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Elizabeth M. Morgan ^a; Elisabeth Morgan Thompson ^b

^a Department of Psychology, Boise State University, ^b Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, & Families, University of Arizona,

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Processes of Sexual Orientation Questioning Among Heterosexual Women

Elizabeth M. Morgan

Department of Psychology, Boise State University

Elisabeth Morgan Thompson

Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, & Families, University of Arizona

Because very little is known about heterosexual identity development, this study assesses and describes sexual orientation questioning processes of heterosexual-identified women and offers a comparison of these processes with those employed by their sexual-minority counterparts. Participants included 333 female college students (ages 18–23; $M = 19.2$): 228 participants primarily identified as “exclusively straight/heterosexual,” and 105 participants indicated a sexual-minority identity. Sixty-seven percent of exclusively heterosexual respondents ($n = 154$) indicated having thought about or questioned their sexual orientation. The processes by which heterosexual participants described questioning their sexual orientation were coded for the presence of five emergent categories using an inductive thematic coding methodology. These five categories included unelaborated questioning (19%), other-sex experiences (16%), exposure to sexual minorities (26%), assessment of same-sex attraction (48%), and evaluations of same-sex behavior (26%). Several unifying and differentiating themes emerged between sexual orientation groups. Results from this study suggest that contemporary young women’s heterosexuality is not necessarily an unexamined identity; indeed, the large majority of young women in this sample were deliberately identifying as heterosexual after contemplating alternative possibilities.

In the amplitude of research exploring female sexual development, heterosexual identity development often goes unexamined and ignored. Instead, research on heterosexual women’s sexual development has focused primarily on behavioral or attitudinal outcomes, without attention to a more multifaceted understanding of identity. In most cases, these studies neglect to probe for information regarding processes of sexual identity development and personal sexual histories, often rendering heterosexuality invisible. When (hetero)sexual behavior is examined, it is surrounded by discussions of risk, especially in a “hook-up” culture, with a focus on casual sex, contraception, sexually transmitted infections and diseases, substance (ab)use, and threat of sexual assault (e.g., Hughes, Johnson, & Wilsnack, 2001; Jackson, 2005; Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003; Long, Ullman, Long, Mason, & Starzynski, 2007; Reddy & Dunne, 2007; Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2006). When not interested in sexual behavior *per se*, research on women’s (hetero)sexual development tends to focus on gender instead; for example, the negotiation of and attitudes toward limiting gender roles, gendered

heterosexual scripts, sexual double standards, and the socialization of femininity (e.g., Jackson & Cram, 2003; Kim et al., 2007; Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007; Striepe & Tolman, 2003). As a result of these patterns of study, heterosexual individuals are not frequently asked to describe how they established their sexual identity (for an exception, see Eliason, 1995). This study seeks a better understanding of young women’s heterosexual identity development through an exploratory examination of the presence and processes of sexual orientation questioning among a college population.

In comparison to the extant research on sexual-minority groups’ processes of questioning, heterosexual identity development has received little empirical attention (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). Indeed, when sexual identity researchers have commented on heterosexual identity, it has been noted that most heterosexual individuals do not think about their sexual identity and heterosexuality is conceptualized as an unmarked identity (Diamond, 2008b). The invisibility of questioning processes for heterosexual individuals may be explained in large part through compulsory heterosexuality. Within the context of compulsory heterosexuality, a heterosexual identity is viewed as the only option and is conceptualized narrowly as both

Correspondence should be addressed to Elizabeth M. Morgan, Department of Psychology, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1715. E-mail: emorgan@boisestate.edu

inherent and uniform, rendering it a “silent” identity (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993; Konik & Stewart, 2004). While compulsory heterosexuality affects both men and women, some feminist scholars have noted differential and unequal material conditions that render heterosexuality necessary for women’s economic and social sustainment (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993; Rich, 1980).

Two key components of compulsory heterosexuality are hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 2006) and hegemonic femininity. According to Tolman (2006), among other things, “hegemonic femininity demands that (good) [heterosexual] girls not have sexual agency, that is, a sense of themselves as sexual beings entitled to feel and act on their own feelings” (p. 76)—that is, sexual and social passivity in relationships with men are part and parcel to a heterosexual identity and the “regulation of divers[ity in] women’s sexuality” (Tolman, 2006, p. 74). Research examining the role of hegemonic femininity in adolescent girls’ sexual health and agency has found a negative association between feminine ideology and both sexual self-efficacy and healthy sexual behaviors (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006). In another study, girls who reported less self-objectification also evidenced more comfort talking about sexuality and engaged in greater sexual experimentation (Hirschman, Impett, & Schooler, 2006). Because the prevailing social norms guiding young women’s sexuality conceive female (hetero)sexuality as passive, devoid of desire, and subordinate to male needs, it is natural that conceptualizations of young women’s sexual identity development often assume that the heterosexual identity is similarly constructed through passive and unexamined processes.

