONAL INTERACTIONS AND SPACES FOR FLUIDITY

In contrast to the institutional and political identifiers in Chapter 5, the women we discussed thus far in Chapter 6 shunned binary sexual categories. They did so in favor of more fluid understandings of sexuality, or for those with sexual proclivities, prioritized the sexual acts they enjoyed over the sex/gender of their intimate partners. Oftentimes, the non-binary identified women could not necessarily recall interactions with specific social institutions that encouraged or discouraged sexual fluidity. Regardless of how the women conceptualized their own identity, there was still evidence of institutional regulation (to varying degrees) that likely restricted the impact of their rejection of sexual binaries.

The social institutions that stood out among these two categories of interviews included that of families, religion, the workplace, and politics. To begin exploring the institutional interactions, and their limitations in enforcing sexual binaries, the first subsection will explore a subset of identity irrelevance stories. The next subsection will address several examples of
institutional interactions among those who placed utmost importance on sexual acts and the sexual communities they took part in. In different ways, these institutions served to simultaneously reinforce, and in some instances reject, socially constructed sexual binaries.

Social Institutions and Identity Irrelevance

Family matters, for Jasmine, were challenging at this stage of her life. Having grown up in a very strict household, relations were often strained “to a harmful level” with her parents and siblings. Now that her family had recently moved south and over twelve hours away from her, she concluded “the distance has been really, really good for me.” Her parents raised her and her two sisters in a strict Jewish “patriarchal” sect (in Jasmine’s words) that valued gender neutrality to “an almost unhealthy degree;”

I wasn’t allowed to wear pink or jewelry or makeup as a kid … so it was interesting so while my family was really religiously conservative about a lot of things their view on gender was almost that it was better to be androgynous … And it was really, really interesting I’ve never heard of anyone else I’ve met growing up like that. And we used to read flashcards that read girl and boy and they crossed them out and wrote ‘kid’ … I appreciate what they were trying to do, you know, don’t judge someone based on what they were wearing.

It would take years in therapy for Jasmine to untangle the “severe codependency” she had developed growing up in what she now labeled “kind of like a religious cult … and it was interesting, too, although we were raised Jewish, um, at the beginning, um, and we ended up going vegetarian and then my parents did ‘unschooling’, which we didn’t use a curriculum … there were a lot of like, really conservative, really strict, um guidelines that we had to live by.”

The emotional codependency instilled in Jasmine by her family and their religious following had a large impact on Jasmine’s understanding of self and identity. “I was home
schooled, and I moved out when I was done with college, I was 20, I moved to down to a nearby city just to get out of my parents’ house.” At the time I spoke with her, Jasmine was living in a city in the northeast, at least a full day’s drive from the rest of her family. Having “escaped” the confines of her at times “suffocating” family and exploring what “a healthy sexuality looks like” to her, sexual identities and labels instilled fear and shame for Jasmine given the environment she grew up in. On the other hand, as the importance of gender roles were downplayed to such a severe degree, “probably heightened my attraction to femininity, as it had been forbidden for so long.”

Jasmine’s complicated family life, gender neutral household, and enmeshment with a strict religious community growing up undoubtedly impacted the sexual freedoms and fluidity she enjoys (and values) today. If nothing else, the juxtaposing gender fluidity and vilification of homosexuality contributed to the difficulties Jasmine had coming in to her sexuality, which today she sees as “fun, explorative, and open … and that’s how I always want it to be.” Although she’d grown up in a similarly “tight knit” household “rife with codependency between my mom, my sister, and myself”, Beth’s family was not particularly religious. In fact, her parents had encouraged her to be open in exploring different faiths. They were also fairly non-judgmental when it came to sexual and gender identities. The same could not be said in the area she grew up in, however; “[There was] a lack of willingness to understand anything diverse, you know? I was, in high school, you know, everybody was paired off, it was just kind of your typical high school … And then it was treated so taboo when I got knocked up in high school, and this wasn’t all that long ago and they just treated us so horribly.”

Perhaps it was because the town they grew up in was “incredibly shallow and not diverse, at all … like 95% white and then some …” that Beth’s parents encouraged her to always “keep
an open mind.” It was while she was in community college that Beth would become involved with and get introduced to the local Pagan community. At the end of the day, for her, “It’s really classifications [meaning sexual identities] for other people that, those, those terms are so that other people can understand you, but our feeling [her Pagan beliefs] is that it really shouldn’t matter or mean anything to anybody else. Because you’re not in my relationship, whether I’m gay or straight, even extending the labels to religions and things like that, unless you’re in the relationship with me those things shouldn’t matter to you. It shouldn’t be a way for you to qualify me, you should get to know me.”

Having her families’ support in encouraging her to embrace diversity, coupled with an acceptance of sexual freedom fortified by her Pagan beliefs, certainly influenced Beth’s openness to exploring her same sex desires, leading her to identify as “bisexual, if forced on paper” or, “preferably … sexually fluid.” Anna (36) also talked at length about participating in a Pagan community while in college. Anna’s father was a pastor in a church that “welcomed all kinds of people, religious backgrounds, and sexualities.” During her formative years, there “wasn’t really any shame in having sex” in her household. Her parents even offered to help her get birth control once she opened up about having sex in high school. Having the space to have honest discussions about sex and sexuality with her family, “gave me a confidence, like, with myself, that like I don’t think any of my friends had.” She attributed her confidence with sex and sexuality to her parents and their “welcoming, for the most part, congregation.” After having a “short stint” in the pornography industry and “trying anything you can imagine in my sex life”, Anna said that she proudly identifies as “a sexually fluid, non-monogamous, polyamorous, and dominant femme.”
Although these are just a few examples among the identity irrelevance narratives, the overarching theme was that their families and religions (or overall non-religiousness growing up) may have fostered safer spaces for the exploration of sexualities (including Charlotte and Laurie). For those growing up in households that did not embrace sexual openness or diversity, they tended to explore their sexuality only after distancing themselves geographically from their families or the religious affiliations they grew up with (such as was the case for Margaret, Ashley, and Mary). Overall, there were more women in the identity irrelevance category who either had families who accepted same sex relationships, were non-religious or non-denominationally religious, had distanced themselves from disapproving family members, or who had religious ties that were accepting of non-heterosexual relationships.

There were two more institutional themes worth noting in this section that stood out among the sexual histories of the identity irrelevant narratives; that of the workplace and politics. Despite the majority having familial and varying religious or faith based support for their fluid desires, few spoke about being active in gay and lesbian politics or communities. In fact, the only mention of LGBTQ communities among these narratives was in passing as a place to look for potential sexual partners or hang out with friends. Mary (30) went so far as to note that, “I’m not really active in local LGBTQ scene anymore, honestly. There wasn’t exactly a lot of inclusiveness, and frankly some of the gays were racist from what I experienced ... So, no, I don’t bother with the community, um, anymore.” This was in stark contrast to the political identifiers whose identities were inextricably linked with LGBTQ history and culture. The exceptions in this chapter were Beth and Chloe, who each discussed participating in Gay Pride events with their partners. However, for the rest of the women I spoke with in this category,
distancing themselves from sexual binaries also seemed to (unintentionally) create distance from LGBTQ specific communities and history.

The final institutional interaction that emerged among the identity irrelevance narratives was that of the workplace. For many of these women, although they personally identified as fluid, often did not discuss their same sex relationships or desires with their colleagues (with the exception of Beth, who was now married to her wife and did not hide that fact). For example, for Margaret, who had a very fluid history, it was not something she ever had discussed in the workplace or with her adult children. Mary had always made efforts to keep her personal life separate from her work life, and for that reason she believed most of her coworkers assumed she was straight.

Chloe, Ashley, Laurie, and Jasmine were also not open with their fluid desires in the workplace. This is not necessarily a surprise, as many people choose not to disclose personal details about themselves at work for fear of reprisal or not being close with coworkers. It is still worth noting that, as compared to the political and institutional identifiers, the identity irrelevance category did not discuss details about their relationships much, if at all, at work. Again, as polyamory, bondage, and non-monogamy are still largely stigmatized in the general population, it is not surprising that the participants who engaged in these fluid relationship types did not share the details with coworkers or family members.

Before we review the institutional experiences of the sexual proclivity group in the next section, it is important to underscore the limitations in macro level visibility of fluid sexualities. To revisit the observation of the women categorized as identity irrelevant, their commonality was that they avoided sexual binaries in favor of varying degrees of sexual variability. Many of these women self-identified as fluid, pansexual, polyamorous, bisexual, or embraced their desires for a
multitude of genders/sexes. That said, while they detailed having a multiplicity of desires that was most important to their conceptualization of sexuality, it is possible that the reach of their fluidity was somewhat limited. For example, as Ashley noted, it is likely that people perceived her as gay when she was out on a date with her girlfriend, but straight if she was out with her boyfriend. Additionally, as polyamorous encounters/relationships are still widely invisible and stigmatized in mainstream society, there are likely limits to the influence of sexual fluidity on a macro, institutional level. Women may be able to embrace fluidities in their personal lives, but that does not necessarily lead to a destabilization of binary sexualities as an organizing principle of society.

*Sexual Proclivities and Institutional Exchanges*

There were a lot of similarities in institutional experiences for the sexual proclivities category and the identity irrelevance category. For example, many of the women did not talk about their dating/sexual forays to their coworkers. As Alexis noted, “My coworkers [at her café job] and colleagues [at school] know I’m dating my current boyfriend, but like, I can’t exactly tell them ‘hey, I had the best threesome with my boyfriend last weekend’ you know? Even my best friend up here doesn’t know. At school, like I don’t know how people would react, right? It’s not the kind of thing you can exactly talk about.” In some ways, because their identities were centered on specific sexual acts and kink cultures, discussing their sexuality could put them at a greater risk of being marginalized than others in this study.

Further, practices of exhibitionism (Evangeline), group sex (Alexis and Willow), cybersex and role playing communities (Monica), domination (Lisa), submission (Kelly), and anonymous sex (Natasha) are fairly ostracized today in the U.S., even as bondage has been
somewhat popularized in mainstream media (Shades of Grey, Rhianna’s S&M song, How to Build a Sex Room (Netflix 2022) among other examples). Non-monogamy is also highly stigmatized. While same sex marriage has become normalized through its institutional inclusion, non-monogamous based sex and non-reproductive sex acts continue to be deemed “abnormal” to varying degrees. As Kelly noted, “It’s not like I can talk about being whipped in front of my friends or family.” As such, the impression I was left with is that the secrecy surrounding the sexual proclivities histories from coworkers, family members, and friends led to fairly isolating social experiences.

