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Getting "Bi" in the Family: Bisexual People's Disclosure Experiences

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Abstract

There are many similarities in gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals' coming out experiences, but bisexual people face unique challenges. Despite this, an explicit focus on bisexual people is missing from family research. Using family systems and cultural sociological perspectives, the authors analyzed how social and cultural factors shape disclosure processes for bisexuals as they come out to multiple family members. After analyzing qualitative data from a diverse group of 45 individuals, they found that bisexual people navigate monosexist and heterosexist expectations in their family relationships. Cultural constructions of bisexuality shape the ways that bisexual people disclose their identities, including how they use language to influence family members' responses in desirable ways. Relationship status also influences bisexual people's disclosure strategies, as a romantic partner's gender is meaningful to family members' understandings of their sexual orientation. The findings highlight the importance of addressing cultural and social contexts in understanding sexual minority people's coming out processes.

Keywords: family systems, GLBT, intergenerational relationships, qualitative research, sexuality, sociology

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals are increasingly likely to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to members of their families (Pfeffer, 2012; Savin-Williams, 2005; Seidman, 2002), indicating an ongoing need to better understand how members of this community navigate the disclosure process. Prior literature has examined how individual-level factors shape the coming out process, such as the sociodemographic characteristics of age, race, gender, religiosity, and class (Beals & Peplau, 2006; Grov, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006; Schope, 2002; Waldner & Magruder, 1999). More sociological literature has examined how the coming out process is situated within a broader cultural context, showing, for instance, how families may respond to disclosures using cultural knowledge about sexual minorities (Aveline, 2006; Fields, 2001; Martin, Hutson, Kazyak, & Scherrer, 2010; Pfeffer, 2012). These studies often focus on a particular familial relationship, (e.g., parent–child), although recent research indicates that attending to family systems may provide a more holistic and nuanced account of the coming out experience: "The change in the whole

family system is another essential feature that has not received significant attention in the literature [on coming out in families]" (Baptist & Allen, 2008, p. 94).

Existing family research most often focuses on lesbian women's and gay men's coming out experiences; bisexual people (and transgender people) are often either excluded from analyses or grouped together in studies with lesbian and gay participants (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). Indeed, "very little family research in the past decade paid special attention to bisexuals" (Biblarz & Savci, 2010, p. 490), indicating lingering questions about their experiences in families. Although some early studies have provided hints as to bisexual people's familial experiences (Lannutti, 2008; McLean, 2007; Oswald, 1999; Watson, 2014), to the best of our knowledge no study has yet focused on bisexual people's experiences coming out in families. In the present study, we remedy this gap using a cultural and family systems framework to understand bisexual peoples' coming out processes in families. Analyzing qualitative data from 45 bisexual individuals, we examined two questions: (a) How do cultural representations of bisexuality influence disclosure experiences in families and family members' reactions and (b) how do the relationships among family members influence the disclosure process?

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives

Two interrelated theoretical perspectives shaped our analysis of bisexual people's disclosure experiences. Family systems theory offers a useful lens for understanding how "individual family members are necessarily interdependent, exerting a continuous and reciprocal influence on one another" (Cox & Paley, 1997, p. 246). Family systems analyses also draw attention to how an event influences multiple family members (e.g., parents, siblings, uncles, cousins, children) as well as family members' relationships with one another. Although family systems approaches are used most frequently in practice-oriented fields, such as marriage and family therapy or social work, other social scientists have used family systems perspectives

to demonstrate how families may be fruitfully analyzed as a social system (rather than individually or dyadically; Baptist & Allen, 2008; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Scherrer, 2014). This approach has been especially useful for understanding interactions among families with GLBT members and provides fertile ground for subsequent research (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Oswald, 1999; Scherrer, 2014). The majority of research examining the impact of sexual orientation disclosure within families has primarily centered on younger gay and lesbian peoples' relationships with parents (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Rossi, 2010; Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Although parents are undoubtedly critical to disclosure processes, prior research has been slower to examine how other family members (e.g., siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins) or how family systems may be important to a person's coming out experience. A family systems approach has also been used to illustrate how families are themselves embedded in a broader cultural context that shapes family members' expectations of one another (Cox & Paley, 1997; Scherrer, 2014).

We also drew on theoretical insights from the subfield of cultural sociology that articulates the centrality of culture in shaping the meanings that people attach to lived experiences (Hays, 2000; Schalet, 2011; Swidler, 1986). *Culture* refers to "the way people conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world at large using language, concepts, and frameworks" (Schalet, 2011, p. 14). Cultural representations are composed of stereotypical images or beliefs about characteristics of particular groups of people (Scherrer, 2009). They can also be thought of as controlling images (Collins, 1991), given that they are embedded in a broader system of social inequality. In this article we use the terms *cultural representations*, *cultural understandings*, *stereotypes*, and *controlling images* interchangeably. When someone comes out as gay or lesbian, family members draw on existing cultural representations of those identities to interpret and respond to that disclosure (Fields, 2001; Scherrer, 2014; Seidman, 2002). Given the unique cultural understandings of bisexuality, it is likely that bisexual individuals experience the process of coming out in families differently compared to their gay and lesbian peers. An attention to culture also extends understandings of the coming out process in families beyond

the focus on individual- and dyadic-level variables that typifies much of the literature, as we outline below (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008).

Coming Out in Families

Although coming out is often conceptualized as a moment of disclosure (e.g., "I came out to my parents last weekend"), the scholarly literature indicates that it is a process (Denes & Afifi, 2014; Orne, 2011; Rust, 1993). For instance, some research indicates that parents suspected their family member's sexual orientation before the moment of disclosure (LaSala, 2010). In addition, once families learn about a family member's sexual orientation, they continue to engage in a process in which their understandings of their family member's sexual identity evolve, often with more favorable interpretations (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; LaSala, 2010). In this study we examined coming out as a dynamic process, both within individual familial relationships and in family systems more broadly. We also examined the moment of disclosure itself because it often marks a turning point in familial relationships (Rossi, 2010; Schope, 2002).