The theoretical and empirical work examining women’s sexual-minority identity development provides a useful starting point for considering sexual identity development, although the processes are likely quite different for heterosexually identified young women. Contributions from a number of researchers (Cass, 1979, 1984; Fassinger, 2000; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Herdt, 1992; Savin-Williams, 1995; Troiden, 1989) have shaped the study of sexual identity, focusing chiefly on developmental models aimed at understanding the emergence and adoption of a sexual-minority identity. With the more recent expansion of identity categories, scholars have suggested developmental trajectories or sexual “lifeways” to be a better descriptor of the diverse processes and multiple pathways that lead to a sexual-minority identity (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). All of these models and trajectories incorporate some form of coming to awareness of one’s sexual orientation or exploration of one’s sexuality (for reviews, see Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Within this research, sexual questioning processes can be defined as “struggles over identifying and authenticating subjective experiences of same-sex and other-sex

attractions” (Diamond, 2005a, p. 12). This includes, but is not limited to, critical interrogations of “subjective experiences of sexual arousal, pleasure, disgust, disinterest, affection, infatuation, and love, as well as the social meaning of these experiences” (Diamond, 2005a, p. 10). Not surprisingly, research indicates that sexual-minority individuals have often described their sexual identities as salient and involving an effortful process and have even indicated higher exploration and commitment in other domains of identity than heterosexually identified young adults (Konik & Stewart, 2004). As such, research on sexual-minority identity development is helpful in providing a framework from which to begin an investigation into heterosexual identity development, but cannot be relied upon for understanding the differences between sexual-minority and heterosexual individuals’ developmental trajectories.

Research has evidenced unique experiences specific to women’s sexual identity development that help inform possible developmental trajectories for heterosexual women. Several studies have revealed heightened fluidity in young women’s sexual identity (Diamond 2005c, 2008a, 2008b), as well as diversity within women’s sexual identity labels, including a significant number of young women who distinguish themselves as “mostly straight” (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Also important is the ample evidence that young women’s sexual orientation indicators (e.g., behavior, attraction, and fantasies) do not always match up perfectly with the identity label they have chosen (Amestoy, 2001; Remafedi, Resnick, Blum, & Harris, 1992; Thompson & Morgan, 2008), highlighting the fact that many heterosexual women may have histories of same-sex behavior and that women often come to a sexual-minority identity after a significant history of heterosexual behavior and identification (Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Diamond’s (2008a, 2008b) longitudinal study furthermore revealed that the majority of women shifted their identity label at least once and that some women who previously identified with sexual-minority labels did in fact adopt a heterosexual identity at various points throughout the 10 years of the study. This body of research is especially relevant to our study because it highlights the fact that a heterosexual identity does not consistently reflect a stable, initial, or uniform sexual attraction, behavior, or identification experience. However, it is important to note that this research has mainly been conducted with populations identifying with a sexual-minority label at some point and is not necessarily applicable to women who have consistently identified as exclusively heterosexual.

Despite indications that women’s heterosexual identity development may indeed be a complex and multifaceted process, research on women’s heterosexual identity development is scant. Worthington et al. (2002) proposed a general model that helps elucidate

questioning as a part of a heterosexual identity during its phase of active exploration. Worthington et al. (2002) suggested that most heterosexuals begin with a commitment to a heterosexual identity without a conscious exploration of that self-labeling and, because of compulsory heterosexuality, many heterosexuals rarely move out of this phase. However, for some, active cognitive or behavioral exploration of one's heterosexual identity can take place with symbolic or real other-sex and same-sex experimentation while reserving "the privileged status associated with identification as heterosexual" (Worthington et al., 2002, p. 517). This model importantly places emphasis on both the individual and social components of a heterosexual identity, such that as the individual seeks to understand his or her emerging heterosexual desires, he or she also discovers the sociocultural meanings attached to being a member of a distinct social group.