As far as relationships with their families, the participants in the sexual proclivities category had varied experiences. To Alexis, her family presented “complications and challenges” throughout her life. After her parents divorced, “I grew up with my mom mostly, it was definitely a lot harder on us … we butt heads a lot. So it was definitely difficult growing up with her. Um, she had a lot of boyfriends coming in and out a lot and that was hard … and she was always working like I always remember my mom working and stressing about money. So I was raised a lot by my other family members, and by my grandparents. Then right before I went to college, like my senior year, I actually, our house got foreclosed on so I lived with my grandparents for a little. So you know I had it a little rough growing up…”

To say her mom was supportive was a “big exaggeration” for Alexis. However, “once [she] went to college it made my mom’s and my relationship a lot better, a lot better just not living under the same roof with the same stressors, you know?” Today, she and her mom are the “closest they have ever been.” Although their relationship had improved, as had her and her estranged father’s relationship, “it’s still not like I share a lot, like other than how work or school is. I don’t spend a lot of time with her, so she hasn’t like met my boyfriend or anything since I
moved upstate.” In contrast, Monica was extremely close with her family, who had “always loved me no matter what, my mom always said that growing up. And she meant it, my parents and I are very close even though I moved far away.” Even with her close family ties, Monica kept her dating life relatively secret. “I mean I’ve told my mom I went on online dates, she gets it, like, knows the area isn’t great for meeting people. But like I can’t tell my mom about role playing or cybersex, that’s just crazy.”

While Monica’s and Alexis’ comments are just two examples, they were typical of the other proclivities group experiences. Perhaps because their personal identities were centered on very specific sexual acts, fantasies, or arrangements, it was too personal to share publically and could be more easily judged than the sex or gender of their partners of choice. This was true no matter how close or estranged they were with family members. Even those with the largest and most supportive family networks did not feel they could share their thoughts on sexual identities.

For example, Patricia, who expressed a lifelong attraction to women but only slept with her husband since she married young, it was not likely she felt able to talk to family/friends about her enjoyment of lesbian pornography. She noted, “… everyone thinks I’m straight, but no one’s ever asked me, at least until now talking to you … I’m not really straight at all, it’s just what people call me without asking.” That said, Patricia did not bother to correct people’s assumptions, either. Stacey similarly noted she would not “tell my family I like women unless I ever dated one. Otherwise, what’s the point, you know?”

Comparable to the women in the identity irrelevance group discussed earlier, the narratives among the sexual proclivities category also displayed a lack of political engagement in LGBTQ politics, despite many voicing their desires for women. However, although not active in LGBTQ communities, several were involved in online sexual/political communities, such as
BDSM and furry community forums. Although they may not have been active publically, many, like Monica, Natasha, and Evangeline, did seek to provide support and advocacy for the cyber communities they were a part of, even if it was via online anonymity. In that respect, they were politically active through their participation in normalizing and advocating for their personal, deepest desires in ways that did not endanger their livelihoods.

The final institutional interaction worthy of discussion for the sexual proclivities interviews was that of religion. Many of the women discussed growing up in religious households, but none of the twelve women with sexual proclivities expressed practicing an organized religion at the time I spoke to them. As Monica succinctly explained; “Faithful … I’d say I have a lot of faith. I’m not religious. But I have a lot of faith. And I believe in science … but science, right now, can’t explain everything. So in the absence of answers from science, I have faith.” Her feelings on organized religion were echoed by the other participants. Patricia and Stacey discussed attending their churches regularly when they raised their children. However, through the years, their participation waned. For Patricia, it had to do with the scandals of the Catholic Church. “I’d just had enough. I thought I was doing the right thing, raising my kids in the church, but once all this came out about abuse, I just don’t know anymore. I still believe in god, but I don’t think he’s hateful. So I still pray, and I have a lot of faith, but no, I haven’t gone to church in years and I don’t think I will again.” In total, eight of the twelve participants voiced having faith or believing in a higher power. However, none voiced actively participating in an organized religion, similar to the identity irrelevant participants.

SUMMATION OF NON-BINARY SEXUAL IDENTIFIERS
What struck me in speaking with all the women in this chapter was that they had put great thought behind their personal understandings of sexuality. To some, it was a lifelong journey to recognize their multitude of desires. Others embraced fluidity from the start of their sexual explorations. This was in stark contrast to the institutional identifiers, many of whom conveyed they had not had an occasion or need to think about their sexuality before; it was simply a given to them. Again, the most consistent response for the institutional identifiers was, “I haven’t thought about it much before” or “It’s just who I am.” Albeit in different ways, the women in the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities categories had put a great deal of thought into what was important to their sexuality. Given the rejection of static sexual identities across the women in this chapter, is it possible that they experienced less institutional coercion at different stages in their lives to adhere to binary sexual norms? What were the range of social forces these women faced, and was there evidence of a compulsory heterosexual order in their stories?

Like the summation in Chapter 5, the truth is that the answer to these questions is not simple. Partially this is because the purposive research sample is not a random sample and thus cannot be representative. Still, there were some interesting dynamics observed in the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivity narratives. Extremely oppressive and dangerous situations, like what Tiffany and Frances grew up with, were absent from the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivity narratives. No one lost their jobs, families, or livelihoods in this chapter due to their sexual identities or practices, similar to the majority of the women in the institutional and political identifier groups. Yet there were still circumstances where it was clear many of these women were not free to express their sexual pleasures and fluidity outside of the people they
were intimate with. To a degree, it seemed like identities that were outside of heterosexual/homosexual binaries had few spaces for visibility or public acceptance.

   Particularly, for identities centered on polyamory, bondage, sadism/masochism, exhibitionism, role play, and cybersex, it seemed like the participants in this chapter were incredibly isolated in keeping their experiences and affiliations confined to their sexual communities. Take polyamory, for example. The complementarity of men/women, and social rewards for monogamy (such marital privileging in the U.S.) made carrying dialogues surrounding polyamorous relationships nearly impossible for the participants. Were any of the women politicians or public figures, it would be possible they could lose social standing had they been outed for their participation in non-monogamous and non-binary based communities of practice.

   Although it had not happened to anyone in this study, for the women who practiced public sex and exhibitionism, had they been caught or discovered, they could have faced arrest and potential jail time (perhaps evidencing some level of a compulsory heterosexual order). Likewise, had any of the polyamorous relationships been emotional for the women I spoke to, it would be impossible for them to receive social legitimization given the monogamous status of legalized marriage. Even engaging in anonymous sex carried the risk of social scorn or being labeled a “slut,” opening the door for social ostracism or even violence against women. Many of the fluidities among the women reviewed in this chapter could have placed them in potentially dangerous or compromising situations had people beyond their inner circles found out. While many family members were reportedly supportive of same sex relationships, it may be that the acceptance would not be extended had they known about their participation in group sex, non-monogamous relationships, or role playing in furry communities.
On the other hand, in spite of their non-monogamous, non-gender/sex based desires putting them at risk socially, they were also able to find safe spaces to experience fluidities in a myriad of ways. Some explored their multitude of desires in the confines of their relationships or marriages, whether it was through incorporating “a third” person, or same sex pornography, or even sex toys. Monica was able to escape a limiting geographical locale to have a flourishing sex life fully online. Evangeline and Natasha could delve into their fantasies with dating apps that enabled them to filter partners that were most compatible with their deepest wants and desires. Certainly, as least in these spaces, the reach of institutionalized normative heterosexuality appeared limited to particular spaces (families, workplace), and a compulsory heterosexual order could be argued to be mostly absent in those places (for at least the women I spoke to in this study).

As a final note in this chapter, although these commonalities and observances were true to the women I spoke with, they should not be mistaken for themes applicable to the entire population. Additionally, although these women rejected binaries in their personal conceptualizations of sexuality, it is difficult to measure the extent of the impact on the broader, macro level binary organization of sexuality. That said, their stories do offer glimpses in to a world where heterosexuality is no longer compulsory in nature, or at the very least, showcases what it could look like if sexual and gender binaries ceased to be an organizing principle of social institutions.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, we will broaden the discussion to review the similarities and differences between all four of the participant categories; political identifiers, institutional identifiers, identity irrelevance, and sexual proclivities. First, we will review the general trends and findings across the identity groupings. Next, the remaining chapter will revisit
and evaluate the main research questions vis a vis the findings. Then we will summarize the limitations of this research and the conclusions drawn herein. Fourth, the concluding chapter will underscore the unique contributions of this dissertation. Finally, Chapter 7 will end with an analysis of future avenues for research inspired by this study and ending thoughts on empiricizing sociological theory.
CHAPTER 7: IDENTIFIER TYPES, TRENDS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Of course you get the thing that people will look at you because I’m a girl, she’s a girl, they must be in a lesbian relationship, right? And yes I am in a lesbian relationship right now. But if people were to ask me “are you a lesbian” I’d be like number one I can’t stand labels, that’s your need to categorize me. But I don’t really know if I am. Because you know the term lesbian is that you’re exclusively attracted to women and I’m not. So it’s, you know, I’m very, there’s different things I’m attracted to, if I were to ever have to check boxes on a form I wouldn’t feel comfortable checking the box that says lesbian because I don’t’ find myself exclusively interested in women. ~Beth, 46 years old

To conclude this research, the final chapter in this dissertation will survey the general themes of this study. Additionally, this chapter will revisit the questions posed at the outset of this dissertation, and review what answers were uncovered through an in depth exploration of the sexual narratives. In the beginning chapters, I noted that I expected to find participants for whom sexuality was a given, something that they had not thought about before. I also expected to find individuals that questioned the “status quo” and had uniquely fluid understandings of sexual identity. Further, I speculated that there would be women who felt that sexual identities based on the sex of their intimate partners did not capture the full range of their sexual enjoyments. As the narrative coding unfolded, unexpected commonalities emerged in the women’s conceptualizations of identity in regards to the relationship between their sexual identities, relationships, favorite sexual acts, and fantasies/desires.

As anticipated, there were many women I spoke with, particularly the institutional identifiers, who felt that sexual binaries were a given, part of who they were. Beyond the socially constructed categories of gay/straight, they had not had an occasion, or reason, to reflect on their sexual identity. This group of narratives I categorized as institutional identifiers. Again, they saw sexuality as something that was easily assumed and perceived, “just part of who I am” (quote from Emma’s interview). Approximately half of the women I talked to expressed having a fixed
sexual identity. However, as I spoke to more and more women who fell in this group, it became clear that those who adopted or purposely chose a binary sexuality did not do so for the same reasons. In fact, the women had different rationales for identifying as homosexual or heterosexual. For a subset of the binary identifiers, politics, families of choice, and LGBTQ culture played an enormous role in why they identified as lesbian/gay/queer. Among these political identifiers, as they came to be categorized, adopting a fixed sexual identity label (or a queer identity) was a way to align themselves with LGBTQ culture and pay homage to the embattled history and marginalization of same sex relationships.

