Identities and Identifications:

Changes in Metropolitan Bisexual Men's Attitudes and Experiences

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Abstract

Drawing on 90 interviews with men who identify as bisexual from London, Los Angeles and New York, this article examines how bisexual men from three different age cohorts remember first experiencing bisexuality, how they sexually identify today, and how this is changing with younger groups of men. By using an innovative recruitment strategy, the majority of participants are not affiliated with bisexual community groups or counseling services. Thus, it provides insight into how bisexuals outside of these specific institutional settings feel about their sexual identities. Findings support Savin-Williams's (2005) contention that sexual identities are becoming less central to the lives of younger generations, who use them in more pragmatic and strategic ways.

Keywords: bisexuality; generation; identity; identifications; youth

Introduction

Attitudes toward sex and sexuality are changing rapidly in the United Kingdom and the United States. Recent decades have brought an erosion of orthodox views and institutional control of sexual behaviors and relationships in these countries (Joyner & Laumann, 2001). The internet has been instrumental in opening up Western societies to multiple sexual activities, normalizing them in the process (McNair, 2013). Following high levels of homophobia and biphobia in the 1980s and 1990s (Eliason, 1997; Loftus, 2001), a key trend has been a liberalization regarding attitudes toward same-sex sexuality (Clements & Field, 2014; Keleher and Smith, 2012), which has influenced how sexual minority youth identify sexually (Savin-Williams, 2005).

The changes in attitudes toward homosexuality are important to understand because the expression and cultural understandings of bisexuality are heavily reliant upon a culture's understanding of homosexuality (McCormack & Anderson, 2014). Thus, in this article, we examine how bisexual men identify sexually, how they relate to the label of bisexuality and how this differs according to the historical context in which they experienced their adolescence. Drawing on interviews with 90 bisexual men from London, Los Angeles and New York, we engage in debates about the changing nature of sexual identities and identifications in contemporary Anglo-American cultures, arguing that for many of our participants, bisexuality is used as a label of pragmatism rather than by a deep and abiding identification with it.

Decreasing Homophobia and Biphobia

While a pernicious strain of homophobia and biphobia has traditionally been detected in U.S. and U.K. sexual morality (Eliason, 1997; Loftus, 2001), there has been a positive shift in attitudes toward homosexuality over the past 30 years (Baunach, 2012; Clements & Field,

2014; Keleher & Smith, 2012). General Social Survey (GSS) data show the proportion of the U.S. population condemning homosexuality has steadily declined since 1987. In a statistical analysis of this data, Keleher and Smith (2012: 1232) demonstrate that acceptance of gays and lesbians has increased significantly since 1990. Similarly, recent PEW (2013) research found that 70% of those born after 1980 support same-sex marriage, and 74% of these Americans believe that "homosexuality should be accepted by society."

Concerning bisexuals specifically, in June 2013, Pew Research released the results of a survey of LGBT Americans in which 92% of bisexuals said that society had become more accepting of them in the past decade; 92% also said that they expected matters to continue to improve in the forthcoming decade. Regarding serious issues of marginalization, only 6% stated that they had been rejected by a family member or friend, only 5% had been treated unfairly by an employer, and only 4% had been threatened or physically attacked because of their bisexuality (unfortunately, the data does not say what percent were physically attacked). 77% of bisexuals have never been threatened or physically attacked because of their sexual orientation. Even so, research also suggests that some bisexual individuals continue to experience more subtle forms of marginalization and interpersonal hostility (Mitchell, Davis & Galupo, 2014; Sarno & Wright, 2013).

Despite research showing that bisexual youths maintain elevated social and emotional difficulties compared to gay or lesbian youth (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), more recent qualitative research helps understand the lessening of biphobia in contemporary cultures. Drawing on interviews with 30 bisexual youth at separate high schools throughout the UK, we found that while there were some issues with participants' experiences of being bisexual before 16, once attending high school ('college' in the UK) at the age of 16, those problems were replaced by near-total support (author citations). This was attributed to peers having greater understanding of bisexuality, being less affiliated to religious doctrine and other

ideologies, and having had contact – both in their communities and online – with other sexual minorities.