Despite its theoretical potential, this model has not been empirically validated, and its application to women's heterosexual identity development remains to be seen. A mere handful of studies have addressed heterosexual identity in women (e.g., Boratav, 2006; Eliason, 1995), yielding mixed results. In most studies, sexual identity questioning is left unreported due to underdeveloped methodologies regarding "questioning"—that is, information about "questioning" is more of a by-product of the data collected rather than a result of specific inquiries. For example, in Boratav's questionnaire study of Turkish students, 94% of heterosexual informants expected their sexual identities to always remain the same, highlighting an "unmarked," unquestioned identity. In Eliason's examination of heterosexual college students' essays, she found that almost one-fourth of her heterosexual female participants (compared to more than one-third of male participants) had never thought about, much less questioned, their sexual identity. However, Eliason also found that heterosexual women's identities were more likely to be in moratorium (exploration with no commitment) and less likely to be foreclosed (commitment with no exploration) than heterosexual men's identities, suggesting they were perhaps prone to exploratory sexual experiences and questioning. Striepe and Tolman's (2003) interviews with adolescents also revealed purposeful examinations of heterosexuality as a result of not conforming to prescribed heterosexual gender ideologies for both girls and boys.

Due to the paucity of empirical research examining heterosexual identity development, heterosexual women's questioning processes are in need of further investigation and clarification. With same-sex desire becoming increasingly culturally normative (Savin-Williams, 2005) and increased insight into the identity processes of sexual-minority women, it would not be surprising if more heterosexual women were questioning their identity than the theoretical models predict. This study offers an exploratory examination of sexual

orientation questioning processes among heterosexually identified young women to help generate a preliminary understanding of sexual identity development among this population.

This Study

We had several goals in conducting this research. Given that research has not previously examined sexual orientation questioning among heterosexual women, our first goal was to assess the frequency with which heterosexual college women actually question their sexual orientation. Because a prior study on heterosexual men's questioning revealed that about one half of these participants had questioned their sexual orientation (Morgan, Steiner, & Thompson, in press) and because restrictions on women's same-sex activities in the context of a heterosexual identity are somewhat more relaxed (e.g., Diamond, 2002, 2005b), we anticipated that more than one half of female participants would indicate having questioned their sexual orientation.

To ascertain differences between the heterosexual questioning (HQ) population and the heterosexual non-questioning (HNQ) population, our second goal was to compare questioning and non-questioning heterosexual women on quantitative measures of feminine gender ideology; sexual identity commitment and exploration; other-sex and same-sex sexual experience; and attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. These measures were chosen because they represent relevant aspects of sexual identity (Worthington et al., 2002), including personal values, attitudes and behaviors, as well as attitudes toward other groups (i.e., LGB individuals). On these measures, we anticipated some differences to emerge between the groups, but also similarities, as both groups primarily identify as heterosexual. We hypothesized that questioning women would indicate less endorsement of statements reflective of feminine gender ideology; greater sexual identity exploration and uncertainty; less sexual identity commitment and synthesis or integration; and more positive attitudes toward LGB individuals. We also expected similar levels of other-sex behavior and somewhat higher levels of same-sex behavior among questioning women than among non-questioning women.

Following the comparative quantitative analyses, our third goal was to qualitatively examine questioning women's narratives to describe sexual orientation questioning among this population, including ascertaining the ways in which questioning has occurred, what it looked like, and the impetuses for the questioning (i.e., "questioning processes"). A qualitative methodology was chosen to facilitate an inductive approach to this research question, due to the lack of previous research on this topic. Because questioning is paramount to both heterosexual and sexual-minority identity development

models, this study also uses sexual-minority women's narratives regarding sexual orientation questioning as a comparison point for understanding HQ processes.

Method

Participants

The initial sample of participants consisted of 575 undergraduate college students; however, only female-identified participants with complete responses were analyzed for this study ($n=333$). Participants were mostly emerging adults (ages ranged from 18–23; $M=19.2$). Participants' racial backgrounds included European American or White ($n=229$; 69%), Asian American or Pacific Islander ($n=48$; 14%), Mexican American or Latina ($n=32$; 10%), biracial or multiracial ($n=15$; 4%), and unspecified ($n=9$; 3%). Participants included 128 first-year students, 122 sophomores, 43 juniors, and 40 seniors.