Among the other half of the women interviewed, what set them apart was their personal rejection of binary sexual identities. Again, just as was the case with the institutional and political identifiers, there were different reasons why the women rejected fixed sexual labels. Having a fluid sexual history alone did not lead to a rejection of sexual identity labels. In fact, many of the institutional and political identifiers had fluid sexual histories they discussed at length, but still continued to adopt a static identity. However, for the two major subgroups of women with fluid histories, they felt that the most important part of their sexuality was embracing the fluidity of their desires. As such, binary sexual identities held little truth or meaning for them. To some, that meant having polyamorous, non-gendered relationships. Others, even if they were currently in an opposite sex intimate relationship, felt it was important to stay connected to their desires for women. Conversely, one woman, who was in a same sex relationship at the time, noted that she wanted to recognize her attraction for men/transmen, which identifying as a lesbian would render invisible in her mind. These narratives were categorized as identity irrelevance, as the importance of their all gender or non-gender specific desires was nullified by adopting normative heterosexual/homosexual identities.
The second category of sexually fluid women that emerged did not look at their sexual identities as something based on the sex/gender of their partners at all. Instead, they prioritized the sexual acts they enjoyed the most over “who” they engaged in those acts with. They felt that the acts that brought them the most pleasure were not based on sexual genitalia. Thus, binary understandings of sexuality held little to no importance for them. So long as their partner(s) could perform the acts they enjoyed the most, and there was mutual physical/mental attraction, it did not matter what was “in their pants.” Participation in group sex, exhibitionism, cybersex, bondage, and other sexual acts and communities was central to how they understood their sexuality. Their sexual gratification was not tied to the gender/sex of their partners. As such, the sexual proclivities group narratives rejected compulsory heterosexual constructions of sexual identities.

Having reviewed the four distinct categories of identifiers in this research, the next section will reexamine some of the main findings across the binary and non-binary identified groups. For example, how did family, religion, race/ethnicity, and age factor into the women’s self-conceptualization of sexuality and identities? The second section will summarize the answers to the research questions posed earlier in the earlier chapters, including the central question of whether there was any evidence to support the theory of institutionalized normative status of heterosexuality versus a continued compulsory heterosexual regime. The third section addresses the limitations of this study, while the fourth will underscore the unique contributions of this qualitative research. Finally, the last section provides various avenues for future research, and ends with final thoughts on the importance of empiricizing sociological and feminist theories on sexualities.
GENERAL TRENDS ACROSS IDENTITY CATEGORIZATIONS

Family Ties

Speaking with the forty women in this study, it was clear that family relationships played a large role in the experience and formation of participants’ identities. There was a wide range of familial relations. Some of the women were very close to their parents and siblings and felt supported to share details about their relationships. Others were close with their families, but noted they did not feel comfortable sharing information about their intimate partnerships. Still, other women reported having tenuous relationships at best with their families, regardless of their sexual identification(s), and shared very little personal information in general with their family members. So, what were some of the themes from family institutional relations as it pertains to the four identifier categories outlined prior?

Among the political identifiers, the theme of chosen families ran strongly throughout their shared histories. Alice’s chosen family took the form of her roller derby teammates and contacts she had met throughout the country. Ella’s chosen family was the drag community they became a part of in their adult life. Shirley’s Mardi Gras group became her localized family that her (and her wife’s) recreational life centered around. Frances’ entire career and livelihood came to revolve around LGBTQ issues, somewhat similar to Cassy’s chosen LGBTQ family she stayed in touch with around the country, despite her current geographical isolation. The need for chosen families in many cases stemmed from either the denigration of gays and lesbians from their biological families or the general silence surrounding same sex relationships in the homes they grew up in. Even for Miranda and Ella, who did not specifically discuss having a “chosen family” in so many words, the invisibility of same sex intimacies growing up added to their personal strife when grappling with their desires for women.
While not all participants had non-supportive families, like Brenda, many still heard disparaging comments regarding same sex intimacies from extended family members, from the use of words like “faggot” and “queers” to worse. To an extent, it seemed like families contributed to the fear, self-doubt, and polluted discourses surrounding homosexuality that led to varying levels of seclusion/exclusion and necessitated “coming out” due to the pervasive assumption of heterosexuality. Even Miranda and Ella, while avoiding negative stereotypes about gays and lesbians growing up, still had to contend with comments like “how do you know you’re a lesbian if you haven’t had sex with a man” from their parents and siblings. These circumstances instilled varying amounts of fear and shame surrounding their same sex desires. Even though she noted her family had been supportive and attended her wedding, Shirley suspected many may have been “praying for their souls privately.” It is quite possible that strained family relationships or a lack of support for LGBTQ identities added to the need for a chosen family for the political identifiers, or at the very least, may have contributed to the pride they took in their hard fought LGBTQ identities.

Family relations, for institutional identifiers, were not necessarily dissimilar to the political identifiers. Many, like Lori, Laura, Tiffany, Jill, and Jamie all had what they described as controlling or very strict households they grew up in. However, other institutional identifiers relayed having very close relationships with their immediate families. What stood out among their interviews was not necessarily how their families supported their sexual identities, but how the social construction of the family as a whole was based on the presumption of heterosexuality. Their conceptualizations of a healthy family were based on the ideal of being good sexual citizens. To be a respected and contributing member of society, for a number of the institutional identifiers, meant being a good mother and spouse within their heterosexual families.
Lori, in particular, spoke at length about finding self-worth in the role of being a mother. Similarly, Laura’s identity as a heterosexual woman in her adulthood centered on having a family and raising kids. Institutional identifiers conceptualizations of family, on the whole, were based on procreation and child rearing. Even for women with a history of fluidity, they felt that abandoning or atoning for their same sex desires in the past was necessary in order to have a healthy family as adults. Although not all institutional identifiers equated the family with heterosexuality, some like Jill and Jamie, noted how their families’ internalized homophobia made them sympathize with gay and lesbians. For Jill, the denigration of gays and lesbians by her family members was enough to make her note, “It always made me glad I wasn’t gay, the stuff they said.” Institutional identifiers, like some of the political identifiers, also portrayed their families as marginalizing gays and lesbians to an extent. It did appear, at least for this sampling of institutional and political identifiers, that the family continues to play a strong role in regulating heterosexuality, either through rendering same sex intimacies invisible or openly discouraging LGBTQ individuals.

Notably, there was a somewhat comparable range of family structures with the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities interviews. Identity irrelevant participants Jasmine, Alexis and Margaret all grew up in contentious households with parents who would eventually get divorced. On the other hand, Beth grew up with an incredibly supportive family throughout her teen pregnancy and marriage to her current wife. What did stick out among the narratives of the identity irrelevance group is that, overall, more of their families seemed to accept some degree of same sex relationships or gender variance. For example, even though Jasmine’s family was religiously conservative, they actively discouraged gender roles in her household (reinforcing a notion of gender fluidity). Margaret noted being supportive of her gay family members later in
her life in a way she did not have from her parents growing up. For Anna, Ashley, and Charlotte, their parents had voiced support for their fluid desires from a young age. It is very possible that having LGBTQ supportive families enabled them to more easily reject binary sexual identities as they got older because less importance was placed on them.

The sexual proclivities group also had fairly supportive families for those who had same sex relationships or encounters over time. They also did not detail many, if any, instances of overt homophobia from their families (which could have just been a coincidence among this non-representative sample). What struck me, however, and what differed from the other three categories of participants, was that rather than having to be in the closet regarding their same sex desires, the women in the sexual proclivities group were “closeted” about their desires and sexual communities they were a part of. As discussed earlier in Chapter 6, while the sexual proclivities group did not necessarily feel compelled to hide their fluid desires, they did feel isolated when it came to the sexual communities they were a part of. Rather than being closeted regarding the gender or sex of their sexual partners, they were secretive regarding the sexual communities they were a part of. This included keeping their non-monogamous, polyamorous relationships to themselves, or hiding their participation in cybersex, exhibitionism, and bondage communities.

On the one hand, it is not surprising that the sexual proclivities participants did not share the details of their sexual liaisons with their family members. Socially, in general, these topics and specific sexual acts are considered extremely private. Additionally, family dynamics also tend to silence sexual specificities beyond the institutions of marriage and child birth. However, the seclusion some of these women felt by not feeling comfortable to share their desires with their friends and family members was palpable in their narratives. It could entirely be possible
that as same sex intimacies become more normalized and socially recognized in society, the specter of the “closet” may be more applicable to other sexual populations, such BDSM and polyamorous communities.

Across all four categories of sexual identifiers, this study appears to indicate that families remain a strong regulating force for normative heterosexuality. At the same time, there were some interviews that appeared to be “beyond the closet,” with stories that featured enormous amounts of support for fluid sexualities and same sex desires from family members. While many women still felt they had to “come out” to their families to varying levels of support or rejection, few experienced a lifetime of scorn and alienation from their families due to their sexual identity. Though many families did exhibit a focus on heterosexuality and reproduction, there were others that discouraged gender or sexual binaries altogether.

While these observations are only true for this sample of participants and is not generalizable to the broader populace, there does seem to be room for families to operate outside of the realm of extremely oppressive compulsory heterosexual regimes. Few of the women interviewed showed signs of retaliation or rejection based on their fluid desires (with the exception of Frances when she was young and going through her divorce). Although a few of the women were scared to come out due to their families’ reaction, none were kicked out of their family homes or cutoff from financial support. In the end, families do seem to continue to reinforce the normative status of heterosexuality, but generally not to the level where coercion and retribution force women to be secretive about their sexual desires and fantasies.

Religion and the Regulation of Sexualities
Much like their experiences with family, participants had varied relationships with religion. Some were extremely positive, others were negative, and others still did not have many ties, if any, to organized religion. The institutional identifiers, particularly, reported a fairly high level of participation in organized religions. Lori, Tiffany, and Laura’s stories stuck out to me for the connection between their religious beliefs and their understandings of sexual identities. One of Lori’s greatest regrets was having a sexual and emotional relationship with a woman in college. Since graduation, she’s “prayed for forgiveness” continually at her Catholic church. It was clear Lori felt a lot of guilt for having explored her desires with women, and thought it was something she had to atone for at length.

In Tiffany’s case, her religion, which was closely tied to the culture she grew up in, was similarly oppressive for same sex relationships. So much so that her first language did not even have a word for homosexuals. To be gay would mean potential prosecution by local law enforcement and threaten certain violence, even from friends and family members. It was literally an unspeakable offense. Although Laura initially rejected the Catholic religion she grew up with, after she looked to start a family, she became re-involved with religion in her adulthood, from her wedding to bringing her kids to “regular Sunday services.” While Laura did not express the guilt that Lori had for engaging in same sex relationships in the past, it likely impacted her decision to stay in the closet while in college.