The prior literature on coming out in families that has focused on gay or lesbian individuals has identified several factors that influence both the coming out decision and the reaction of family members. Gay and lesbian people can choose to come out to integrate themselves into their families (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010), or they may delay disclosure for fear of family members' negative reactions (D'Augelli et al., 1998). Individual-level factors, such as gender, race, and religion, play a role: Mothers are favored as recipients of disclosure more so than fathers, Whites are more likely to disclose to family members compared to people of color, and individuals whose family members hold traditional religious beliefs are less likely to be out. Dyadic-level factors, such as the quality of the family relationship, also matter insofar as family members with close ties are more likely to disclose (see Heatherington & Lavner, 2008, for a review of this research). Family responses can range from rejection to affirmation, with factors similar to the ones just discussed affecting how family members respond (LaSala, 2010; Scherrer, 2014). It is important to note that scholars have also illustrated how cultural-level factors influence the coming out process in families, which aligns with the current analysis. Seidman (2002), for instance, showed that as the cultural meanings of gay and lesbian identities become more positive families are increasingly accepting or accommodating of their gay or lesbian family member. Fields (2001) also indicated that parents who accept their children following disclosure draw on cultural representations of gay and lesbian identities as being normal and being biological. She noted that bisexuality might be an exceptionally challenging identity for parents to understand given the unique cultural constructions of bisexual identity (Fields, 2001).

Constructions of Bisexuality

Although gay, lesbian, and bisexual people share many similar experiences, there are important differences among these identities (Bradford, 2004; Rodríguez-Rust, 2000; Rust, 1993). Although definitions of bisexuality vary greatly, many would define their bisexual identity as indicating attraction to people of one's own gender and people of other gender(s). Most relevant to this study are the unique coming out experiences that bisexual individuals face because of how bisexuality has been culturally constructed (Bradford, 2004; Israel & Mohr, 2004; McLean, 2007; Ochs, 1996; Rodríguez-Rust, 2002). These largely negative representations of bisexuality have also been described as characteristic of *biphobia* (Ochs, 1996) or *binegativity* (Eliason, 2000), terms that we use interchangeably in this article. One defining aspect of the cultural representations of bisexuality has been its depiction as a transitory sexual orientation (Ault, 1996; Herek, 2002; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Ochs, 1996; Rodríguez-Rust, 2000). Individuals are expected to be romantically attracted only to people of one gender; scholars use the term *monosexism* to describe this expectation (Bradford, 2004; Rodríguez-Rust, 2002). Given the cultural expectation of monosexism, bisexuality is often mischaracterized as a "phase" or as a temporary identity "on the way" to a gay or lesbian identity or "back to" a heterosexual identity (Bradford, 2004; Diamond, 2008a; Israel & Mohr, 2004). This understanding of bisexuality as a temporary identity may have implications for family relationships because family members may imagine that this identity will change and it need not be integrated into their understanding of their bisexual family member. Furthermore, that some

bisexual women describe their sexuality differently over time may pose unique implications for family members (Diamond, 2008b).

Bisexuality, like other sexual minority identities, also challenges heteronormative cultural expectations (Jackson, 2006; Kitzinger, 2005). By *heteronormativity* we mean the assumption and privileging of heterosexuality in everyday life (Jackson, 2006; Kitzinger, 2005; Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Heteronormativity may operate distinctly for bisexual people because their identity includes the possibility they may have a different-sex romantic partner (Ochs, 1996). Indeed, when someone comes out, family members often experience a process of grieving over the lack of a heterosexual identity and life (Martin et al., 2010). These heteronormative expectations may be particularly resilient for bisexual people because family members may hold on to hope that their bisexual family member will eventually enter into a different-sex relationship. Likewise, if bisexual individuals are in a different-sex relationship, family members may misunderstand them to be heterosexual, despite their self-identification as bisexual. Research has shown that this is also the case for some women partnered with transgender men: Family members mistakenly understand them as heterosexual, despite their self-identification as queer (Pfeffer, 2012).

Bisexuality has also been conflated with promiscuity and as non-monogamy, which stereotypes bisexual people as sexually deviant and potentially dangerous sexual partners (Israel & Mohr, 2004). Although sexual activity is perhaps unlikely to emerge as a topic of conversation in families (Elliot, 2012), these understandings of bisexuality may still shape bisexual people's disclosure strategies or family members' understandings of their bisexual family member. Gender also plays a role in perceptions of bisexuality, with men often being viewed more negatively than bisexual women (Eliason, 2000). Furthermore, bisexual women's bodies and behaviors are more likely to be sexualized for the pleasure of heterosexual men, whereas men are more likely understood as "really" gay (Diamond, 2005; Eliason, 2000; Yost & Thomas, 2012).

Coming Out as Bisexual

Given culturally specific understandings of bisexuality, there is good reason to suspect that bisexual people may have distinct coming out experiences. Indeed, bisexual people often come out later in life (Rust, 1993) and are less likely to disclose their identities (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994) than their gay and lesbian counterparts. Research has illustrated that controlling images of bisexuality influence how bisexual people come to their sexual identity and how they disclose that identity to others (Bradford, 2004; McLean, 2007). For instance, Bradford (2004) found that some bisexual individuals do not come out for fear that others will apply negative conceptions of bisexuality to them. In McLean's (2007) research on bisexual people's disclosure experiences with friends, coworkers, and partners, she found that people are often dismissive of bisexual people's sexual identities, casting them as temporary, immature, untrustworthy, and illegitimate. To assess potential responses from people in their social networks, bisexual individuals engage in a process of "selective disclosure" (McLean, 2007), whereby they provide hints about their identity (e.g., making jokes about romantic interest in men as well as women).