There is also evidence that increasing numbers of people are coming out of the closet, and at younger ages (Riley, 2010). Large scale surveys (e.g. Pew and Gallup) indicate that LGBT respondents are generally younger than the overall adult population, meaning that more have come out in recent years than in decades prior (author citation). Significantly, both Pew and Gallup use high quality recruitment techniques (e.g. cellular phones as well as landlines; addressed-based sampling etc) and use high quality statistical analysis. It is thus evident that alongside the liberalization in attitudes regarding homosexuality, similar shifts are occurring related to bisexuality (see also Anderson & McCormack, in press).

Given the focus on bisexual men in this article, it is also important to understand shifting discourses around masculinities (Anderson, 2014; McCormack, 2012a). This is because the experiences of bisexual men are contingent on how broader attitudes toward bisexuality and homosexuality intersect with dominant conceptions of masculinity (Burleson, 2005; McLean, 2007). Given that homophobia has traditionally served to police heterosexual men's gendered behaviors (Plummer, 1999), men have used homophobic language and behaviors to prove that they were heterosexual and raise their masculine capital (Anderson, 2005; Floyd, 2000). However, as attitudes toward homosexuality improve, the power of homophobia to regulate masculinities diminishes (McCormack & Anderson, 2014) and the stratification of masculinities will be influenced by improving attitudes toward homosexuality.

Changing Patterns in Sexual Identities

Growing up as a sexual minority youth in a heteronormative society can lead to strain and tension (Meyer, 2003), which is one reason why many opt to remain closeted until adulthood.

Yet remaining closeted has psychological repercussions, as many LGB youth internalize the homophobia of the broader culture (Flowers & Buston, 2001). This is more complex for bisexual individuals, who face confusion and a range of questions about their identity (Klein, 1993; McLean, 2007). However, occurring alongside the liberalization in sexual attitudes and masculinities, a growing body of research highlights that how sexual minority youth identify sexually is undergoing a profound change.

Savin-Williams (1998, 2005) has pioneered research into changing patterns in sexual identities, arguing that the "new gay teenager" is one that is not defined by their sexuality or a sense of marginalization, but eschews identity labels and does not have a master identity that is related to sexuality. He argues that sexual minority youth are entering a "postidentity" phase to characterize this shift. Dean (2014:5-6) calls this a "post-closet" culture to recognize the "cultural legitimation of 'normalized' gay men and lesbians and their expanded latitude in negotiating desire, gender and identity."

The extent to which this is occurring is debated, with Cohler and Hammack (2007) arguing that meanings of identity are becoming important in different ways. They highlight how a narrative of struggle and success dominated in the 1980s and 1990s, and has since been replaced by one of emancipation. However, they critique this as "dangerously assimilative" (p. 54), fearing that such an approach homogenizes the experiences of sexual minority youth. This fear seems to have been unfounded, however, given the complexity of life experience that is recognized in the literature that charts the progressive changes for sexual minority youth (e.g. Anderson, McCormack & Ripley, 2014; McCormack, 2012b; Morris, 2014), as well as research that focuses on negative experiences (e.g. Robinson & Espelage, 2011). In other words, research finding a lessening of negative experiences does not homogenize sexual minority experience, and the turn toward this diversity has not resulted in an absence of research documenting negative experiences.