Overall the institutional identifiers had a mix of positive and negative experiences with religion growing up. Many were still practicing an organized religion in their adulthood. The political identifiers, on the other hand, by and large reported not actively participating in organized religions at the time I spoke with them. For example, Frances, Cassy, Shirley, Miranda, and Ella all reported growing up in religious households. None of them reported feeling
welcomed by their denominations, and further felt that their respective religious institutions did not support their same sex desires. Perhaps their negative experiences growing up, regardless of religious sect, led the political identifiers to reject organized religion in their adulthood. It is worth noting that none of the political identifiers were a part of religions that were supportive of same sex relationships or desires. Perhaps if they were, they would have been more likely to have stayed religiously active. Coupled with families who were vocal in their disapproval of same sex intimacies, the marginalization of same sex desires by religious institutions had a profound impact on the political identifiers’ understanding of their sexual identities.

One of the interesting differences between the institutional/political identifiers and the identity irrelevance identifiers was that there was a broader range of religions practiced by the women in the identity irrelevance category. While the institutional and political identifiers discussed practicing Muslim, Catholic, Jewish, and Evangelical religions growing up, a few of the identity irrelevance narratives noted participating in religions that were welcoming to sexual fluidity and same sex relationships. Beth, who was grouped with the identity irrelevance narratives, became involved with a local Pagan religious community while in high school, and expressed feeling welcome there when it came to her evolving desires. While she was not practicing currently, she was still observing Pagan holidays and held on to Pagan spiritual beliefs even today.

Jasmine, another identity irrelevant participant, found support for her fluid desires through her involvement in a local non-denominational religion. It was where she met her current boyfriend and for the first time found a place that was supportive of her same sex desires, unlike the “cult” (as she described it) that she grew up in. Anna, who identified as sexually fluid and was categorized as identity irrelevant, grew up in a “welcoming Christian denomination”
that supported same sex couples. Her father, a pastor, was “incredibly supportive” of her relationships with women over the years. Perhaps, for these identity irrelevant identifiers, a supportive family, coupled with an accepting religion, made it somewhat easier for them to practice and embrace their fluid desires. Although not all identity irrelevance narratives had positive religious experiences, such as Margaret, Ashley, and Mary who distanced themselves from the religious affiliations they grew up with, the identity irrelevance narratives generally had more levels of religious support than the political identity narratives did.

Among the sexual proclivities narratives, there was a stark absence of religious participation. Monica, as an example, spoke at length about having a lot of faith in a higher power or science. All of the sexual proclivities interviews expressed believing in a higher power or having faith, but did not have an affiliation with any one particular religion or practice. Stacey and Patricia rejected Christianity at this point in their lives, citing their disappointment with the scandals and abuse cases over the years. As Patricia noted, she still believed in a higher power, but not one that was hateful to any one group of people. It is quite possible the only reason the sexual proclivities participants did not participate in alternative or non-denominational religions was because there were none locally to attend. It is also possible that it was just a coincidence that none of the sexual proclivities participants I talked to were active members of an organized religion. However, it could be the case that support for their particular sexual communities of practice was absent from the organized religions in their general localities.

In sum, regardless of how the narratives were categorized, it was clear that religion had a great impact on the women’s experience and understanding of sexuality. Religious marginalization of same sex intimacies had a lifelong impact for a number of the women I spoke with. Some of the interviewees were still trying to reconcile their desires with something their
religion posed as evil or inherently wrong. Religion could both be a space where people felt welcomed and supported in their desires, or could instill a great amount of fear or shame for having particular sexual desires or relationships. Of all the institutional interactions observed in this study, religion was voiced as the least supportive institution of fluid sexual desires and identities across the women I spoke with.

**Age is Just a Number**

Savin-Williams’ (2005) research, discussed in Chapter 2, argues that today’s youth are experiencing a time when sexual identities as “master statuses” is nearly over. Additionally, Savin-William argues that today’s youth are abandoning totalizing identities of gay, straight, and bisexual as their institutional necessity has lessened over time. A few of the narratives I collected were reminiscent of Savin-Williams’ findings. Some of the youngest participants, like Alexis, Willow, Lisa, and Charlotte, all 23 years of age or younger, rejected binary labels. Of the participants under thirty years of age in this study, 56% chose a binary identity. Only 46% of the women under thirty rejected binary sexual labels. Meanwhile, out of the eight women over sixty, 63% chose a binary sexual label, and 37% ascribed to a fluid understanding of their sexuality. There were certainly observations within this study to support Savin-Williams’ argument that youths today are shunning binary sexual identities. However, there was also findings to suggest that people across all age groups are discarding binary understandings of sexuality. Perhaps the phenomenon is not relegated to only youths today, but applies to all age groups.

Although the sample is not generalizable, as it was a purposive sample and not random, it was still an intriguing finding that some of the women over sixty rejected binary sexual identities. It could be the case that, although the women over sixty came of age during a
compulsory heterosexual order, having had a myriad of experiences over their lifetimes enabled them to see sexuality as more fluid. To revisit the narratives of Stacey, Margaret, and Patricia, the acknowledgement of their desires for women over time seemed to play a role in their rejection of binary understandings of sexual identities. In Stacey’s case, acknowledging that what she liked sexually was not tied to a specific set of sexual organs was something she came to understand over time. Although she may not have had sex with a woman in her lifetime, she still recognized her desires for women and noted that her sexual fulfilment was not tied to the sex/gender of her partners. To recap Patricia’s take on sexual identities, she noted, “Sex isn’t about who you do it with. I think what’s more important is what you enjoy. So sure everyone thinks I’m straight. But no one’s ever asked me, and I like a lot of things.” Her enjoyment of women and female bodies was something she was able to share with her husband over their long marriage.

Margaret, however, did not focus on the acts, but instead embraced her lifelong desires for both women and men. To deny any of her myriad of desires, at this point in her life, would be a “disservice to my desires and the women I’ve enjoyed [being with] …” The rejection of sexual binaries, at least in this sampling of narratives, was not relegated to any one age group. Moreover, turning sixty did not bring an end to the women’s sex lives. Instead, if anything, they spoke about feeling more sexual freedom in their later years when there were less strings attached to sex and dating in their 60s and 70s.

Again, while this study does not necessarily challenge Savin-Williams’ findings, it would, on the surface, seem to suggest that perhaps rather than youths only experiencing less social pressures to adhere to sexual categories, the lessening institutional regulation may extend itself to various age groups, especially as all the age groups in this study had both binary and
non-binary identified individuals. It is possible that rather than youths only benefitting from changes in the social construction of sexualities in the contemporary U.S., all age groups are finding spaces that encourage the multiplicity of desires. The lessening importance of sexual labels for institutional recognition may apply to all age groups, but be constrained by other factors (race, location, monosexuality, monogamy, ethnicity, religion, etc.).

As a final thought on the relationship between age and sex, it is noteworthy to mention that the narratives dispelled one more common sexual stereotype. As far as sexual activities across age groups, I did not find any differences in the amount (or types) of reported sexual activity between the younger and older participants. All age groups had women who reported not being sexually active and women who reported being very sexually active at the time we spoke. At least among this group of women, I did not see any evidence to suggest that there were major differences in sex drives or the amount of sex the women in this study had across age groups. While there were changes noted in the women’s physiology (some discussed having to look to solutions for lubrication after 50, or talked about their partners using Viagra), that did not stop them from participating in sexual relations later in their lives. Further, the reasons for not having sex among the women over fifty years old were on par for those under fifty, such as not being interested in being physical with anyone at that point in time or not wanting to have romantic/emotional relationships presently.

The above findings (again, at least for the women I talked to) are important in that they underscore the need for further investigation of the relationship between sex, sexuality, and aging. There is a dearth of research regarding the sexual activity of men and women over 60, likely due to the assumption that sex drives lessen over time. Among the younger women I spoke to, there were several who implied that sex “dies when you reach a certain age” (said by
Charlotte, the youngest participant). However, in speaking with these forty women of various ages, I did not see any narrative evidence to support the idea that older women are less likely to have sex, or that younger generations are necessarily having more or different types of sex than their older counterparts in this study. Further research is needed to understand the specific sexual differences (if any) between various age groups to dispel the stereotypes surrounding sex and aging. Moreover, there are likely specific sexual needs or risks facing different age groups that would be better understood with further investigation.

**Racial and Ethnic Intersections with Sexual Identities**

Although there was not as much racial/ethnic diversity in this sample as I had hoped to have, there were examples of the complicated ways that sexuality was impacted by racial and ethnic backgrounds. There were no observed differences in the number of non-binary to binary sexual identities between racial/ethnic backgrounds. For example, there was a similar ratio of non-binary to binary identifications between white groups and women of color as participants.

However, race and ethnicities did have an impact on the sexual stereotypes participants who are women of color faced. In addition, several interviewees discussed the overt racism they experienced in white LGBTQ communities. Although the Korean and Vietnamese American women I spoke to were both institutional identifiers, it cannot be generalized that Asian American women are more likely to be institutional identifiers because their stories were not well represented enough in this research. But what both of the women did talk about was feeling the pressures of being “a model Asian” minority, as Jamie described in her own words. Being a second generation family in the U.S. placed different expectations on both Amy and Jamie, and
they both voiced pressures from their parents and grandparents to fit in and adhere to the social norms of their schools and towns.

Of the eight Black or multi-racial women who participated in this study, two were institutional identifiers, two were political identifiers, three discussed sexual proclivities, and one was categorized as identity irrelevant. The one identity irrelevance narrative in this group (Mary) distanced herself from the LGBTQ community over time after experiencing multiple instances of racism while participating in various LGBTQ groups across the U.S. The two politicized identifiers chose to locate geographically in large metropolitan areas in order to participate in the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) LGBTQ communities they found support within. Miranda and Carmen, similar to Mary, discussed feeling out of place in “white LGBTQ scenes” (Carmen) due to racist stereotypes and slurs used against them.

Nonetheless, Carmen, Miranda, Mary, and Jill also discussed the taboo of LGBTQ identities in the BIPOC communities they grew up in. Particularly, Jill noted that her historically Black congregation was homophobic even though there were members who were known LGBTQ individuals. Though everyone in the community was aware the individual was “gay”, their identities remained unspoken for fear of reprisal or ostracism. These narrative echoed findings from the larger body of intersectional research on sexualities that highlight the ways that race/ethnicity can further complicate the experience and acceptance of non-heterosexual identities (Collins 2004; Durham 2002; Goldman 1996; Nagel 2000; Somerville 2000).

The two Latina identified women I talked to fell under the sexual proclivities category. Again, due to the small sampling, it was just coincidence both women happened to fall into the same group. Neither talked about the role their ethnicity had in their upbringing or understanding of sexuality. However, both Evangeline and Willow lived in large cities, partly
because it was easier to access their sexual communities of choice (group sex communities, exhibitionist forums, etc.). While there has been cross-cultural research surrounding Latino/Latina sexualities across the globe, there has not been as many studies on sexual identities focused on Latin American communities in the U.S. Similarly, there has not been as much research centered on sexual identities in Muslim American communities. For Tiffany, there were severe repercussions for not adhering to both sexual and gender binaries in her home Muslim country. It is possible that Muslim Americans face similar, heightened LGBTQ backlash even in the U.S. to varying degrees. Again, this would be an interesting area for future studies to focus on, as will be discussed later in this conclusion.