Although there is considerably less research about coming out as bisexual within families, several studies provide promising foundations for this analysis. One such study is Lannutti's (2008) discussion of lesbian and bisexual women's experiences with same-sex marriage. Although relationships with families of origin is a very small segment of the analysis, Lannutti's research indicates that cultural constructions of bisexuality matter because families often hold out hope that their bisexual identified family member will "reconnect to the heterosexual world" (p. 253). Another notable study is Oswald's (1999) examination of two lesbian and four bisexual women's relationships with their friends and family members following the disclosure of their sexual identity. The bisexual women in Oswald's sample described how stereotypes about bisexuality emerged prominently from their friends and family members as they struggled to understand participants' bisexual identities. More recently, Watson (2014) sought to expand on non-monosexual people's experiences coming out in families, using data collected from 47 people (15 of whom self-identified as bisexual) regarding gender identity, expression, attractions, and relationships. Watson found that fear of stereotyping contributed to participants' reluctance to come out to family and

that some parents resorted to silence and ignoring their bisexual child's identity or relationships. Although these studies did not explicitly focus on bisexual people's experiences coming out to families, they suggest that families are likely knowledgeable about culturally constructed representations of bisexuality and that these understandings likely shape their responses to their bisexual family member.

Our sociological analysis builds on previous literature that examines how culture matters in the coming out process. Moreover, we analyzed how individuals come out to multiple family members, not only parents, and how interactions within family systems shape the disclosure experience. Thus, our study fills an empirical gap by focusing on bisexual people's experiences and extends theoretical understandings of coming out processes for all sexual minorities by focusing on culture and the family system. We examined two main questions: (a) How do cultural representations of bisexuality affect disclosure experiences in families and family members' reactions and (b) how do the relationships among family members influence the disclosure process?

Method

This study drew on data from semistructured qualitative interviews collected from 45 bisexual identified individuals. The data we used are from two related but distinct qualitative research projects on bisexual identity. Study 1 included 20 bisexual identified participants and examined how bisexual people "do" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) their sexual identity across different social venues. During interviews conducted in 2005, participants primarily discussed their self-presentation strategies and relationships with friends and family. Although a few participants in this study ($n = 5$) were not out to any members of their family, the challenges of coming out to one's family was a prominent theme in these data, which provided the impetus for Study 2. Study 2, conducted in 2008, focused on the issue of bisexual people's relationships with families. In this second study, 25 individuals were interviewed about how their bisexual identity shaped their family relationships. Participants were included in the second study if they were out to at least one member of their family, although many were out to more than one family member. Both studies privileged

participants' own definitions regarding who constitutes their family. In total, 45 bisexual identified people were interviewed about how their bisexuality shaped their social experiences. Although the foci of these studies varied somewhat, both samples provided examples of bisexual people's decisions about disclosing their sexual identities to family members. Furthermore, these data provide examples from those who were not out to families and those who were out to a smaller number of family members as well as those who were out, in some way, to the majority of their family.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Recruitment for both projects occurred in the Midwest and used targeted e-mails to GLBT-specific groups, flyers posted at GLBT events and establishments, announcements in university courses with sexuality/gender content, and snowball sampling. The inclusion of bisexual people of color was sought by targeting organizations with missions that focus on GLBT people of color. Two inclusion criteria for both studies were (a) to self-identify as bisexual and (b) be over age 18. Study 2 also required that participants be out to at least one family member. Each participant completed a brief demographic survey and participated in one in-depth, semistructured interview. The first author conducted all interviews.

The interview schedule was loosely clustered around a few key questions, several of which overlapped between the two studies. Study 1 participants responded to questions such as the following:

- How did you come to identify as bisexual?
- (How) has your sexuality shaped your experiences in predominately heterosexual or gay/lesbian social spaces?
- How do your other identities (e.g., race, gender, class) inform your sexuality?
- (How) does your appearance relate to your sexual identity?

Although no question explicitly asked about experiences with family members, this theme emerged throughout the interviews. In Study 2, participants responded to related questions such as the following:

- How did you come to identify as bisexual?
- How do your other identities (e.g., race, gender, class) inform your sexuality?

- Who are the people that you consider to be your family?
- Who in your family knows about your bisexuality?
- How did they find out?
- What was their reaction?
- How has it impacted your current relationship with them?
- Who in your family have you elected *not* to tell and why?

Interviews ranged in length from 40 minutes to 130 minutes, averaging 83 minutes.

Sample

The sample included 13 men and 32 women, including one man who also identified as transgender. Although all participants self-identified as bisexual, several ($n = 19$) also used other language to describe their identities, such as *bi-queer*, *homosexually inclined bisexual*, or *pansexual*. Regarding race, one participant identified as African American, two identified as Asian, two identified as Hispanic/Latino, two identified as multiracial, and the remainder ($n = 37$) identified as White. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64, averaging 27 years. When asked about their class background, 18 participants identified as lower or working class, 10 identified as middle class, and 17 identified as upper middle class. Only one person reported being out to "all of [his or her] family members." The majority were out to some, but not all, family members, which highlights the complex, dynamic strategies bisexual people must use within their family systems. The majority of participants were out to their parents. Some were out to only one parent, and only a few were out to other family members (e.g., grandparents, siblings, aunts, cousins) but not their parents.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Data from both samples were combined and analyzed holistically. We analyzed the data using open and focused coding methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). During the open coding process, any and all codes are identified in line-by-line coding of the data in an inductive analytic process (e.g., father's reactions, coming out with a different-sex partner, "choosing" a sexual orientation). Procedurally, during the open coding process, each author

coded a small number of transcripts (~5) and then met to discuss prominent themes and develop a working list of codes. The authors then returned to code additional transcripts with the working code list as well as to identify any new themes. The authors met about 20 times during this coding process to craft and refine open and focused codes and systematically code all 45 transcripts for these themes. Family processes were identified as participants discussed interactions with various family members or the family system as a whole that pertained to their sexual orientation. In conducting focused coding, inductive themes were refined and synthesized, and theoretically relevant themes were deductively developed (e.g., family members as gatekeepers, heteronormativity). These themes were used to craft "initial" and then "integrative memos" (Emerson et al., 1995) to push empirical findings toward theoretical and analytical insights. Integrative memos "elaborate ideas and begin to link or tie codes and bits of data together" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 162) and were revised to form segments of this article.