In order to develop understandings of the changing nature of sexual identities, there has been interest in a trend of people eschewing traditional sexual identity labels for terms they feel better describe their sexuality (e.g. Hayes et al, 2011; Morgan & Thompson, 2011; Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). One focus of research has been on the 'Kinsey 1s' – men and women who identify as "predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual" (Kinsey et al, 1948). Developing research on people with non-exclusive sexual desires but may do not primarily identify as bisexual, pansexual or other similar terms, Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013) discuss the presence of "mostly heterosexuals" as a discrete sexual orientation group that is distinct from both heterosexuality and bisexuality. They highlight that research traditionally grouped "Kinsey 1s" as part of another category: sometimes they were excluded from the study altogether, or were classified as bisexuals, heterosexuals or non-heterosexuals. Their review of existing research on mostly heterosexuals concludes that it is a viable sexual identity category that needs to be included in sexual identity models. While the Kinsey scale is critiqued in terms of its original usage as well as its operationalization in ways that may question the utility of discrete categorizations of sexual identity (e.g. Galupo et al, 2014; Weinrich, 2014), there is strong correlation between 5, 7 and 9 point scales of sexual identity measurement that provides strong empirical evidence that these "mostly straights" are distinct from heterosexuals and bisexuals (see Savin-Willams & Vrangalova 2013).

We argue that the emergence of mostly heterosexuals as a discrete sexual category in contemporary academic research, despite being identified in Kinsey's research back in the 1940s, is attributable to decreasing homophobia. The reduction in homophobia and the one-time rule of homosexuality (Anderson, 2008), where people viewed even one act of same-sex sexual activity evidence of having a homosexual orientation, provides the space for people to recognize their own desires without being stigmatized.

Thus, Cohler and Hammack (2007) contend that identities are still important for youth, and Savin-Williams' (2005) research documents a move away from pathology in sexual minorities experiences that has fundamentally influenced *how* they identify. Taken together, it is evident that there are profound changes occurring in the behaviors, experiences of identities of sexual minority youth, and that the influence on bisexual identities is under-theorized. The purpose of the present study is thus to address this gap in the literature, and determine whether generational differences exist in openly bisexual men's experience of biphobia, coming out, relationships and use of the label "bisexual."

Methods

In devising this research, we sought to address an issue that has been highlighted concerning research with bisexuals—namely that it tends to collect data from particular groups such as self-help and community groups (Hartman, 2011). As McCormack (2014) argues, this has led to a skewing of bisexual research to those that have had particularly negative experiences; an effect worsened by the atypical nature of bisexual communities in relation to the broader bisexual population (author citation). In order to avoid this issue, we did not involve these groups in the recruitment process. Instead, participants were recruited directly from busy streets in the city centers of London, Los Angeles and New York, and we recruited 30 men from each city (90 in total). We focused on men in this article given the need for separate analysis of men and women, particularly regarding their identities (Worthen, 2013), as well as our expertise as masculinities scholars.

We strategically selected city center locations with high numbers of pedestrians given that bisexual men represent a small minority of the population. We recruited participants throughout the day as well as in the evening, including weekdays and during the weekend. Members of the research team would stand on these selected street corners announcing,

"Bisexual men, we're paying forty dollars for academic research." After participant recruitment, interviews were immediately conducted in a suitably private nearby locations such as a coffee shop or secluded public area.

We have discussed the limitations and benefits of this approach elsewhere (author citation), and highlight that it enabled us to recruit 90 participants and that it was effective in recruiting bisexual men who were *open* about their sexual orientation: Asking potential participants to identify as bisexual on a crowded public street acted as one mechanism of narrowing our desired target population.

Perhaps the most common question about our research design is whether it was prone to people feigning bisexuality to earn money. We highlight first that this is an issue in all interview research and also that our approach likely *decreased* the chance of this happening. This is because rather than having time to prepare a fake life history, participants responded to our calls contemporaneously (see Anderson & McCormack, in press, for a fuller discussion of this and other issues).

Process

This qualitative research employed in-depth interviews with 90 bisexual men. Participants were divided into three strategically selected age cohorts (18-24, 25-35, 36-42) with the purpose of examining the influence of changing attitudes connected to bisexuality and masculinity. These cohorts were adopted to enable examination of how a participants experiences of adolescence may be influence affected by different gender and sexual discourses of the time—such as the influence of the internet and other trends concerning sexuality that have taken place over the last 30 years. These cohorts also correspond with three of Plummer's (2010) generational cohorts for gays and lesbians; arguing that the unique

social and historical contextual factors of each generation has an influence on the ways in which society and sexualities are experienced (see also Evans & Riley 2014).