The narrative findings in this study certainly merit further research to uncover which of these trends are found in the broader U.S. population. The suggested themes across the interview categories would certainly be interesting to explore on a larger scale. It is quite possible that there are more nuances across the categories that could be uncovered. Additionally, it is possible that there are more categories as of yet unobserved. Now that we have reviewed the main observances in this qualitative data set, the next section will revisit the original research questions posed at the start of this research.

REVISITING THE PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To begin this section, we return to the reasons that the women provided for adopting binary identities and adhering to socially constructed sexual labels to answer the question of why some people continue to identify within sexual binaries. Next, we will review the instances of rebellion and rejection of binary sexualities and the spaces that may have encouraged resistance to static identities to understand why and where/when people are rejecting sexual binaries. Then,
we will explore the varying accounts of sexual fluidity among the participants to answer the broader question of who and how people interpreted their fluid experiences, and outline the differing interpretations by the four categories of identifiers. Finally, we will address the principle question behind this research; can the theory of compulsory heterosexuality fully explain the observed sexual identity disjuncture and fluid accounts documented in this study? Or is there some utility in also considering the applicability of the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality to explain the findings of this dissertation?

The Adoption of Static Sexual Identities

In total, sixteen women out of the forty participants I spoke with adopted a fixed sexual identity. What was interesting is that the women had different reasons and rationales for taking on static sexual identities. As expected, there were a number of women who felt their sexual identity was a natural part of themselves, just “who [they] are.” For the four institutional identifiers without fluid experiences or fantasies, their heterosexuality was “a given.” Many interpreted their heterosexuality as having a genetic basis. Some were surprised that anyone would ask about how they identified sexually at all. Even for Brenda, the lone lesbian political identifier with no history of sexual fluidity, her lifelong desires for women led her to conclude that her homosexuality was how she was born. Sexual identity was an unquestioned assumption for these women. As a result, this extended to their adoption of socially constructed gender binaries, at least for the four institutional identifiers without sexually fluid histories.

Having grown up with non-U.S. cultural norms also seemed to impact the adoption of normative binary gender and sexual roles. In Tiffany’s culture, for example, gender roles were culturally, religiously, and legally enforced. Tiffany was expected to live at home with her
family until marriage, with a strictly controlled curfew and chaperoning of her time with men. For an unmarried woman to be alone with men, without a chaperone, could lead to sexual assault and violence. Culture also played a role for Amy, for whom heterosexuality was a “no brainer.” While her parents had a strict no dating policy while she was in high school, as soon as she got to college they pushed her to date and find a “doctor for a husband.” Her first generation Vietnamese family assumed that her husband would be the primary earner for the family, and thus she should find someone of a higher social status (such as a doctor).

Jamie (Korean American) and Jill (African American) also both adhered to and naturalized traditional gender roles, citing the masculine dominance of their partners as a source of attraction for them. Similarly, they described themselves and other women as having stereotypical moods and dispositions, such as being overly emotional. While both grew up in the U.S., the added cultural/community stigmas of their racial and ethnic communities may have influenced their adherence to gender and sexual binaries. Monogamy, marriage, and having children were also unquestioned for these four women. All saw marriage and kids as the most natural progression for their relationships once they found the “right man.” Not only did the normative status of heterosexuality remain unquestioned for these women, but also the underlying gender binaries that uphold these norms.

The remaining six institutional identifiers, the women who chose a static identity regardless of having fluid sexual histories, similarly adhered to gender binaries, both for themselves and for their expectations in their long terms partners. They felt that in order to be fulfilled sexually, they needed a husband and a family. In terms of their “types” when looking for suitors, they focused on men who were strong caretakers, and generally took on the dominant, head of household role. Strength and masculinity were cited the most for what they were
attracted to in their sexual partners. But why, given their desires for or sexual encounters with women across their lives, did they still adopt a static heterosexual identity?

For some institutional identifiers, having a sexual experience or intimate encounter with a woman served to reinforce their “true” desires for men. For example, some women kissed other women publically to draw the attention of the men they were attracted to. Other institutional identifiers negated their same sex experiences or fantasies as one time occurrences. Their predominant attraction for men led to their dismissal of same sex attractions, regardless of the duration or number of times they had intimacies with women. The adherence to gender roles and the perception of the complementarity of masculinity and femininity reinforced the institutional identifiers belief in monosexuality. Additionally, the stereotype of American families, and the link between being a good heterosexual and raising a family, was common among the institutional identifiers. Some saw leaving their desires for women behind as necessary in order to raise a “healthy family.” Having a traditional family was both a source of accomplishment and a goal for many of the institutional identifiers.

However, for the eight lesbian/gay politicized identifiers with fluid sexual histories, monosexuality also played a large role in their adoption of a static homosexual identities. Since they were predominantly attracted to women, and did not desire to be intimate with men in the future, they similarly dismissed their opposite sex sexual encounters as one offs. Several of the political identifiers noted that they felt substantial pressure from friends and family members to date (or have sex with) men in their youth. Some even noted that people had implied they could not truly know if they were gay unless they gave having sex with or a relationship with men a “fair chance.”
The subtle coercion to “give heterosexuality a chance” had a lasting impact on the political identifiers. Having sex with men at different times in their lives served to reinforce their predominant desires for women. A unique theme for political identifiers, however, was that of cultural and community affiliations. All of the political identifiers voiced the importance of LGBTQ culture and the historical importance of gay and lesbian identities. Many took part in sexual activism to varying degrees, and all had close ties to their local (and national) LGBTQ communities, organizations, and spaces. The importance of LGBTQ history and the marginalization against members of the community led institutional identifiers to proudly adopt the sexual labels of gay/lesbian/queer rather than reject labels altogether.

**Binary Gender and Sexual Rebellions and Resistances**

While there were many who adopted static sexual identities, there were also twenty-one women in this study who found varying ways of understanding their sexuality and pleasures outside of sexual binaries. Though many relayed similar attractions to strength and dominance, these traits were not relegated to masculinity and men alone. Rather, these traits generally transcended constructions of gender, and were seen as personality traits not tied to the sex/gender of their partners. The women in the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities categories found varying ways to conceptualize their sexualities and reject socially constructed sexual binaries. They also found spaces and communities that valued and supported their sexual fluidity.

The identity irrelevant identifiers were distinctive in their understanding and practice of sexualities. Many of these women felt that they had an attraction to all genders/sexes. Specifically, they had an attraction to both male and female bodies, and enjoyed relationships or sexual intimacies with men and women. Others felt that their sexual attractions for people were
not dependent on “what they have in their pants.” Rather than being attracted to sexual organs, their sexual attraction was based on other traits, like domination/submission power dynamics, individual personalities, and the sexual acts that were not dependent on the sex/gender of their partners.

A number of the identity irrelevance narratives also placed importance on non-monogamy, rejecting both the monogamous and monosexual underpinning of normative heterosexuality. The women in this group valued freedom of choice and felt that binary sexual identities were limiting and not suited to describe their sexual histories. A few of these narrative accounts aligned themselves with polyamory and pansexuality, while others used the general term of being “sexually fluid.” Again, in contrast to institutional and political identifiers, these women rejected the premise of monosexuality and monogamy. Several women also rejected physical sexual relationships in general. Their overall lack of wanting or need to have sex with a partner(s) led them to understand their sexuality in ways that were not dependent on sexual or gender binaries.

There were similar themes of non-monogamy and polyamory across the sexual proclivities narratives. However, there was one main difference in their histories. Rather than prioritizing the multiplicity of their desires for various gender/sexed expressions and bodies, they felt that their sexual identity was best defined by the sexual acts and communities they were a part of. Sexual communities that focused on particular types of sexual acts were an accepting space for the sexual proclivities group to explore their fluid fantasies. One example of a socially accepting place for fluidity was BDSM communities and the online cybersex/exhibitionism forums some of the women spoke about at length. Other examples of spaces that were supportive of sexual fluidity included online groups that served as a meeting space for people to arrange any
number of sexual liaisons (including voyeurism and group sex/polyamorous encounters/partnerships).

Overall, these places enabled the sexual proclivities category to explore their deepest desires with likeminded, consenting individuals. Having the freedom to focus on what they enjoyed sexually, rather than specific traits of the people they engaged in the acts with, created new spaces for fluidity to thrive by focusing on the sexual acts themselves that brought the most pleasure. Although the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities categories both embraced fluidities, they did so in differing ways and within different social spaces.

Reconsidering Queer Narratives and the Challenges of Overlapping Categorizations

A final note on the self-identified queer narratives reviewed earlier in this dissertation. While three of the four queer narratives were included in the political identifier group, I wanted to add a caveat to their inclusion in this static identifier category. Their stories were grouped with the lesbian/gay identified women because they similarly saw their sexuality as being politically based and chose a sexual label to reflect that. Rather than identify as sexually fluid or pansexual, they chose a queer identity to convey their connection to the broader LGBTQ identity, communities, and history. However, while they used queer as a “static” identity, their fixed identity of queer was grounded in fluidity and freedom of choice. The queer theoretical movement, at heart, argues for fluid interpretations of sexuality to challenge the boundaries of the good/bad and the normal/abnormal sexual citizen.

Thus, while the queer political identifiers held a static, or fixed identity label of queer that they did not interchange, it was one built on the premise of sexual fluidity. Further, the queer narratives prioritized freedom of choice beyond binaries. In this way, the queer narratives were
more closely aligned with the identity irrelevance narratives. However, due to their discussions at length surrounding the importance of LGBTQ politics, community, and culture, I grouped them with the political identifiers. They are one instance of how the boundaries between the four categories sometimes overlapped.

There are other examples of the overlapping boundaries between the categories of identifiers. Women across all four categories shared various similarities with one another. Many had comparable relationships with their families or ties to local communities. Also, many (though notably not all) of the women were able to identify their favorite sexual acts that they enjoy. However, it was only those in the sexual proclivities category that used their favorite sexual acts as the basis for understanding their sexual identities. Those not grouped in sexual proclivities may have identified sexual acts that were central to their sensual satisfaction, but those acts were secondary to other factors they based their sexual identity on.

For example, there were institutional and political identifiers who expressed a deep enjoyment of oral and anal sex. Without those acts, they noted they would not feel sexually fulfilled. Yet, when it came to understanding their sexuality, rather than seeing those acts as central to who they were, it was secondary to being straight or gay. While centering sexual identities on sexual acts clearly differentiated the sexual proclivities narratives from the rest, it is important to note that there were certainly intersections and overlapping themes, desires, and acts across all the interviews. As will be discussed later, it is a factor that may complicate replicating a similar research study.