In response to the question, "When you think about your sexual orientation, what term do you *most* identify with?" 228 women (68%) indicated "exclusively straight/heterosexual." The remaining women ($n=105$) were placed in the "sexual-minority" group for comparative analyses, and included women who primarily identified as "mostly straight with some bisexual tendencies" ($n=73$), "bisexual" ($n=21$), "mostly gay/lesbian" ($n=4$), and "exclusively gay/lesbian" ($n=7$). "Mostly straight" identifying women were included in the sexual-minority group because in previous studies this group distinguished itself from exclusively heterosexual participants regarding same-sex attractions and experiences (Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

Procedure

Procedures were the same as those used in a similar study on the questioning processes of heterosexual men (Morgan et al., in press). All participants were college students enrolled in a lower division psychology course at a public university in northern California, and participated to fulfill a course requirement. Participants were given information about the content of the questionnaire and elected to participate in the study through an online educational experiment system. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire via a secure, online survey Web site (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). The procedure, including consent, debriefing, and credit allocation, took place online. After giving consent, participants completed a demographics section and two open-ended questions about sexual orientation development. Following these questions, participants completed several additional measures of sexual attitudes and experiences, some of which were not analyzed in this study. The questionnaire took approximately 90 min to complete.

Measures

In addition to a demographic questionnaire, participants completed the following measures: sexual orientation questioning, the Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale (AFIS; Tolman & Porche, 2000), the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale for Heterosexuals (LGB-KASH; Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Schutte, 2005), a measure of other-sex and same-sex sexual behavior, and the Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment (MoSIEC; Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008).

Sexual orientation questioning. Narrative responses from two open-ended questions were used to assess sexual orientation questioning. The first question inquired, "Have you thought much about and/or questioned your sexual orientation? If yes, when do you first remember thinking about your sexual orientation? If no, why do you think you have never thought about this?" The second question asked, "What has been important in developing your sexual orientation? Please be as specific as possible." Participants were provided with unlimited text space to answer these questions.

AFIS. Participants completed the 20-item AFIS (Tolman & Porche, 2000), which assesses personal endorsement of items that relate to traditional feminine ideologies (e.g., "I express my opinions only if I can think of a nice way of doing it," and "I think that a girl has to be thin to feel beautiful"). Responses were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*), 4 (*neither agree nor disagree*), to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .80.

LGB-KASH. Participants completed the 34-item LGB-KASH (Worthington et al., 2005). This scale assesses personal attitudes toward LGB individuals, written from a heterosexual perspective. Four of the five subscales were analyzed for this study: *endorsement of hate crimes* (e.g., "It is important for me to avoid LGB individuals"), *internalized affirmativeness* (e.g., "I would display a symbol of gay pride [pink triangle, rainbow, etc.] to show my support of the LGB community"), *knowledge of LGB history and community* (e.g., "I am knowledgeable about the history and mission of the PFLAG [Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays] organization"), and *support for LGB civil rights* (e.g., "Health benefits should be available equally to same-sex partners as to any other couple"). Responses were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*), 4 (*neither agree nor disagree*), to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for each subscale ranged from .81 to .92.

Other-sex and same-sex sexual behavior. Other-sex and same-sex sexual behavior was assessed through two sets of questions. The first set of 22 questions assessed

the frequency with which participants engaged in a variety of romantic or sexual activities (e.g., hand holding, light kissing, or receiving and performing oral sex) with the other sex and the same sex. Responses for the frequency of occurrence items were given on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*), 3 (*three to five times*), to 5 (*ten or more times*). The second set of 22 questions assessed the number of other-sex and same-sex partners for the same sets of romantic or sexual activities. Responses for the number of partner(s) items were also given on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*no one*), 3 (*three to five people*), to 5 (*ten or more people*). Four scores were calculated by averaging responses for each set of questions, which yielded a “frequency of other-sex behavior” and “frequency of same-sex behavior” score potentially ranging from 1 (*no experience*) to 5 (*highest possible frequency of other-sex or same-sex experience*); and a “number of other-sex partners,” as well as a “number of same-sex partners,” score potentially ranging from 1 (*no partners*) to 5 (*highest number of other-sex or same-sex partners*). Cronbach’s alpha for each subscale ranged from .91 to .96.

MoSIEC. The MoSIEC, developed by Worthington et al. (2008), applies Marcia’s (1966) identity framework to sexual identity. This 22-item scale has four distinct factors that are common across all sexual orientation identities: exploration, uncertainty, commitment, and synthesis or integration. Sample items included, “I am actively trying to learn more about my own sexual needs” (exploration; eight items), “I sometimes feel uncertain about my sexual orientation” (uncertainty; three items), “I have a clear sense of the types of sexual activities I prefer” (sexual orientation commitment; six items), and “My understanding of my sexual needs coincides with my overall sense of sexual self” (synthesis or integration; six items). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with a midpoint of 3 (*neither disagree nor agree*). Cronbach’s alpha for each subscale ranged from .77 to .86.