We engaged in multiple strategies to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of these data (Creswell, 2012; Padgett, 2008), including *member checking*, as we solicited feedback on the findings from community groups with individuals who met criteria for participation and, in a few instances, with study participants themselves. We also used *data triangulation*, as we elicited survey data from participants about their family relationships as well as qualitative accounts. We also engaged in *peer debriefing*, as we presented segments of integrative memos and early drafts of this article to peer writing groups. We also engaged in documenting the *chain of interpretations* (Angen, 2000) or *audit trail* (Padgett, 2008), including collecting materials such as initial and integrative memos and meeting notes to enable others to understand how we reached these conclusions. Data were also scrutinized for "disconfirming evidence" (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004). Quotations were edited minimally for readability and, unless otherwise noted, are representative of the data. Pseudonyms for participants are used to ensure confidentiality.

Results

In this section we examine three themes that illuminate bisexual people's coming out experiences

within their family systems. First, we discuss how cultural representations of sexualities shape disclosure experiences. In particular, we explore how language and partner status both play important roles in bisexual people's coming out processes. We found that bisexual people were strategic in managing their identities in families, on the basis, in part, of how they imagined their family members would view their sexuality. Second, we examine how cultural constructions of bisexuality also shape family members' responses when bisexual people come out. These findings indicate that families were indeed knowledgeable of stereotypes about bisexuality and that these controlling images (Collins, 1991) shaped their responses to their bisexual family member. Third, we analyze how the coming out process is embedded in a broader family system. We found that family members often acted as gatekeepers regarding their bisexual family member's identity. This role can create complex family dynamics and indicates that coming out in families may be best understood as occurring within a family system.

Strategies for Disclosure

Bisexual individuals were strategic in their decisions about to whom and how they disclosed their sexuality. Furthermore, their coming out experiences extended beyond the moment of disclosure into what could better be understood as a *process* of coming out. Although participants in this study had some agency in their disclosure experiences, not all bisexual people were given a choice in disclosing their identity. We illustrate how individuals' decisions and experiences are shaped by the cultural understandings they perceive their family members have about bisexuality. Although we found that factors such as relationship type and quality were also a part of people's coming out decisions and experiences (Beals & Peplau, 2006; Schope, 2002), we focus on the finding unique to this study: the importance of viewing disclosure to families as embedded in a broader sociocultural context. Specifically, we discuss how family members' monosexist and heteronormative understandings influenced individuals' disclosure strategies and experiences. We found that bisexual individuals were aware of the (negative) cultural constructions of bisexuality and anticipated that their family members were also somewhat knowledgeable about these tropes. This knowledge encouraged participants to select disclosure strategies that would achieve desired outcomes.

These strategies were differentially available depending on a participant's relationship status and family members' knowledge about his or her past and present relationships. Although participants often used a specific strategy with a particular family member, these strategies sometimes changed over time and between family members.

Not coming out

Some participants decided not to come out to members of their families. This was particularly common among participants whose family members knew only of different-sex relationships. For instance, Monique, a 29-year-old White woman who had been married to a man for several years, was out to her husband and many friends, but she not out to the majority of her family. She explained: "If I was going to be in a monogamous relationship with [a woman] . . . I [would] probably [come out], but I'm married [to a man]." Monique interpreted her marriage to a man to mean that she does not need to come out to her family. This rationale reflects circulating monosexist understandings of sexuality. Although individuals whose family members were familiar only with their same-sex romantic histories were also subject to monosexist assumptions about the nature of their sexuality, the strategy of not coming out was less available to these participants.

When making decisions about coming out to particular family members, participants often tried to gauge their family members' beliefs about same-sex relationships and bisexuality. If participants believed that a family member held heteronormative ideas, they were less likely to disclose their bisexuality to that family member. Ken, a 22-year-old White man, said that he did not want to come out to his parents because "there's some sort of assumption [that] the only son needs to carry on the family name." Ken preferred not to disrupt his parents' heteronormative familial expectations, which presumed different-sex marriage and parenting. Furthermore, these decisions are gendered, given that Ken was burdened with the expectation that different-sex marriage and parenting are the only mechanisms by which he could carry on the family lineage.

In a similar vein, Elia, a 22-year-old White woman, was out to her older and younger sisters, but not to other family members. She spoke at length about how the fact that other family

members hold negative views about gay people has kept her from coming out. Reflecting on a conversation with her grandfather, she said, "He said 'gays are bad, gays are wrong' and I was like 'For sure I'm not going to tell you now.'" Because her grandfather expressed heteronormative ideas, Elia did not want to disclose her bisexuality to him. Like Elia, Melanie was out to a number of family members but said that she decided not to come out to her grandparents: "I don't know my grandparents very well, but I definitely know that they have an idea in their heads about what it means to be gay." Melanie elaborated, saying that she also suspected that her grandparents have no idea what bisexuality means. She went on to say, "It's a conscious decision not to tell them—it's not just omitting facts." As these examples also indicate, age, generation, and family role (e.g., grandparent, sibling) also shaped motivations for disclosure (Rossi, 2010; Scherrer, 2014; Schope, 2002) given that participants in this study were less likely to report being out to older family members.