Consequently, we determined that these categories mean that each cohort would have experienced adolescence within a specific social context: a time of high cultural homophobia during the late 1980s, decreasing homophobia during the mid-1990s, and more positive attitudes towards homosexuality during the late 2000s (Loftus, 2001; Keleher and Smith, 2012). Thus, we categorized three age cohorts for analysis with men aged 36-42, 25-35 and 18-24. The men in the in 36-42 group were aged 16 between 1984 and 1990; those in the 25-35 age group were aged 16 between 1991 and 2001; and those in the 18-24 year old group were aged 16 between 2002 and 2008.

We interviewed 30 men from each city, and 10 from each cohort within each city. Interviews with these men were largely biographical in nature, exploring participants' experiences across the course of their life. 55 percent (50 out of 90) identified as white or Caucasian, with the other participants identifying as an ethnic minority—we do not provide further details here as race is not a key lens of analysis in this research (see Anderson & McCormack, in press). Data was not collected on their educational level or social class. Discussions focused on the extent of biphobia; their bisexual coming out experiences; relationships with friends, family and partners; and their feelings about the term 'bisexual.' All interviews were digitally recorded, stored securely and transcribed. Participants were provided with contact details for the research team, and offered the opportunity to review transcripts. All other ethical procedures of the British Sociological Association have been followed, as per the university ethics approval at the time of data collection.

Analysis

A modified approach to analyzing data using grounded theory was employed in our analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Each researcher inductively developed their own themes as they gathered interviews and at the end of each day, interviews were discussed alongside the emerging data and our initial thoughts on prospective themes. This coding in the field fed into successive data collection as the interview schedule was revised to account for themes that were developing during the course of research.

Upon returning from our fieldwork, coding and analysis continued in combination with intensified search for literature pertinent to bisexual men's experiences. We undertook further coding and identified patterns in the transcribed stories (Urquhart, 2013). It was at this stage that we undertook a cohort analysis, searching for similarities and differences in the themes between cohorts. This was an inductive and iterative process, with themes grounded in and emerging from the data. Given this analysis, the results presented in this article will not relate directly to the questions asked but rather to the themes that emerged inductively in our analysis. These more detailed themes were cross-checked by the interviewers, with each coding 10% of the others' transcripts. Theoretical arguments were then formed from the data (Charmaz, 2006). It is through this process of logical abstraction and inter-rater reliability that rigor is assured.

Limits to Generalizability

We recognize limitations on the generalizability of this project—these men were all located from metropolitan areas and they all had the time (or reason) to be in the areas where we were recruiting. The data does not speak to how bisexual women's identities may be changing, the experiences of older bisexual men, or those in the closet. It is also important to highlight that our recruitment procedures – calling publically for bisexual men for research – would be more likely to recruit those with at least some attachment to bisexuality as an

identity category. The difference in our recruitment strategy also makes direct comparison with other research on bisexual identities somewhat more complex—although it also highlights the issues with relying on particular groups from which to recruit participants (see also McCormack, 2014).

Results: From Confusion and Denial to Clarity of Desire

Research has traditionally shown that recognition of bisexual desires often occur later than same-sex desires, and is accompanied by a state of confusion and fear (Weinberg, Williams & Pryor, 1994). Across all three cohorts in our study, there were men who recognized bisexual desire post-adolescence, those who recognized it during adolescence and those who recognized it pre-adolescence. Among the oldest two cohorts, 13 of the 60 men only realized their same-sex desires post-adolescence. For Andy, white and aged 39, the realization of his bisexuality occurred when he was 18. He said, "I was freaked out. I had spent much of my youth being homophobic, calling everybody fags. And when I started to realize that I was one, it really freaked me out."