Analysis and Preliminary Coding

Preliminary analyses classified heterosexual women’s open-ended responses regarding sexual orientation questioning into two categories: questioning and non-questioning. Questioning narratives included those in which the participant explicitly noted or implicitly described that she had thought about or questioned her sexual orientation in the past, was currently questioning her sexual orientation, or had considered future changes to her sexual identity. All responses were coded by two undergraduate research assistants with adequate reliability; Cohen’s kappa was .91, and percentage of agreement was 96%. The nine discrepancies were the result of ambiguous participant narratives; these were resolved in discussions between the first author and

the research assistants. When using this classification system, results indicated that 154 (67.5%) of “exclusively straight” women had or were currently questioning their sexual orientation, and 74 (32.5%) of “exclusively straight” women had not questioned their sexual orientation.

In recognition that “thinking about” one’s sexual orientation can be different than “questioning” one’s sexual orientation, narratives were carefully reviewed to ascertain if responses should be separately categorized based on this distinction. However, participants who specifically reported “thinking about” their sexual orientation ($n = 57$; 37%) provided similar narratives, examples, and explanations as those who specifically noted “questioning” ($n = 97$; 63%) their sexual orientation. For example, one participant wrote, “Yes, I have thought about my sexual orientation from a very early age—maybe eight or so. I wasn’t sure if I liked guys or girls.” Furthermore, these two groups of participants (those who reported thinking about vs. questioning their sexual orientation) did not differ on any of our quantitative measures (e.g., AFIS, LGB–KASH, MoSIEC, or sexual behavior scales; all $ps > .10$). Thus, all participants who indicated either of these processes were combined into one coding category, which for convenience we labeled “questioning.” Non-questioning narratives were those in which participants explicitly indicated or implicitly described having never questioned their sexual orientation.

We also examined the 105 “sexual-minority” women’s narratives; all but two of these participants indicated that they had questioned or were currently questioning their sexual orientation. Thus, the preliminary coding process yielded three groups that were used for further analyses: HQ women ($n = 154$), HNQ women ($n = 74$), and sexual-minority women ($n = 105$). A one-way analysis of variance revealed significant age differences between the three groups— $F(2, 330) = 4.16$, $p = .02$ —such that the sexual-minority group was significantly older ($M = 19.43$) than the HNQ group ($M = 18.95$); there was no difference between the HQ group ($M = 19.13$) and either of the other two groups. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences among these three groups regarding their racial or ethnic background ($p > .10$).

Further analyses included a qualitative review of the questioning women’s narratives, which was conducted using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) because previous research has not described sexual orientation questioning among this population. The first step in the coding process involved reading narratives closely for emergent themes in participants’ descriptions of their questioning processes. Once the themes were categorized, all narratives were reviewed for the presence and absence of each category; these categories are described with an example narrative in Table 1. Because multiple themes occasionally emerged in the same narrative, responses could receive

Table 1. *Coding Categories for Questioning Versus Non-Questioning and Processes of Questioning Categories*

Coding Category	Cohen's Kappa (% Agreement)	% Present	Description of Category	Narrative Example
Questioning versus non-questioning (<i>n</i> = 333)	0.91 (96%)	67% (<i>n</i> = 154)	Participants explicitly noted or implicitly described that they had thought about or questioned their sexual orientation in the past or had considered future changes to their sexual identity.	"I have thought about my sexual orientation because I fantasize about members of the same sex. So my first memories were when I was young and experimenting with masturbation."
Processes of questioning (<i>n</i> = 154): Unelaborated questioning	0.87 (95%)	19% (<i>n</i> = 30)	Participants provided enough information to suggest that they had questioned their sexual orientation, but not enough to what this process included.	"I only questioned my sexual orientation when I was a Junior in high school."
Other-sex influences	0.92 (94%)	16% (<i>n</i> = 25)	Participants questioning included evaluating sexual or romantic experiences with boys (or lack thereof).	"I remember first considering my sexuality in high school, when I went for a couple of years without a boyfriend."
Exposure to sexual minorities	0.93 (94%)	26% (<i>n</i> = 40)	Participants described that their questioning process was instigated or supported by coming into contact with sexual-minority communities or individuals.	"I never really thought about my sexual orientation until high school. When I was exposed to gays, bisexual, and lesbian people, I knew I was only attracted to men."
Assessing same-sex attraction	0.80 (89%)	48% (<i>n</i> = 74)	Participants described that their questioning entailed assessing their attraction to women.	"I have questioned my sexual orientation, as I'm sure most people have. It's basically a fleeting thought of 'well I think some girls are pretty, and I like to look at them, maybe I'm gay?'"
Evaluating same-sex behavior	0.96 (96%)	26% (<i>n</i> = 40)	Participants described questioning their sexual orientation following same-sex activities.	"I have often questioned it. I first started thinking about it in the 7th grade, when I realized I was kissing more girls than boys."