Instances of Social Coercion & Evidence of Institutionalized Normative Heterosexuality
Another observation that emerged from the interviews was the myriad of ways that all of the women experienced varying levels of coercion to adhere to normative sexual identities. Two of the narratives struck me as showing a great, if not dangerous, degree of social coercion to adopt binary sexual identities. The first was Tiffany’s story of growing up in the Middle East. To violate the norms governing sex and sexuality could lead to dire consequences. Her story about being assaulted at a friends’ party by a suitor she turned down was not an uncommon occurrence for women she grew up with. When she returned home, she would have no choice but to live with her mom and brothers again, even after having traveled the world on her own and obtaining a higher education. Although arranged marriages today are not as common as they once were at her home, she still had friends and acquaintances who were married to partners that were chosen by their families. Tiffany expressed her fears of returning now that she had the freedom to date during her time in the U.S. Returning home with a “very different quality of life and customs” was scary for Tiffany, heightened by the fact that I spoke to her on the eve of her return.

Frances also had terrifying experiences with the social coercion to adhere to binary sexual and gender regimes in the U.S. Coming of age in the 50s and 60s left few protections and safe spaces for Frances’ desires for women. The fear of losing her job, social standing, and family support pushed her to marry quickly as soon as someone suspected she might be a lesbian. Her fears were not unfounded, as once her desires for women were made public by her ex-husband, she lost everything. Her family abandoned her for years, she lost her job, custody of her children, and all of her income and belongings. For over a year, she was forced to live in her car with no contact from her family or children. Tiffany and Frances’ narratives were extreme examples of living in compulsory heterosexual regimes and the social coercion to adopt normative heterosexual scripts.
Yet, there were still traces of social coercion to adopt binary sexualities and genders in all of the narratives gathered in this study. Women across the identity categorizations detailed experiences with religious upbringings and living in towns and places that were particularly unwelcome to fluidities and non-heterosexual relations. Monica, for example, turned to cybersex in the midst of near total isolation from LGBTQ safe spaces. Jasmine’s strict religious upbringing that was “borderline cultish” fostered fear and shame surrounding her sexual fantasies of women. What was somewhat surprising to me was how many of the women I spoke to with non-heterosexual identities were not “out” at work (unless they were involved in activism/academia). At least among the women I spoke to, it seems the workplace continues to be a space where women with non-heterosexual identities or sexual proclivities/polyamorous relationships do not feel safe disclosing details regarding their sexuality. The fear of on the job retaliation, whether it was being fired or passed over for promotions/advancement, was a common theme across all of the categories of identifiers. This was certainly evidence of the types of continuing social coercion to adhere to normative sexual expectations.

That brings us back to the principle questions of this research; can micro-level sexual narratives capture instances of macro-level regulation of sexual coercion? Moreover, can the theory of compulsory heterosexuality explain the occurrences of sexual regulation and coercion observed in this study? Or does the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality better elucidate the contemporary experience and organization of sexualities in the U.S.? First and foremost, while this study offers some insights in regards to these questions, due to its limited size and scope, these research findings require further substantiation to understand how typical these experiences are in the larger populace. As such, further study will certainly be necessary to garner additional evidence, examples, and narratives.
With that caveat in mind, what these forty narratives did reveal was the different ways macro, institutional structures of sexuality can reveal themselves in a multitude of ways in micro-level sexual narratives. Again, as outlined in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, evidence of compulsory heterosexuality would reveal itself in the instances where women with fluid experiences would feel compelled to identify within binaries even though they did not “fit” their history. The social rewards for doing so would manifest in ideologies of being a good sexual citizen and a lack of harassment or social ostracism. Additionally, a strict adherence to binary gender roles and social expectations could also support the theory of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1993).

On the other hand, indications of an institutionalized normative heterosexual order would appear in narratives where women were less likely to adopt binary sexual identities amid sexually fluid histories. The theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality would also be supported in the cases where women put less importance on the sex or gender of their partners and more importance on freedom of choice or specific sexual acts or communities (Seidman 2009B). A widespread rejection of sexual identity labels could also support the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality, as women would have more spaces to voice their desires for women and other gender expressions (even if they did not act upon those fantasies).

That brings us to revisiting the principle question at the heart of this research. What did the collected narratives reveal in terms of the social regulation of heterosexuality and institutional coercion to adhere to sexual and gender binaries? Were there instances of the aforementioned evidence to suggest the continuation or compulsory heterosexuality? Or did the findings indicate that perhaps coercion was less prevalent in the women’s histories? In the end, the results varied from participant to participant. Perhaps a compulsory heterosexual order and
the fear to adopt fixed sexual identities was no more apparent than in Tiffany and Frances’ interviews. Again, Frances lost everything when she was “outed” publicly. In the case of Tiffany, she did not even have to be gay to be at risk for social ridicule, gossip, and unwanted sexual advances. Simply being an unmarried woman on her own without the protection of her family posed a serious danger to her safety.

Yet, as the interview went on, Tiffany spent a great deal of time detailing the freedoms she experienced while in the U.S. working on her M.A. Even Frances discussed how, although it was 30 years in the making, today she feels more free to be herself publically “more than ever before” and felt completely safe doing so, even while traveling the globe with her wife. Although they each had signs of living in a compulsory heterosexual order, the coercion and social regulation varied both over time and across their geographic location. Their experiences can certainly be explained by the theory of compulsory heterosexuality, and exemplify the power of institutions to force people to adhere to normative heterosexuality. However, at different times in their histories, their experiences may also be better understood through the lens of institutionalized normative heterosexuality. Tiffany’s freedom to date online and have sex without repercussions in the U.S., and Frances no longer having to hide her homosexuality from anyone anywhere she travels, better lend themselves to the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality.

Again, for the ten institutional identifiers who chose a static heterosexual identity, six of those women experienced varying degrees of sexual fluidity across their lifetimes. At the end of the day, those six women all chose to adopt and convey a fixed heterosexual identity privately and publically. They each had their reasons; in the case of Lori and Laura, religious beliefs and the desire to have “healthy” families necessitated they leave their desires for women behind. To
Lori, her relationship with a woman in college was a source of shame, something she felt the need to atone for years later. Her self-worth was built around having “the perfect family,” and her proudest achievement was raising two children with her husband. Laura’s narratives, while absent the sentiments of extreme shame surrounding her lesbian relationships in college, also very much centered on the idea that the only way to have a real family was to adhere to normative heterosexual scripts.

As such, when Laura decided to have a family, she began dating men in the early stages of her career with the goal of finding a husband to “settle down with.” The belief that the only way to fulfill the role of a good sexual citizen is to marry and have children is one that is entrenched in compulsory heterosexual ideology. Yet, if you juxtapose their accounts to those of Tiffany and Frances, the extreme social coercion and backlash for not adhering to binary heterosexual identities were mostly absent. For example, while it was difficult for Laura to connect with the LGBTQ community after she graduated, she would have been able to settle in metropolitan areas that had thriving LGBTQ cultures had she wanted to. In addition, while she was not out to her family in college, she was a recognizable lesbian on her campus without fear of reprisal.

Similarly, Lori was able to have a yearlong relationship with a woman in college, again without the threat of danger or prospect of losing everything (financially, emotionally, or otherwise). A true compulsory heterosexual society offers few places to explore the multiplicity of desires. For the political identifiers in this study who chose to adhere to binary lesbian/gay identities, they did so (as far as this study observed) not out of fear or coercion to be socially recognized, but because it conveyed their connections to the history of LGBTQ marginalization. Only one of the nine self-identified lesbians/gays/queers in the entire study felt there was a
biological component to their desires for women. The rest openly acknowledged the existence of sexual fluidity, but again, chose to self-identify in order to pay homage to the sexual communities they came of age in. Noticeably absent from the accounts of the majority of political identifiers was the idea that they were only two sexualities, heterosexual and homosexuals. Even if they did not ascribe to more fluid identities like pansexuality, they did acknowledge the existence and importance of sexually fluid experiences.

But what about the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities narratives? Here is where I observed the most examples of what institutionalized (as opposed to compulsory) normative heterosexuality may look like on an individual level. While not all women in the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities categories had intimate, romantic experiences with self-identified women or genderqueer individuals, they were still incredibly open in acknowledging their desires for all genders. Moreover, their embracement of fluid sexual experiences and fantasies were not interpreted through a lens of shame or pollution, but instead were seen as generally enhancing their sexual satisfaction. None felt the need to adopt static, fixed sexual identities in order to “fit in” socially. Instead, they found identities and sexual communities that were based on something other than sexual and gender binaries. Again, none of these women lost their families, or livelihoods, due to their rejection of sexual or gender binaries.

The ability to express their fluidity socially without major reprisal, and the existence of spaces that recognize non-binary identities, is more closely aligned with the tenets of institutionalized normative heterosexuality. In a society organized by institutionalized normative heterosexuality, only some institutions are structurally upheld by sexual and gender binaries (such as religious and family institutions). Even though some institutions may be organized by sexual/gender binaries, heterosexuality is not a necessary condition of institutional belonging at
large. There is some evidence in these narratives of the individual sexual agency to resist sexual/gender binaries without being rejected generally in American institutions (Seidman 2009B).

Yet, at the same time, amid the many fluid sexual accounts gathered in this research, there were still circumstances where the identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities narratives were not fully open or public with their desires. In some cases, the women were not free to express their sexual pleasures and fluidity outside of the sexual communities they were a part of. For instance, at least for the women categorized in the sexual proclivities group, they were somewhat isolated in sharing their experiences with family, friends, and went out of their way to avoid discussions about their sexuality/relationships at work. This could exemplify the ways that women have to navigate the structural divides of normative heterosexuality in some institutions, while also still being able to express identities outside of socially constructed sexual and gender binaries (Seidman 2009B).

Thanks to technological advances and the media mainstreaming of BDSM culture, there seemed to be an abundance of social spaces for the women to enjoy or coordinate their deepest desires. However, the fact that these women went to varying lengths to hide their participation in the sexual acts/communities from those who were the closest to them suggests that perhaps while the specter of the closet is lessoning in light of increasing LGBTQ visibility and protections, perhaps it is shifting in its regulatory scope. Rather than reinforce sexual binaries and discourage sexual fluidity, the “closet” of the 1950s could now be serving to protect alternative tenets of normative heterosexuality, such as monogamy and monosexuality, rather than enforcing a social regime of heterosexuality.
Again, while the findings are not conclusive, they do suggest some important shifts in the social regulation of sexualities in the U.S. Overall, it is clear that sexual and gender binaries have not disappeared in the U.S. The reach of social coercion and rewards to adhere to normative binary sexual and gender scripts varied for each of the women in this study depending on a myriad of factors. The assumption of heterosexuality continues to be something that either needs to be corrected (via coming out) or reinforced via the performance of normative heterosexuality. There was still evidence of coercion on different levels across the narratives. Additionally, there were also some notable institutions that continue to exert coercive pressures to adhere to sexual norms (such as some, but not all, religious institutions). The narratives seem to suggest there are still circumstances that may be better explained and understood via the theory of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1993).