Coming out as gay/lesbian. Some participants came out as gay or lesbian rather than bisexual because of their family members' monosexist assumptions about sexuality. These participants believed that their family members would have an easier time understanding gay or lesbian identities compared to a bisexual identity. Kesha, a 30-year-old White woman, self-identified as bisexual at 18 and described her process of coming out to her parents and sister when she was in a same-sex relationship at age 20. Kesha said she felt like she "needed to clarify" to her mother why she and her girlfriend had been spending so much time together. "When I came out to her, I said 'gay'—just to make it nice and simple." Six months later, Kesha came out to her father as gay. Reflecting on that decision, she said: "My dad leans toward the pretty conservative side, so I wanted to ease into it." Similarly Melanie, the previously discussed participant who had not come out to her grandparents, said that she thought if she were to come out to her grandparents they would have an easier time understanding lesbian identity:

> If I were to say to them "I'm a lesbian," they'd be like "Oh, that's weird, but okay, so you like girls." But If I were to say to them that I'm bisexual, I think that would be a different, more difficult idea for them to get their heads around.

Perhaps because coming out as gay or lesbian would not challenge monosexist assumptions, bisexual participants imagined that these identities would be easier to understand than a bisexual identity.

One participant, Lana, was a 27-year-old White woman whose family knew only about her dating history with women. Because of this history, and her current long-term relationship with a female partner, Lana believed that her family understood her sexual identity as lesbian. Lana was particularly close to her grandmother, with whom she had lived for several years as a teenager. When talking about her decision not to correct her grandmother's assumption that she was a lesbian, Lana explained: "If I started dating a man, I would then have to say to my grandmother 'I'm not a lesbian,' but at this point, I don't see a point in having the conversation." Because Lana had had only same-sex romantic partners, she did not think it was important to come out as bisexual to her grandmother. Similar to other participants, Lana thought that it was more difficult to explain bisexuality, and thus coming out as lesbian/gay or as in a same-sex relationship was conceptualized as a simpler way to help their family members understand their sexual identity and relationships.

Participants also described coming out as lesbian or gay to avoid heteronormative expectations. For instance, Lana elaborated that she felt uncomfortable with the privilege associated with different-sex relationships, such that if she were in a different-sex relationship people would think she would have "a white wedding gown and walk down the aisle." She said she is "much more comfortable [with] letting them think that I'm a lesbian." Similarly, Paula, a 22-year-old White woman, said, "I would never bring [up my] bisexuality to my father. He might think that there's a chance that I would be straight. I try not to use that label with anyone who is going to desire my heterosexuality." Indeed, participants frequently discussed their concerns that their families would expect that they would eventually "settle down" with a different-sex partner if they came out as bisexual.

Kesha expressed a similar sentiment. Not only did she come out as a lesbian because she thought it would be an easier identity for her parents to understand compared with bisexuality, but she also was very aware of their heteronormative expectations. She explained that she was cautious to not discuss

her bisexuality or any different-sex sexual behavior/relationships: "It's not the kind of thing that I would bring up, for their sake.… I think that they still have the secret dream of me falling in love with a guy and settling down and popping out kids." For Kesha, shielding her parents from her bisexual identity (and instead coming out as a lesbian) prevented them from maintaining heteronormative expectations of marrying a man and having children. These examples illustrate how heterosexism and monosexism shaped bisexual individuals' disclosure decisions by prompting participants to conceal their bisexuality from family members.

Coming out as bisexual. Some participants were out as bisexual, or as someone who may have relationships with men or women, to particular family members. These participants often said that their interest in being out as bisexual (as opposed to lesbian or gay) was motivated by an interest in helping family make sense of their previous, current, and potential future relationships. As an exemplar, Melanie started identifying as bisexual at age 18 and began the process of coming out to family members, including her mother, father, and some siblings, in her early 20s. She explained that she came out as bisexual to her mother but did not use that term with her father. Melanie did not use the word *bisexual* in part because "it's like saying the word 'sex' in front of my dad and I don't need to do that." However, she nonetheless disclosed her openness to relationships with both men and women to her father. The initial disclosure happened after she broke up with her ex-girlfriend. She turned to her father for support:

Melanie: So you know how I've been dating [ex-girlfriend's name].
Father: Uh . . . yup. I do now. So are you gay?
Melanie: Well, I really loved her, but I could get married to a man some day, so I don't know. I feel like I could fall in love with anyone, and this time it happened to be with [her], and I don't know who it's going to be next time, and I don't know who I'm going to end up with.

Although she was out to both of her parents as being open to relationships with men and women, Melanie was not out to other family members, including her grandparents and some siblings, in part because they did not know about her dating relationships. She explained that her relationship "only lasted for six months, so there was a finite amount of family members I came in contact with [during that time]." As this participant illustrates, bisexual people's disclosure experiences are shaped by cultural constructions of bisexuality.

Although family members' knowledge of past and current relationships with both men and women was linked to participants coming out as bisexual, heteronormativity also shaped these disclosure decisions. For instance, some participants thought that bisexuality would be more likely to evoke positive responses from their family members. Liz, a 23-year-old Asian woman, came out to her parents as bisexual. She said that her parents "would feel more hopeless about it if I said [I was] lesbian." In this way, participants imagined that coming out as bisexual would make the news of their same-sex relationship more palatable for family members. Jenna, a 20-year-old White woman elaborated:

Saying "Oh, I'm a lesbian" is just a much stronger statement. Because there's not the possibility that everything will turn out in that hetero[sexual] defined, husband and wife and kids and [the] white picket fence and a dog kind of lifestyle.

In other words, participants generally agreed that coming out as bisexual was not as challenging to their family members' previous conceptions about what their life would resemble. Although these same respondents also discussed how heteronormative familial assumptions were problematic, coming out as bisexual may have made this news less difficult for family members to process.