Note. "Processes of questioning" categories were coded individually as present or absent; "unelaborated" was necessarily mutually exclusive from the other four categories.

a "present" code for more than one theme (except for "unelaborated," which was mutually exclusive from the other four themes). All narratives received a "present" code for at least one category. Narrative responses were coded by two undergraduate research assistants with adequate reliability; Cohen's kappa ranged from .80 to .96, and percentage of agreement was at least 89% on all coding categories (see Table 1). Discrepant narratives were typically the result of a lack of attention to an aspect of the narrative or a vague statement, and were resolved through discussions between the first author and the research assistants. Excerpts were selected for presentation as exemplars of the thematic patterns observed across the responses.

Results

Comparisons Between HQ and HNQ Women

To better understand the potential differences between heterosexual-identified women who report having questioned their sexual orientation and those who reported having never questioned their sexual orientation, we

contrasted HQ women's responses with those of HNQ women regarding quantitative measures of feminine gender ideology, attitudes toward LGB individuals, other-sex and same-sex behavioral experiences, and sexual identity development. Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and *t* tests assessing differences between HQ and HNQ women for each of these variables.

Regarding feminine gender ideology (as measured by the AFIS), no differences emerged between HQ and HNQ women. Both HQ and HNQ women's scores were similarly below the midpoint of the scale, suggesting that both groups had equally low endorsement of statements representing feminine gender ideology. Differences between HQ and HNQ participants did emerge for all four subscales of the LGB-KASH, with moderate to large effect sizes. As expected, HQ women indicated greater internalized affirmativeness, support of LGB civil rights, and knowledge of LGB history and community than HNQ women. HQ women also indicated less endorsement of LGB hate crimes than HNQ women, although both groups presented averages well below the midpoint of the scale.

Table 2. Tests of Differences Between Questioning and Non-Questioning Heterosexual Women

Variable	Questioning			Non-Questioning			<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Feminine ideology (AFIS)	151	2.55	0.40	74	2.60	0.50	0.77	0.11
LGB-KASH								
Hate crimes	154	1.27	0.40	74	1.53	0.64	-3.21***	0.49
Civil rights	154	4.60	0.56	74	4.15	0.83	4.24***	0.63
Knowledge of LGB history	154	2.87	0.84	74	2.53	0.86	2.63**	0.47
Internalized affirmativeness	154	3.67	0.68	74	3.04	0.78	6.24***	0.86
Same-sex sexual behavior								
Frequency of activity	152	1.54	0.44	74	1.39	0.41	2.39*	0.35
Number of partners	151	1.42	0.36	71	1.32	0.37	2.02*	0.28
Other-sex sexual behavior								
Frequency of activity	152	3.95	1.06	74	3.85	1.11	0.67	0.09
Number of partners	151	2.92	0.97	71	2.79	1.08	0.95	0.13
Sexual identity (MoSEIC)								
Exploration	154	3.51	0.68	74	3.16	0.72	3.56***	0.50
Uncertainty	154	2.16	0.84	74	1.43	0.49	6.92***	1.06
Commitment	154	3.30	0.77	73	3.36	0.65	-0.62	0.08
Synthesis or integration	154	3.65	0.66	73	3.82	0.66	-2.02*	0.26

Note. Responses for feminine ideology and Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale for Heterosexuals (LGB-KASH) subscales ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Responses for frequency of other-sex and same-sex sexual behavior ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*ten or more times*), and responses for number of other-sex and same-sex partners ranged from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*ten or more people*). Responses for sexual identity subscales ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). AFIS = Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale; LGB = lesbian, gay, or bisexual; MoSEIC = Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Regarding sexual behavior, as expected, there were no differences between HQ and HNQ women's frequency of other-sex sexual experiences or number of other-sex partners. However, there were significant differences between the groups' same-sex behavior. As predicted, HQ women reported higher frequency of engagement with same-sex behavior and more same-sex partners than HNQ women. However, it is important to note that these were moderate to small effect sizes and that both HQ and HNQ women did report same-sex sexual experiences. For example, 60% of HQ women indicated they had engaged in light same-sex kissing, while 42% of HNQ women reported this behavior. Forty-three percent of HQ indicated having "made out" (close body contact with hugging and prolonged kissing) with another female, as opposed to 17% of HNQ women. Also, 4% of HQ women indicated having given oral sex to another woman, while just over 1% of HNQ women reported this behavior.