At the same time, other narrative experiences appeared to transcend compulsory heterosexual regulation. For identity irrelevance and sexual proclivities narratives, their experiences seemed to be best described by the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality. Again, there were examples in these narratives to support both theories to an extent. Perhaps, moving forward, both theories are important in understanding the social construction of sexualities in contemporary American society (Rich 1993; Seidman 2009B). It may be the case that both theories should be explored in order to best explain different social phenomena. As such, the importance in differentiating which theory is best suited to explain varying experiences is key to better understanding the ways that individual experiences of sexualities are both operating outside of, and continue to be regulated by, normative heterosexuality.
RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

As noted throughout this study, there are limitations to extrapolating the findings of this research. The purposive sampling techniques that were required to target representation from particular groups in this study unfortunately make is so that we cannot generalize the experiences of these women to the broader U.S. population. Further, the sample size made it impossible to capture a fully illustrative sample across different demographic and social groups (age, religion, race, ethnicity, economic class, and geographic location). Even across age groups, I was not able to find equal amounts of participants in all age brackets. Particularly, I was only able to find four women who were in their 50s who would agree to participate in this study. Thus, it is possible that the categorizations defined herein may not apply to the population at large. There is also the potential that there could be more than four categorizations for sexual identifier types in the U.S.

Aside from the non-representational (but purposive) sample, there are other limiting factors to this research worth touching on. Perhaps the most challenging is the fact that it is impossible to guarantee the participants fully disclosed all the details of their sexual histories, fantasies, and desires to me. There is also a chance that the degree of female masculinity in my physical appearance could have impacted how much (or what) the women felt comfortable disclosing. Also, there is no way to guarantee that the women were not trying to give me particular responses because they thought it was “what I was looking for.”

Further, there is a sampling concern that a particular type of person was more likely to respond to the calls for participants to begin with. At least four of the women who participated in this study noted having participated in other research studies. While none were specific to the field of sexualities, they did seem more likely to share their stories in order to contribute to scientific knowledge or advancement.
That said, the women’s histories could have also been biased to the extent that people who had non-normative experiences would be more likely to want to participate in research regarding their sexuality than those who were normatively heterosexual. It is very possible that women who had less normative experiences felt compelled and were more willing to speak with me about their sexual histories. As such, fluid accounts and understandings of sexualities could be overrepresented in this research as compared to the general population. Finally, since I experienced a general shortage of physical public spaces to post the calls for participants, those who responded to the in-person ads may have presented a selection-bias since they frequented similar spaces (coffee shops, bars, gyms).

Further complicating the conclusions of this study is that for many of the fluid narratives, it is difficult to discern their impact on the broader social construction of binary sexualities. Many of the women may have eschewed identities to me, but did not go on to reject them in their personal lives. Some would only publically date men, but have sexual encounters with women privately or online. Others would not go out of their way to correct people for assuming they were heterosexual. While the women may have felt comfortable voicing their fluid desires and fantasies to me, it is impossible to tell if they only felt safe to disclose their stories to me or if their personal experiences could somehow impact the larger macro level sexual regulation. It is very difficult to extrapolate whether or not sexual fluidity and individual resistances to sexual and gender binaries necessarily have the ability to impact sexual and gender coercion at the macro, social institutional level.

The remaining limitation of this research is its ability to be replicated. While I tried to draw conclusions in categorizing the women’s experiences into the four narrative types, I cannot guarantee that another researcher would have drawn the same conclusions as I did. I recognize
that the overlap in experiences for some of the participants leaves the potential that someone else’s impressions of the interviews may have led them to make a different identity categorization. This could not only impact the data tables, but could also change the amount of women reported as operating outside of sexual binary discourses. One example of this, as noted earlier, draws on the queer identified women in the study. While I felt three of the queer identified women best fit in the political identifier group, another researcher may have felt they all belonged squarely in the identity irrelevance category. Having reviewed the limitations of this study, it should be noted that this research still has a lot to contribute to the wider field of sociological research on sexualities.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF SOCIOLOGY AND RESEARCH ON SEXUALITIES

There are a number of ways this study adds to the sociological understanding of the social construction and coercion surrounding sexuality and sexual identities in the U.S. Contrary to many prior studies on sexualities, this research specifically targeted women across age groups. In speaking with the women at length, it was clear that fluidity is not just something impacting younger generations, such as Savin-William’s research indicates. Further, in seeking narratives of women over forty years of age, the research was intended to uncover how conceptualizations of sexual identities may or may not fluctuate over time. An abundance of sociological research has looked at sexual identities and fluidity among college age women, but few have addressed the changes in identities across women’s lives. There were enough findings among these narratives to suggest that fluidity may not be relegated to the younger generations. It is possible that, having had a lifetime of sexual encounters, fantasies, and desires, older woman may be more likely to embrace fluid understandings as they age and have different experiences.
Additionally, this dissertation sought to target communities and places outside of college campuses and educational communities. Although many studies have shed light on the fluid experiences of college women, it is very likely there are more spaces for sexual fluidity to thrive outside of universities and colleges. There were a number of narratives in this study that suggested that fluid experiences and interpretations of sexuality are not limited to higher educational spaces. Furthermore, the narratives supported findings in intersectional research that argue there is added marginalization and regulation of sexualities across racial, ethnic, and religious communities.

What also makes this research unique is that it is potentially one of the first exploratory qualitative studies to question whether compulsory heterosexuality is still applicable in light of all the social changes in the regulation of sexualities since the 1970s. It is also one of the first qualitative attempts to explore the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality, and whether or not it may better explain the contemporary experience and construction of sexual identities in the U.S. Although the conclusions in this study are not representative of the larger populace, they still do highlight avenues for future studies.

Another contribution of this investigation, and one I find to be particularly important, was in demonstrating that you can research sexuality in ways that avoid naturalizing socially constructed sexual identities of gay/straight. We discussed earlier in the literature review that some prior research on sexual fluidity was used to naturalize sexual binaries. Instead of seeing sexual fluidity as evidence that sexual identities can change over time, sexual fluidity became an added fourth category to the existing social organization of sexuality (gay/straight/bisexual). Rather than rooting these women’s desires in biology, I sought to highlight the ways that sexual fluidity constitutes a renegotiation of socially constructed sexual binaries and sexual
categorization. Sexual identity, for these women, was a highly social one, bound by the macro institutional structure of sexual binaries at the same time it was a socially organized via local communities and forums.

Finally, this research has added to the body of literature surrounding general identity development. Perhaps the identifier categories put forth in this study could extend themselves to other identity groups, and are not only limited to sexual identity conceptualizations. They may be able to explain other identity performances or dissonances between actual experiences and how people identify within or outside established social norms. With these limitations and contributions aside, what are some potential avenues for future research on sexual identities?

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON SEXUALITIES

To bring this dissertation to a close, what are some possibilities for research in the future to address both the limitations of this study and also broaden the reach of its findings? The first would be to expand this research to a larger sample size. A greater sample size would be able to uncover more variation and experiences across different communities and social groups. Potentially, a larger sample could also unveil additional identifier types not captured in this dissertation research. Perhaps a more interesting direction for the future would be to replicate this study in other countries to better understand the role of particular cultures in regulating the experience and interpretations of sexual identities. It is possible that the theory of compulsory heterosexuality may be extremely applicable in some cultures, while the theory of institutionalized normative heterosexuality may be better explain the organization of sexualities in other countries.
Personally, I felt that one of the most interesting routes for future research would be focusing on sexual experiences and identities among older populations. They could explore how age interacts with other factors, such as race, ethnicity, religion, and so forth. There continues to be a shortage of studies on sexual identities and experiences among women over forty years of age. Given their sexual experiences spanned a longer time frame, it is very possible that beliefs in sexual fluidities may increase for some as they get older. Perhaps there is a correlation between the amount of sexual experiences people have over their lives and whether or not their understandings of sexual identities changes as they get older. The research on age and sexual identities and experiences is also important to challenge and fight stereotypes that sexual activity and desires lessen as people age.

Finally, an important avenue for future research would be to focus on sexual identity formation among racial and ethnic minority groups. Per the research cited in the earlier literature review, different groups may experience varying degrees of coercion to adopt binary sexual identities. Even if there is a growing amount of research that points to the proliferation of fluid sexual narratives and resistances to binary conceptualizations of sexuality, it is very likely those freedoms do not extend equally to all individuals in the U.S. Finding answers on how race and ethnicity impact understandings and experiences of sexual identities can help find more nuanced ways of supporting underserved populations and work to unravel compulsory heterosexual regulation across all demographic groups.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENTS OF SOCIAL THEORY

In summary, the negotiation of sexual desires and pleasures in a society organized by sexual and gender binaries presented various challenges for the women in this study. To some,
this manifested as incongruities in their chosen binary identity (a lesbian identity amid a sexual history with men; a heterosexual identity amid sexual experiences with women). Other narratives displayed a life long struggle to find comfortability with their deepest fantasies and desires. Yet, still, some women embraced their complicated sexual histories and set aside socially constructed sexual labels and roles altogether. At its heart, this research aimed to provide an empirical assessment of long standing theories in feminist and sociological studies of sexuality and gender.

Overall, I sought to shed light on the ways that larger, macro institutional organizations of sexuality can greatly impact individual sexual experiences on a micro level. The importance of utilizing empirical research to bolster theories on sexuality and gender cannot be overstated to better understand how macro level structures impact everyday identity negotiation on a very personal level. This study is an example of how we can further refine sociological and feminist theory by utilizing qualitative research to exemplify and substantiate theoretical arguments. In the end, it can only help to further our understanding of the ways our private sexual lives are impacted by larger social regulation. This is especially important living in a time where it is clear that social protections can be eliminated at the whims of differing political systems of power.
APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I. GENERAL

Why don’t we begin by talking a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where do you live now? What brought you to your current location?

Tell me about your last birthday. Did you have a big party? Was it a small/big affair? Was it a “milestone”?

Can you describe your family for me, and what your family life is like? What are some of your happiest memories/experiences?

Did you enjoy going to school and pursuing your education? Did you “fit in” or did you have difficulties being bullied or getting along with other kids?

Tell me about your work life. Where do you work (you can just say the field if you don’t feel comfortable stating the actual workplace)? Do you enjoy your job?