There were years of denial for some participants before they recognized their desires. Marcus, white and aged 35, said, "The feelings were there at 9 or 10, but I only really took notice of them around 16. I'm not sure I knew what the term bisexual was back then, it was pretty confusing, but I look back now and recall the feelings." Similarly, Phil, aged 31 and white, said:

> It was a weird feeling at first. I was 19, and finding myself looking more at the guy while jerking off to porn. I tried not to, by watching lesbian porn instead. But it just didn't do it for me. I fought it for a few years, but eventually I just had to admit to myself that I liked guys, too.

Self-realization occurred in pre-adolescence for some of the older men, too. For example, John, 38 and white, realized his bisexuality at the age of 12. He said, "At that age I already had a sense of what excited me."

Interestingly, while these men spoke of denial regardless of age of realization, they did not mention being confused as older research suggests (Weinberg et al, 1994). Nonetheless, these men had difficulty dealing with these feelings, in a way similar to Weinberg et al (1994) describe. For example, Bernie, white and aged 37, realized his bisexuality at the age of 16 and said that these feelings "didn't sit easy…I wanted to suppress them." He added, "I was like 'this isn't normal,' and I didn't know what was happening." AJ, black and aged 38, felt similarly, saying, "At 16, if I got turned on by a guy I would tell myself to cool down, think about something else, try and think about some girls." Thus, the men of the older two cohorts recognized bisexual desire at an early age, but had difficulty in dealing with these desires—mostly likely attributable to the biphobia prevalent in society at the time. Similarly, Darryn, aged 42 and black, said he was 15 years old when he first acknowledged his bisexuality. "It was a little weird at first, and I was in denial," Darryn explained, "Because I didn't know if how I felt was right or wrong, but as I matured I found out it wasn't just me who felt like that."

These negative experiences contrast with men in younger cohort (18-23), who had more positive understandings of what it meant to be attracted to males at that age. For example, Tyler, a 19 year old Hispanic man, recollected being attracted to both boys and girls from the age of 7. He said, "I realized what 'being gay' was early on, my aunt's had gay friends so that helped me come to terms with it. I knew some people frowned upon it, but I was pretty much always able to accept that about myself." Similarly, Mike, aged 18 and white, said:

> I knew what was up by 10 or 11. I just found myself drawn to guys as well as girls. But I wasn't too bothered by it. I wasn't going to tell anyone just yet, but I knew what gay was, and I knew there were gay kids in my neighborhood, so it wasn't really a big deal.

Importantly, the majority of the men's narratives in the youngest cohort did not include negative feelings about these desires, unlike men from the older two cohorts where such feelings were regularly expressed.

While most of these men discussed not being particularly troubled by their feelings at this age, some men from the youngest and middle cohort still experienced feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment. "I was 12 and I didn't want anyone to know," Jake, white and aged 24, explained. Similarly, Marco, an 18 year old Hispanic man was 15 when he first realized. "Even though I was dating this girl who I was really into," he said, "I still knew I was bi." He described the process of realizing he was bisexual as "a bit of a burden," adding "but I realized who I really was and that made me happy, ya know?" Despite this worry about social stigma, these men did not discuss confusion about their desires which may be attributable to greater discussion of sexual diversity in broader culture (Netzley, 2010).

While most of the men of the youngest cohort first recognized their bisexual desires either during or before adolescence, some men only realized their desires after adolescence. Even so, these younger men experienced their desires with less stress than the older generation. Kevin, black and aged 19, said that he only realized he was bisexual aged 17, and that "It was weird I just started to realize I liked men. It wasn't a switch coming on, but it was like 'oh, why didn't I realize this before.'" Similarly, Adam, black and aged 23, said he was only attracted to women until the age of 18, adding "I didn't tell people immediately, as I needed to process what was going on. I came out about a year later."