Taken together, these stories illuminate the ways that culturally constructed understandings of sexuality shape bisexual people's disclosure strategies, which primarily stem from the salient sexual discourses of heteronormativity and monosexism. Specifically, what family members knew about previous and current relationships influenced the language used in coming out. As these stories illustrate, coming out requires bisexual people to engage with a different (but related) set of assumptions compared to lesbian and gay people who come out to their families.

Family Members' Responses

Cultural constructions not only shape if and how bisexual people come out, but they also influence

how family members respond when a family member comes out as bisexual or as open to relationships with different- and same-sex partners. The most prominent example of this came from family members revealing that they viewed bisexuality as a transitory identity (i.e., a pathway to a permanent identity as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). For example, Ellen recalled that when she came out as bisexual, her parents responded by saying, "Oh you're just trying this out, you're just dabbling [in] this for awhile and you'll go back to dating men." Likewise, Sam, a 21-year-old White transgender-identified man, recounted his mother's responses: "How can you be sure you're not just going through a phase?" and

> What does it mean? You can't pick one or the other? I've never met [any]one who didn't pick one or the other. I've had gay friends, but I don't understand. You can't be attracted to both people, it just doesn't work.

Hanna, a 21-year-old African American woman, had a similar experience when she was talking with her grandmother, who had raised her and whom she described as her "familial world":

> [My grandmother] was like, "I thought that you were just going through a phase when you were 16." And I was like, "No. I've been in relationships with men and women and I'm definitely not heterosexual. Either you accept that or you don't."

Hanna said that her grandmother's understanding of her sexuality changed over time and that her grandmother came to be very accepting and supportive of her. These examples illustrate how family members can harbor monosexist cultural assumptions regarding sexual orientation and how they may believe that bisexuality is a transitional pathway to a "real" sexual orientation (Ochs, 1996).

Not only was bisexuality seen as a phase by family members, but this assumption also was undergirded by heteronormativity: Many participants discussed how their family members held out hope that they would ultimately end up in heterosexual relationships. Speaking of her parents, Susan, a 24-year-old White woman, said that disclosing her bisexuality resulted in her parents making comments that emphasized her heterosexuality and de-legitimizing her same-sex attraction:

"They say, 'Well you've told us before that you like guys, [so] why are you still doing this? Why can't you just stop this?'" Because Susan was a younger participant, it may be that family members are more likely to maintain hope that younger people are going through a developmental phase with their sexual orientation and that they will eventually "end up" in a heterosexual relationship.

Although considerably less prominent than the idea that bisexuality is a phase, some participants also reported hearing other stereotypes about bisexuality from family members, such as the idea that bisexual people are promiscuous or sexually deviant. Meghan said that her mother believed bisexuals are "whorish people who want to have sex with everything." In this way, bisexuality is not only de-legitimized, but it is also linked to stigmatized behaviors. A related stereotype about bisexuality emerged contending that a bisexual identity is incompatible with monogamous relationships. According to Phil, "I think in a lot of people's minds, they smoosh together bisexuality and non-monogamy." Phil's sister articulated this stereotype and assumed that because he is bisexual, he also has non-monogamous romantic relationships. Cultural representations of bisexual people as sexually indulgent and non-monogamous were less frequent in these data than other common stereotypes about bisexuality, perhaps because of the general discomfort of talking about sexual practices with family members (Elliot, 2012).

Although there were many similarities in bisexual men's and women's coming out experiences, the stereotypes surrounding bisexual identities were also gendered (Israel & Mohr, 2004; Scherrer, 2013). For example, when Faith, a 22-year-old White woman, came out to her brother as bisexual, he responded, "'Bisexuality is cool. Like, bi chicks, you could do two at once.'" Faith's brother's response indicates a gendered reaction in which bisexual women's same-sex desire and relationships are more readily festishized as ultimately serving the sexual pleasure of heterosexual men. Furthermore, the bisexual men in this sample were more likely (than women) to report that their family members expected that their bisexuality meant that they were "really" gay. For example, Ralph was a 55-year-old White man who was married to a different-sex partner, and together they had two children. In his late 40s, Ralph disclosed his bisexual identity to some members of his faith community

whom he described as his family. Although he felt very supported in the moment, Ralph later learned that several people approached his wife after his disclosure to offer her comfort, anticipating that their relationship was over and that Ralph would now start dating men.

Taken together, these data indicate that families were (surprisingly) knowledgeable about stereotypes about bisexuality, most often as they described bisexuality as a temporary identity on the way to a stable monosexual orientation. When participants came out as bisexual, family members engaged with these stereotypes, both explicitly and implicitly, to try to understand their bisexual family member. In addition to addressing the broader sociocultural context, our findings also underscore the utility of examining coming out in families as a process that both affects the entire family system and is shaped by existing family dynamics.

Coming out in Family Systems

Bisexual individuals' disclosure experiences are embedded within a family system. In this section, we examine the interactions between and among multiple family members following disclosure, or what Heatherington and Lavner (2008) referred to as the "dynamics of triangles and other coalitions" (p. 341). We examine how knowledge about sexual identity is managed within these interactions and the ways that this disclosure (or lack of disclosure) shapes families' subsequent dynamics. To provide more nuanced context for these family processes, we use the exemplars of Kesha and Sam to illustrate common themes in these data.

After disclosure to a family member, that family member often played an important role in determining whether and how other family members were told. In the examples provided here, mothers acted as gatekeepers who controlled what information other family members received about their child's sexual orientation. In many instances, mothers restricted information and told their bisexual child to not come out to other family members (most frequently here, grandparents, the other parent, or younger siblings). For example, Kesha first came out to her mother and then her father and sister in her early 20s and reported that her mother "asked me not [to] tell my grandparents, her parents." Reflecting on that request further, she said, "They're very conservative and

she was afraid it would upset them. They've been known to cast people out of the family for making moral errors." Her mother's specific knowledge of Kesha's maternal grandparents having conservative and heteronormative beliefs, insofar as they would likely interpret Kesha's sexual orientation as a moral error and thus sever ties if she came out, aided in Kesha's decision to not come out to her grandparents.