Can you give me an idea of what your idea of a perfect Friday night/weekend is? What types of hobbies or activities you enjoy most in your free time? Do you go to bars/clubs often? What are you friends like? Are they the same age/race/gender/geographic area as you? Do you see them regularly?

II. RELATIONSHIP HISTORY

Are you in a relationship right now? If not, tell me about the last relationship/intimate encounter you were in. Was it long term/serious? Or casual? How long were you with them? Where did you meet?

Tell me about the person. What were they like? What first attracted you to them? What did you like most/least about the person? How would you categorize (if at all) in gender/sexual identity terms?
What were your favorite traits about them (if any)? If there was anything you could have changed about them, what would it be?

Did/do you live together? Would you consider it a traditional relationship? What do you like most/least about your interactions with one another?

How many times would you say that you have been in love? Do you think you can or have you loved more than one person, intimately, in your lifetime? Do you like being in love? Who was your first love?

Could you make a short list of the qualities you find most important in intimate relationships? Character-wise, emotionally, physically/aesthetically, and sexually?

III. SEXUAL HISTORY/FLUIDITY

Before we talk more about your sexual history, can you talk a little bit about how you define sex? For instance, where do you draw the line between sex and fooling around?

Tell me about some of your other relationships/encounters. Who was your first sexual experience (consensual)? How did you meet them? If you had to do it all over again, would you have made the same decision?

Have you had sexual encounters with more than one person (either at a time or multiple partners at once)? In your experience, are there particular sexual acts that are more satisfying/important to you in your intimate, sexual relationships? (Use list if people have trouble identifying sexual behaviors that they enjoy the most.)

Do you think you could name your favorite sexual act/behavior? For example, something that, if left out, would make the experience less enjoyable for you? Or maybe something that, even if you didn’t do it all the time, is still something that you would put at the top of your list?

Would you stay in an intimate relationship without your favorite act, for the short term or long term future? Any final thoughts about what you enjoy most in your sexual/physical relationships? What about something you wouldn’t be willing to do?
Let’s switch gears to talk a little bit about your fantasies. Sometimes, fantasies include things we would actually do, and sometimes they are just things that we feel are erotic but that we wouldn’t necessarily ever act on the desire or want to act out. Just the thought alone might be erotic enough without ever doing it.

Could you describe one of your fantasies? Is it recurring? Is there something in particular that you might think about during sexual encounters that either turns you on or helps you to orgasm?

Can you talk about a time that you acted out one of your sexual fantasies? Has it ever factored into how you personally identify?

IV. IDENTIFICATION HISTORY

Changing gears a little bit, tell me about how you define sexual identity? What identities or examples can you think of regarding sexual identity (or orientation)?

Where do you see the boundaries between heterosexuality/homosexuality? For example, sometimes people find themselves in a certain situation where they might engage in behaviors that don’t “fit” with their identity, such as people in prison or even people who have intimacies with people of the same sex, but only during college.

Have you ever had sexual intimacies with someone of the same sex (or opposite sex for LGBTQ individuals)? By intimacies, I don’t necessarily mean intercourse – but anything like kissing, exploring, foreplay, or more? Was it a one-time experience? What did it mean to you (experimental/fantasy/strong attraction/what’s all the fuss about)? If you haven’t, have you ever thought about it/had the opportunity? What made you pass it by?

Have you ever thought about or wanted to have sexual experiences with someone of the same sex? Are there some acts you would consider engaging in with the same sex, if the opportunity presented itself? Where would your boundaries be?

When you talk to people about your sexuality, what do you tell people? Do you say you’re a member of a particular community? Do you necessarily say anything at all? Say someone you were only vaguely acquainted with asked about your intimate life? How would you respond?
Has there ever been a situation where you were afraid or uncomfortable to disclose your sexual identity to someone? What made you afraid? Are there some people you would never discuss your identity with? Who would you feel most comfortable talking about your sexual experiences/identity with?

Have you always personally identified as “X”? Is your identification important to you? If you had to pick a few acts or adjectives to encapsulate what your sexuality means to you (or what is most important to you sexually), in terms of identity or the fantasies/actions you enjoy the most, what would they be?

V. INSTITUTIONAL INTERACTIONS

Can you tell me about some of the social spaces that you have found to be supportive in terms of your overall sexuality? Are there some social spaces where that you felt were more supportive to having an experience with someone of the same sex, even if you didn’t act on it? What about your family and friends? Have you felt supported/open? What about with your culture (racial/ethnic subgroups/religion/even local community)?

Can you tell me about a time where you may have hid your sexuality, or who you were having intimacies with? Do you ever feel like you need to avoid the topic of sexuality altogether with people?

Have you ever been in a situation where you were worried you couldn’t bring the person you were seeing with you? Have you ever faced disapproval for who you were seeing? From who? How did was the disapproval shown? Have there been places where you never once worried about bringing your partner? Have there been places where you faced disapproval in the beginning, but eventually you received their approval? What changed?

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you needed to portray your own gender/sexuality differently than you would normally feel comfortable in order to fit in or be more accepted?

Do you think you could have (or have you had) a pleasurable experience with someone of the same (or different) gender? Do you think you could have in a particular time period/social space, even if you’ve never acted on it?

Have you ever felt like your sexuality/gender factored into whether you were accepted in your job/schooling/family/friend interactions? Have you ever felt like the “odd man out” because of your appearance or sexual preferences?
Can you think of a situation when you were asked to identify your gender/sexual identity?

Would you categorize yourself as religious? Can you tell me about your experience in religious institutions? Have you felt supported by them? Has there ever been a time when you felt ostracized or judged as sexually immoral by your church? Have you ever been accused of or worried about being judged as sexually immoral?

Do you have any final thoughts you’d like to discuss in terms of what we’ve been talking about?
APPENDIX II: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Seeking self-identified women over the age of 18 who are willing to discuss their relationships and intimacies over a free cup of coffee!

If you are interested in participating in this interview please email_____________ for more information. This research is being conducted through SUNY-Albany and has been approved by the Institutional Review Board.
APPENDIX III: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Sexual Fluidity and Institutional Normative Heterosexuality

Nicole LaMarre, MA - Primary Researcher
University at Albany, Sociology Department

Christine Bose, Ph. D. - Faculty Advisor
University at Albany, Sociology Department

cbose@albany.edu

LaMarreN@gmail.com
(860) 861-4097

Consent Form

I understand that I am agreeing to participate in a research study entitled “Sexuality, Identity, and Personal Relationships.” This study is conducted by Nicole LaMarre, a doctoral candidate at the University at Albany, State University of New York. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University at Albany. I understand that this research study is designed to explore personal relationships, sexual experiences, and conceptions of sexual identity.

Agreeing to this study includes participating in an interview that will last approximately ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes, conducted by Nicole LaMarre. During this interview, I will be asked questions that will investigate my current relationship status, my social networks, sexual identity, representation and understanding of sexuality, and sexual experiences, fantasies, and preferences. I will be asked permission to be audio taped during this interview. There is a moderate chance of becoming uncomfortable as a result of the questions being asked. Additional risk and discomfort may be associated with questions regarding my sexual desires and behaviors. However, I can decline to answer any question and I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (including withdrawing my data while it can still be identified). All information I provide will be kept strictly confidential. My participation is completely voluntary. As such, you may revoke your consent and end the interview at any time.

I am aware that if I experience any emotional distress, I can contact the University Counseling Center at 518-442-5800 or the Capital District Psychological Services Center at 518-442-4900 if I need professional assistance. To reduce the risk of exposure associated with answering questions about my sexual history, my identity will be kept confidential. Any identifying information inadvertently mentioned during the interview will be deleted from the recording to further protect my identity. Upon completion of this study, in approximately one year, the tapes will be destroyed for further protection of my identity. Although I may not receive direct benefit from participating, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research.

I will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. As a participant in this study, it is my right to contact the researcher, Nicole LaMarre, at LamarreN@gmail.com. In addition, if I have any questions regarding my rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or if I wish to report any concerns about the study, I may contact the University at Albany Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at 1-800-365-9139 or orrc@albany.edu.
APPENDIX IV: DATA TABLES & FIGURES

TABLE 1: Age of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24 years old</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34 years old</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44 years old</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 54 years old</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 64 years old</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 74 years old</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total women over 55</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note the first age category only has a 7 year increment due to the minimum age of participants in this study of 18 years old. The oldest participant was 74 years old.

TABLE 2: Race/Ethnicity of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race &amp; Ethnicity</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (n = 27)</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American (n = 6)</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina (n = 2)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial (n = 2)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American (n = 2)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern (n = 1)</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Women of Color (n=13)</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
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</table>

TABLE 3: Sexual Identities of Interviewees by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Heterosexual/Straight</th>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Bisexual</th>
<th>Queer</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Pansexual/Fluid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 34 years old</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=14)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 54 years old</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=16)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 74 years old</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### TABLE 4: Sexual Histories of Participants by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Intimacy with Men Only</th>
<th>Intimacy with Women Only</th>
<th>Sexual Experiences with Men and Women</th>
<th>Fantasies / Open to Sex with Women</th>
<th>Intimacies with Trans/Non-Binary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 34 (n=14)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 54 (n=16)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 74 (n=10)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

### TABLE 5: Sexual Histories of Participants by Race & Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race &amp; Ethnicity</th>
<th>Intimacy with Men Only</th>
<th>Intimacy with Women Only</th>
<th>Sexual Experiences with Men and Women</th>
<th>Fantasies / Open to Sex with Women</th>
<th>Intimacies with Trans/Non-Binary</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (n=27)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women of Color (n=13)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

### TABLE 6: Sexual Identities of Interviewees by Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race &amp; Ethnicity</th>
<th>Heterosexual/Straight</th>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Bisexual</th>
<th>Queer</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Pansexual/Fluid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (n=27)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women of Color (n=13)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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### TABLE 7: Classifications by Sexual Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Institutional Identifier</th>
<th>Politicized Identifier</th>
<th>Identity Irrelevance</th>
<th>Sexual Proclivity</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Heterosexual/Straight</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual/Fluid</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>
TABLE 8: Classifications by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Institutional Identifier</th>
<th>Politicized Identifier</th>
<th>Identity Irrelevance</th>
<th>Sexual Proclivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 34 years (n=14)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 54 years (n=16)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 74 years (n=10)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 9: Classifications by Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Institutional Identifier</th>
<th>Politicized Identifier</th>
<th>Identity Irrelevance</th>
<th>Sexual Proclivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (n=27)</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women of Color (n=13)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 10: Identifier Classification by Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Identifier</th>
<th>Politicized Identifier</th>
<th>Identity Irrelevance</th>
<th>Sexual Proclivity</th>
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FIGURE 1: Participant Location Map

(Google 2022; retrieved 11/21/2021)

FIGURE 2: Categorization of Participants

FIGURE 3: Sexual Identity of Participants
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