We cannot make claims about there being a reduction in the number of people who realize their identities post-adolescence, because it is possible that there are men aged 18-23 at the time of data collection who will only realize their desires later in life—that is, the reduction could possibly the result of the age of participants. What is clear, however, is that this recognition is less difficult for the younger generation. Given the rationale of our cohort design, we contend that this is the result of increasingly liberal attitudes toward homosexuality alongside a greater awareness of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity (see Anderson & Adams, 2011).

Generational Differences in Identifying as Bisexual

Critical understandings of identities contend that they are essentially narratives that enable social experiences to be integrated into a coherent account that makes sense of significant events and provides a purpose to life (Plummer, 1995). It is important to recognize that labeling of sexuality is present across historical time periods (Norton, 2010). Even so, sexual identities remain an important way of understanding personal experiences of sexual desire, and mediating these experiences of sexual desire in the broader culture (Hammack & Cohler, 2009).

Although the men in our study must identify with the term bisexual enough to respond to our calls for research on bisexual men, there was a range of ways in which participants identified with the term that we explore. Many of the participants spoke about valuing the bisexual label at an inter-personal level, because it helped them discuss their sexual desires with others. This view was strongest amongst the older two cohorts, and particularly with men over 30. For example, Anthony, aged 34 and white, identified as bisexual, but "leaned more towards men." He said, "Bisexuality as a label works for me. Otherwise how do you explain to people that you like both when they don't understand that?" Similarly, Drew, 30

and black, said, “Yeah I use it, it just works. I use it if I’m in a relationship to make it known, you know. You need the language to explain who you’re attracted to.”

Others, particularly among the older cohorts, linked identifying as bisexual as having pride in their desires. Arthur, aged 42 and white, said that “I think bisexual is a good label. It’s a different way of looking at the world… I think it’s all about taking pride in what you do in your life.” Ricky, Hispanic and aged 33, said, “I don’t mind the label bisexual, I’m proud of what I am. I’m comfortable with it.”

This was not the case with all participants, particularly among the younger two cohorts. Some found the word did not fit their identities well, or they questioned whether a label was necessary. For example, Shane, aged 28 and black, said, “I don’t really care for the label but it works well enough. Nobody takes the label too seriously.” Richie, aged 32 and Hispanic, said that “Labels are useful, but I really don’t care if they’re used or not.” Some people, particularly in the youngest cohort, did not find the label ‘bisexual’ helpful in explaining their desires. For example, Frank, Hispanic and aged 20, said:

> Bisexual is a little ambiguous for me, because it’s hard to know what it means. The bisexual label seems too rigid…And you know that’s why when I talk about my desires, with people I’m dating, or with friends, I find it easier not to use the terminology all the time. I prefer discussing it, and talking about my desires instead.

Ray’s ambivalence to the label came from his experiences in talking with other people who doubted the existence of bisexuality. Aged 25 and Hispanic, Ray said that he used the label “when referring to other people, but not so much for myself. What I say about for myself depends on the situation because I may or may not be attracted to that man or woman.” He explained that this was partly due to bisexual burden **(**Anderson et al, 2014), an umbrella term to understand the range of stereotypes and prejudices bisexuals traditionally encounter:

> The label bisexual doesn't work for me, and I don't think it always works for most people. There is always worry behind what you label yourself as – whether you'll get accepted by other people.

Tyrone was one of just two men over 30 to have a similarly ambivalent view related to the label. "I don't really like labels to begin with. I feel like, whoever I'm in a relationship with at that point, that's what matters. Not what label I have." As we show in the next section, this generational divide is even more apparent in the way that the younger men critique the notion of identity categories altogether.

Ambivalence Toward Identity Categories

While a range of views about the label bisexual existed across the cohorts, there was a significant strand in the youngest cohort that de-emphasized the importance of sexual identity labels. This fits with a broader trend where sexual minority youth eschew sexual identity labels, defined by Savin-Williams (2005) as a "post-identity" phase (see also Ghaziani, 2014).