In other instances, the gatekeeper family member came out to other family members for the bisexual individual, a decision that was not always necessarily discussed in advance or agreed on. In Kesha's story, although her mother requested she not come out to her grandparents, her mother actually disclosed Kesha's sexual orientation to other extended family members at a family gathering, which Kesha could not attend. Kesha explained: "My mom thought it was the perfect opportunity. She just said, 'I think it's a good time to tell you guys that [Kesha]'s gay.' She said she just seized the opportunity and told them all." Kesha reported that she and her mother had not discussed this and that she was "surprised" and "a little annoyed" about being left out of the decision of disclosure. This story also illustrates that the strategy Kesha used to disclose to her mom, which was informed by mononormative assumptions about sexuality (recall that she wanted to "keep it simple"), also affected what other family members know about her sexual orientation (given that her mother was the one to disclose it). Had Kesha been the one to tell her aunts and uncles, she might have used a different strategy and come out as bisexual, for instance, rather than gay.

These points are further illustrated by the story of Sam, who came out as bisexual to his sister and parents at age 16 prior to his gender transition (the narratives around coming out thus reflect that at the time Sam identified as a woman). Recall that Sam's mother reacted negatively and with mononormative assumptions, saying that it was impossible for Sam to like both men and women. That Sam's mother had this understanding of sexuality is important because "she told the entire family that I was a lesbian" (as opposed to bisexual), which Sam described as upsetting. Sam's story underscores two important things. First, Sam's mother acted as a gatekeeper insofar as she disclosed Sam's sexual orientation to the rest of the family. The fact that she was responsible

for the disclosure underscores her key role within the family system. However, her disclosure reflects her own understandings about sexuality rather than those of Sam. It is important to note that, because of her mononormative assumptions, she told the family that Sam is a lesbian, despite Sam having come out to her as bisexual.

Participants also reflected on how dynamics in the family system shifted following disclosure. Kesha's not being out to her grandparents was not always straightforward because other people on her mother's side of the family (e.g., aunts, uncles, some cousins) did know about her sexual orientation, and her same-sex dating partners often accompanied her to family events. The partial disclosure in the family system, coupled with the fact that her mother had been the one to disclose, created silence surrounding Kesha's sexual orientation and partners at family events. Kesha reflected that even though her aunts and uncles knew about her sexual orientation, they did not explicitly talk about it or her romantic relationship: "Everyone knows that my mom's parents don't know [about my sexual orientation]. I've very rarely seen them without the grandparents there [and] it can't be talked about in front of the grandparents." These complex family dynamics, whereby some family members may know and others may not, create a challenging situation for bisexual people, as even those who know about their sexual orientation may not acknowledge their relationships and identities. Moreover, Kesha and her mom, as well as aunts, uncles, and cousins were drawn into a complex web of information management and served as gatekeepers in keeping the knowledge of Kesha's sexual orientation hidden from her grandparents.

Sam also discussed how the fact that his mother (inaccurately) disclosed his sexuality as a lesbian to other family members shaped subsequent familial interactions. Specifically, Sam said that their interactions have been somewhat awkward:

> They stopped asking me about boyfriends, and, at some point and I could tell who was the last to know because my uncle asked me one time about dating. I went to a women's college, and he said "What are you gonna do without boys?" [Laughs] and everyone in the room got quiet and awkward.

This narrative illustrates several important points about the complexity of coming out in family

systems. First, this example illustrates heteronormativity in families, reflected in the fact that Sam's uncle jokingly questioned her choice to attend an all-women's college because of the lack of opportunities to date men. Second, because some family members knew about Sam's sexual orientation, but others did not (viz., his uncle), the partial disclosure created uneven knowledge across family members and the potential for situations in which family members are complicit in maintaining silence around sexual orientation. Third, the fact that Sam's mother came out to others on Sam's behalf, as a lesbian, also contributed to confusion. This shaped other subsequent interactions with family members, as Sam either clarified the situation or remained silent. During one such interaction, Sam mentioned a boyfriend to an aunt:

> The first time I mentioned having a boyfriend to [my aunt], she was like "Really?" There was a moment where it was like, okay my mom told you that I was a lesbian, and now you're seeing that that's not true.

In this example, Sam's own dynamic (relationship) with his aunt assumed primacy over his aunt and mother's relationship. In sum, these narratives highlight how coming out in families is a complex process that both shapes and is impacted by existing family relationships.

Discussion

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample was geographically bounded to the Midwest, and although the participants had some diversity regarding age and class, it was less diverse with regard to gender and race. The gender gap in our sample likely reflects the fact that more women than men identify as bisexual or that the legitimacy of men's bisexuality is particularly scrutinized and stigmatized (Eliason, 2000; Yost & Thomas, 2012). Although we made efforts to recruit bisexual identified people of color, we were less successful at obtaining as racially diverse a sample as we wished, perhaps because we did not recruit adequately through informal social networks of GLBT people of color (Moore, 2011). Second, this analysis did not focus explicitly on differences that may exist on the basis of the intersection of age, race, class, or gender. Future research should examine

how geographic context, as well as these other social identities, further shapes the coming out experiences of bisexual people (Kazyak, 2011). Third, these data did not enable us to examine family members' perspectives about their bisexual family members. It could be that family members have different understandings of bisexuality than the ones articulated by the respondents in this study, indicating an important avenue of inquiry for future research. Furthermore, little is known about how family members' responses may be further influenced by recent social and political shifts on issues such as same-sex relationship recognition. Future research may fruitfully examine how attitudes about bisexuality may be uniquely affected by these cultural shifts. Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to literature on GLBT family relationships by using cultural sociology and family systems frameworks to analyze bisexual individuals' disclosure experiences in their families.