Lastly, groups were assessed regarding sexual identity variables. Counter to our hypothesis, HQ and HNQ women did not differ on the commitment subscale. However, HQ women did have lower scores than the HNQ women on the synthesis or integration subscale. As expected, HQ women indicated higher levels of uncertainty and exploration than HNQ women.

Qualitative Analyses of HQ Women's Narratives

To better understand what sexual identity questioning looks like for heterosexual women, their narratives

were analyzed for prominent themes. A discussion of the five discrete themes that emerged and how they represent the various forms of sexual identity questioning and exploration as described by the young women in this study follows. These five categories included unelaborated questioning (19%), other-sex experiences (16%), exposure to sexual minorities (26%), assessment of same-sex attraction (48%), and evaluations of same-sex behavior (26%).

Unelaborated questioning. Narratives in this category typically included a statement that the participant had questioned her sexual orientation and an indication of how old she was when she did so. For example, one participant reported, "I've questioned my orientation a million times, and still do. The first time I did I was about 12." Another participant explained, "When I was an adolescent, I questioned my sexuality. I had always thought of myself as heterosexual, but there was a brief period of time that I questioned that. I am now secure in my heterosexuality." Other narratives in this category included slightly more information regarding the participants' perspectives of their questioning process, but were not appropriate for any of the other categories. For example, one participant explained, "I suppose I've thought about it. I believe (or like to hope) that everyone is bisexual and that you don't choose whom you're involved with by a single characteristic (like gender, race, religious beliefs, etc.) and that you fall for or are interested in the person."

Other-sex influences. This category included descriptions of questioning that involved concluding a heterosexual identity following an assessment of their relationships with men as positive, as well as questioning following difficulties entering into or in relationships with boys. Most notable in this category were the participants who described not feeling ready or comfortable dating or being sexual with boys during middle school or high school, but had friends who were dating. As a result, the participants described questioning their sexual orientation or using “being gay” as an excuse for not dating. For example, one participant explained:

Yes I have thought about my sexual orientation. I think that the first time I thought about my sexual orientation was somewhere around middle school. All of my friends began to experiment with boys, and I didn't really seem to care for that. I felt pressured to mess around with boys, and finally broke under it. I identify myself as heterosexual, and think that this experience of being forced into it might have contributed to that.

Other participants described that their questioning was a result of boys not being interested in them: “There was a point where I wasn't dating anyone for a long time and I wondered if I was a lesbian.” Several participants who had dated boys, but not with great success, explained that these negative relationship experiences prompted them to question their sexual orientation. For example, one participant explained, “I questioned it briefly when I was 16 because so far all my relationships with boys had been huge failures, and I've always thought that there are more attractive girls in the world than guys.”

Exposure to sexual minorities. This category included narratives in which the participant noted that an aspect of her social context, generally relationships with sexual-minority individuals, prompted her to question her own sexual orientation. For many participants, this included generally coming into contact with LGB communities or individuals in high school or college. For example, one participant described that she generally socialized with a “queer” crowd of students. She explained:

The issue of my sexual orientation probably arose first in 9th grade when I became involved with the gay-straight alliance at my school. As a result of my experiences I often question my sexual orientation and wonder if I am attracted to women.

Participants also described college as an important social context:

I never really questioned my sexual orientation for much of my life, but have a little since coming to college. Not so much because I feel confused but because there are so

many people here who are open with their sexuality, which leads me to consider my own.

Other participants described situations in which contact with sexual-minority friends prompted questioning. One participant explained:

I am straight, but about 2 years ago, one of my best friends told me he was gay. I wondered how he figured it out and started questioning why I was not attracted to girls. This actually made me notice that sometimes I thought girls were very attractive, but I had no desire to act on it.

Other participants described questioning their sexual orientation when someone else asked them if they were gay. For example, a participant relayed, “Yes, when this boy, who used to be a friend, asked me if I was gay. I had never felt that way, but I started wondering why he thought that.” Lastly, participants reported questioning their sexual orientation when sexual-minority friends disclosed sexual interest in them. For example, one participant explained:

Yes, I have questioned my sexual orientation. My senior year of high school a good friend of mine who is a lesbian began taking a lot of interest in me. I felt so flattered and really believed for a while that I liked her back. She was the first and only girl I've ever had a real crush on though I am attracted to many.