The majority of men in the oldest cohort spoke about the value of identity categories. Riccardo, aged 38 and Hispanic, said, "Being bisexual is important to me because it's about *recognizing* yourself, about working out who you are." He added, "When you're hot for men and women, how do you understand that unless you call yourself bisexual?" Similarly, Barry, aged 39 and black, highlighted the power of identity labels in coming out to potential partners. He said, "I bring that up right at the beginning and I say, 'look and understand that I'm not going to change my ways,'" adding, "But you know I say that because I *am* bisexual – it's who I am." Likewise, Vernon, aged 40 and white, said, "Being bisexual is who you are. How can you get treated right if people don't understand that." There was little ambivalence in the oldest cohort's perceptions of identity categories.

Many of the participants in the younger two cohorts had little attachment to sexual identity labels. For example, Max, white and aged 27, said, "I find myself equally attracted to males and females so if I fit the criteria to be labeled as bisexual, then sure, why not." This approach was similar to Neil's. Aged 18 and white, he said that he uses the bisexual label because "…it implies evenly split desires. That's what I have, so I'm happy with that. It works as a way to describe my desires." They were happy to use the labels but there narratives were absent of any component that would suggest a deep-rooted emotional attachment to a bisexual identity.

Some of these young men used their ambivalence toward identity categories and the label 'bisexual' to explicitly argue against its importance. George, white and 28, said that pronouncing a gay identity was sometimes easier and did not find this a negative thing. He said, "It depends who I'm with. I find it easier to call myself gay. But I went to a gay pride festival once and ended up going home with a woman, so I don't feel that it stops me doing what I want." William, white and 22, strongly resisted the label. He said, "I don't use it, I don't talk about it. I just say that I'm attracted to men and women. I only use the word bi when I have to."

Jackson's perspective that sexuality was a spectrum influenced his understanding of the use of labels. White and aged 21, he said, "I believe all people are bisexual by nature, and it all depends on the context of the situation, the personality, everything. So yeah, bisexuality works as a label to capture that, sure." He added, "It's tough. If you don't have the categories then how do you talk about sexuality, but when you have categories you put people into them, and that doesn't suit everyone."

It was significant that those in the youngest cohort also in long-term relationships actively rejected using the bisexual label. For example, Sam, aged 23 and Hispanic, often said that he was gay because he was currently in a long-term monogamous relationship with a

man. Rather than this being a form of bisexual erasure, however, Sam argued that it was about describing his sexuality most appropriately:

> The term bisexual, I don't associate with sex any more than it needs to be. Yes, I'm attracted to men and women. But the fact is I'm doing monogamy with my boyfriend, and I don't think of women that much at the moment. Technically, I might be 'bisexual' if you were to do scientific tests, but I'm happy saying I'm gay at the moment.

Here, Sam's ease at forgoing a bisexual identity in a relationship speaks to how these men do not view it as a fundamental part of their identities. By not describing such practices as a form of closeting, it suggests that the label is less important to their social identities than has previously been described, even though he identifies with the label enough to have responded to our call for participants (see also Savin-Williams, 2005).

These examples do not show a rejection of identity categories more broadly, but a diminution in their importance to these men's lives—seemingly happy to switch between bisexual, gay and other labels as appropriate (Cohler & Hammack, 2009). Some men, however, supported the notion that identity categories were critiqued more broadly (Savin-Williams, 2005). David, aged 19 and Hispanic, said that he was "not a big fan of labels. I just prefer to be myself I suppose. I'd rather say, 'I kinda like guys also.'" He attributed this in part to the focus on sex, saying "I like fit-looking dudes and pretty women. I don't see why we have to label that." Similarly, Saul, black and 19, said that "The term bisexual is a cop out term. It's more about what you feel about a person at the time. I'm all about the intimacy." The two themes of diminishing importance or outright rejection show a marked shift in attitudes toward sexual identity among participants in the youngest cohort.