Our findings demonstrate that the cultural context within which families are embedded shapes both how people come out as well as how family members respond to disclosure. Respondents were aware of their family members' understandings of bisexuality and were strategic in navigating these stereotypes during the coming out process. In some ways, stereotypes about the transitory nature of bisexuality (Oswald, 1999) may have made coming out easier for bisexual people, as they imagined that family members would not necessarily have to discard heteronormative expectations. Similarly, coming out as bisexual may have been preferred to other identity labels, such as queer or pansexual, as it was seen as more easy to understand. In contrast, other participants elected not to come out as bisexual (and instead came out as gay or lesbian) to avoid the negative and stigmatized reaction they anticipated their family members having regarding bisexuality (Bradford, 2004; Oswald, 1999). It is interesting that coming out as gay or lesbian (rather than bisexual) was also seen as a way to combat family members' heteronormative expectations.

Bisexual people must contend with monosexist and heterosexist cultural expectations of family members (Bradford, 2004; Diamond, 2008a; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Rodríguez-Rust, 2002). Indeed, respondents reported that after disclosing a bisexual identity, family members often dismissed that identity and instead presumed that they were "really" heterosexual. This was especially true for women; in contrast, men reported that their families presumed that they were "really" gay. Such reactions reflect monosexism and highlight one of the most significant ways that coming out as bisexual is qualitatively different from coming out as gay or lesbian. Family members of gay and lesbian individuals often struggle with accepting that identity and abandoning an imagined heterosexual future (LaSala 2010; Martin et al., 2010; Seidman, 2002). Yet family members often try to normalize a gay or lesbian identity and rely on discourses about those identities being biological/inborn to do so (Fields, 2001; Seidman, 2002). Bisexuality challenges such essentialist understandings about sexuality, and thus family members are unable to rely on scripts about how their bisexual family member did not choose to be bisexual (Fields, 2001). Furthermore, if and when bisexual individuals have different-sex romantic partners, this may heighten family members' heteronormative expectations. Family members may misunderstand them as heterosexual (in contrast to their self-identification as bisexual), similar to the experiences of other sexual minorities (Pfeffer, 2012). Stereotypes of bisexual people as promiscuous and non-monogamous (Israel & Mohr, 2004) also shape how families understand what it means to be bisexual. These stereotypes were pervasive in participants' narratives; all participants identified at least one stereotype about bisexuality in connection to their family relationships. Participants described these stereotypes as problematic and engaged with them strategically in their coming out experiences.

Unlike popular notions that regard coming out as simply declaring one's sexual identity to others, participants' accounts in this study illustrate how much deliberation and consideration went into anticipating family members' possible responses and crafting one's coming out strategy to maximize desirable outcomes. Instead of assessing whether a particular strategy is good, authentic, or privileged, we addressed how circulating discourses about bisexuality affect the strategies that individuals use. Coming out strategies might be interpreted differently by family members, suggesting a need for future research that examines coming out strategies alongside various family members' responses. Future research should also continue to explore how cultural constructions about sexual identities (e.g., bisexuality, asexuality, queer identities) shape how

they are received in the family. Also, given that people are increasingly likely to avoid sexual identity labels or use alternative sexual identity labels to describe themselves (Diamond, 2008a, 2008b; Savin-Williams, 2005) future research should also seek to be inclusive of queer, pansexual, or sexually fluid people's coming out experiences as well as people who prefer to not label their sexuality. Particular attention should be paid to how different family members, such as parents, grandparents, or siblings, might have different cultural understandings of the same sexual identity and thus might respond very differently to disclosure. The question of how family members' responses might change over time, particularly for individuals who identify their sexuality differently over time (Diamond 2008a, 2008b), also warrants continued attention in future research. Our findings have implications that extend beyond social science research because they may also be useful for informing therapeutic interventions with the families of GLBT people or clinical practice with bisexual persons and their unique therapeutic needs (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2013; Scherrer, 2013).

Our findings empirically demonstrate the utility of using a family systems approach to understand the process of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals coming out in families, confirming the contentions of other researchers (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Future research that examines the process of coming out in families may benefit from theories or perspectives that account for interactions between and among family members, such as family systems, rather than focusing narrowly on a single family relationship (Cox & Paley, 1997). We found that not all participants were seeking the same type of relationship with their families, thus highlighting the complex dynamics of family systems. Not all participants saw it as important or desirable to make sure that all of their family members knew about their sexual identity. In fact, some did not have a choice in whether or not to disclose to extended family members, as one family member often played a gatekeeping role in protecting or disseminating the information to the larger family. This finding further underscores the importance of research that incorporates the perspectives of family members, given that the gatekeeping family member might have a different understanding of sexuality and could disclose an inaccurate identity.

Understanding the coming out process within a family systems framework highlights the potential for such misrepresentations to occur.

We also found that partial disclosure in the larger family system can occur when only some relatives know. Past and current romantic relationships were particularly critical for understanding bisexual people's relationships within families because intimate relationships sometimes masked the person's bisexuality to some family members. In a sense, this phenomenon could create a "double closet" for bisexual people, given that they are incorrectly assumed to be either heterosexual or gay or lesbian on the basis of their intimate relationship history (Zinik, 2000). The degree to which romantic partners are not recognized as such (as is often the case for same-sex relationships) can result in not only awkwardness but also distance from family members. Moreover, the degree to which there is silence in general surrounding a person's sexual orientation can result in frustration and sadness for individuals who do feel that it is important for the family members to know about their sexuality. Our findings highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be "in the closet" or "out" in the family. Future work can address why certain family members serve as gatekeepers, how relationships within extended families might be strained as a result of partial disclosure, how family members may seek to educate themselves on these issues, or how family members may advocate for acceptance. Furthermore, advocacy efforts to promote affirmative stances toward nonheterosexual sexualities would benefit from more purposive inclusion of bisexuality as well as other marginalized sexual minority identities.

Note

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