Discussion

In this article, we address when bisexual men became aware of their bisexuality, how they identify with the label, and the extent to which there is a generational cohort effect in these experiences. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 90 bisexual men from three metropolitan cities in the U.S. and U.K., we find that there have been two significant shifts in the experiences of bisexuals. First, in relation to how early recognition of bisexual desires were dealt with by participants and secondly, that there has been a loosening of emotional ties with the label of bisexuality. In both cases, there is considerable explanatory power in the contention that these changes are the result of less homophobic attitudes during the time of adolescence.

When considering early awareness of maintaining both same-sex and opposite-sex desires, confusion has often been seen as an inherent component of bisexuality. Weinberg, et al's (1994) model of bisexual identity development contended that the first stages of developing a bisexual identity were seen to emerge from confusion around desires for both men and women. This idea found support for men in the oldest cohort. Yet for the men in the youngest cohort, confusion played a far smaller a role in understanding their desires. While some still feared discrimination or social stigma, none expressed being confused about their same-sex desires. We attribute this to the greater awareness of bisexuality as a sexual identity in the 21st century (Anderson & Adams, 2011).

In addition to these changing ways of identifying as bisexual, we also found significant change in the nature of these identifications among young bisexual men. Savin-Williams (2005) argues that sexual minority youth are entering a "postidentity" phase in which they no longer find solace or resonance with sexual identity categories. Cohler and Hammack (2009) suggest that rather than identity ceasing to be of importance, it becomes important in different ways. They say that "shifting master narratives of queer identity in the

twenty-first century... [necessitate] adequate sensitivity to and appreciation for the contextual basis of human development" (p. 456). Our research finds support for both positions, with identifications continuing to have significance for our participants but in different ways than for the older generations.

The youngest cohort still place importance on their sexual identity. Most, when coming out, used the word bisexual – some because this was the easiest way to explain their desires, but most because it is how they identify. While their experiences were markedly more positive than the older generations, the idea that they needed to come out – and that they had previously been in the closet – accurately described their experiences and feelings (Plummer, 1995). The notion of a sexual identity resonated with them, and the positive receptions they received had a beneficial impact in their lives.

However, we also show that the nature of these identifications are fundamentally different. Many men in the youngest cohort simply do not have a strong emotional engagement with their sexual identity. Some were happy to "lose" their bisexuality in a relationship, while others felt the label was the best option for describing their sexual desires without stating any particular affiliation with it. The ease of coming out (see McCormack, Anderson & Adams, 2014) has quite possibly altered the value they place in their sexual identities.

These findings differ from much of the research on bisexuality, particularly that which focuses on the effects of societal biphobia and minority stress. We contend that this is attributable to two key factors: 1) declining homophobia has had a profound effect on the sexual identities of young people in terms of their more positive realizations of being bisexual and a shift toward bisexual identity having less importance in their lives (see Ghaziani, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2005); and 2) different recruitment procedures – moving away from relying on bisexual communities, LGBT groups and counseling services – means that the bias toward

samples with particularly negative experiences is not found in our research (McCormack, 2014).

There are of course limitations to our study. The aim of qualitative research is not to make generalizations, and our sample is limited in several ways. First, the manner of recruiting bi-identified individuals means that we will not have recruited all types of people with non-binary sexual identities, which will influence our findings related to experiences of social and sexual identity (Callis, 2014; Mitchell et al, 2014). Similarly, the characteristics of our sample in terms of its location, urban nature and public manner of participant recruitment will also influence who participated and the nature of our findings. Thus, the relevance of our findings are primarily for men who identify as bisexual, who are public about this to some extent, and who live in relatively liberal metropolitan cities.

Notwithstanding these important limitations, the generational effects related to identity and identifications resonate with and advance existing theorizing in the area. In his book *The New Gay Teenager*, Savin-Williams (2005, p. 222) hoped that he would "see the elimination of same-sex sexuality as *a* defining characteristic" in his lifetime. For many of the men in the younger two cohorts, particularly those under 30, this appears to be precisely what has happened. Bisexuality is still a useful label and identity that these men inhabit and use, but there is no evidence to show it is the characteristic that defines their lives.

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