Assessment of same-sex attraction. Many participants noted that questioning included an assessment of their same sex-attraction. As a result, many explained that they find women attractive, but not in a sexual manner. For example, one participant explained, “I do think a lot of my girl friends are beautiful but I don't find them sexually attractive.” Other participants did describe a sexual attraction to women, but noted that they were not interested in romantic or sexual relationships with women. One participant explained:

While I find women's bodies very attractive, I cannot see myself in a serious emotional, romantic involvement with a woman. I often find women more visually appealing than men, but to the touch (which is more important to me sexually), I enjoy men's bodies more.

Participants also often described their attraction toward women, and then compared it to their feelings toward men. For example, one participant explained, “Sometimes I think women are very beautiful, more so than men, but there's a difference, women ARE beautiful, men are handsome, and when all is said and done I want a handsome man to sweep me off my feet.” Ultimately, while participants frequently noted some form of appreciation for women's appearance or sexual attraction to women, their greater interest in men or lack of interest

in pursuing women for relationships enabled a continued identification as heterosexual.

Evaluations of same-sex behavior. The same-sex behaviors that instigated or provided a basis for sexual orientation questioning generally involved kissing friends when intoxicated and in the presence of others, including men. For example, one participant explained:

I have questioned my sexuality briefly, but it hasn't ever changed. I'm straight, but sometime [in] senior year, all of my girlfriends and I went through an experimentation phase and we all made out with each other every time we drank. I have since kissed many girls, but I don't think it means that I'm gay, I think I just like kissing people. I am straight but I'm very open to pretty much anything.

Most participants explained that their same-sex activities reaffirmed their heterosexuality, but still reserve the right to continue engaging in "experimentation" with their female friends:

The most important thing in developing my sexual orientation is exposure to both sexes on a sexual level. In previous encounters with women, I've always had something in the back of my head like "wait... this is kind of weird!" I never think of that when I'm with a man. I would never pursue anything with a female past kissing these days. Sure, relationships have crossed my mind, but that is completely it. I see myself with husband and beautiful children in the future!

Other participants described that their same-sex experiences generally led them back to a heterosexual orientation, but that they were also open to future changes. For example, one participant explained:

I do not consider myself to be bisexual but I also think that it is not possible to be completely heterosexual. I have kissed other girls drunkenly but I do not think that makes me attracted to women. However, that does not mean I consider myself completely straight.

Another participant described her feelings toward same-sex behaviors:

I did question my sexual orientation once. It happened in my junior year of high school. One of my friends was a lesbian and we would hang out often. After some time I believed I started having sexual feelings for her. I think it was more of a curiosity at that time. I wanted to have sex with her but I didn't want to actually have a romantic relationship with her. Other activities that have involved me with women since I entered into college have only included kissing other girls, but I've found that I do not get aroused or turned on by kissing them. I consider myself more attracted to men but I do occasionally fantasize about what it would be like to have sex with a member of the same sex.

Qualitative Comparison Between HQ and Sexual-Minority Women

In addition to descriptively exploring heterosexual women's questioning processes, we also conducted a qualitative comparison of HQ women's narratives and those provided by our smaller sample of sexual-minority women. In particular, we examined HQ and sexual-minority narratives for overlapping and divergent themes.

Similarities between HQ and sexual-minority young women's responses emerged, such that both groups of participants described prompting from the social context as an important part of their questioning process. For example, a woman who identified as "bisexual" explained, "College has definitely been an important part to my sexual orientation. I found on this campus it was okay to be gay or lesbian or bisexual and there is no reason for me to fear what is inside of me." However, sexual-minority participants often described that an accepting social context facilitated "coming-out" and self-acceptance (e.g., "I just know that being exposed to [bisexuality] and feeling like it was okay really helped my sexuality to emerge"), whereas heterosexual women frequently described the social context as opening the possibility of alternative orientations to heterosexuality.

In addition to prompting from the social context, sexual-minority women also described their questioning processes originating with assessment of same-sex attraction and evaluations of same-sex behaviors. For example, a woman who identified as "bisexual" explained:

I remember first questioning my orientation when I was 13 after I developed my first crush on a girl. After realizing I had a crush on her and [that I] had lesbian tendencies, I wondered whether I liked boys at all and then decided I like both sexes.

Another woman who identified as "exclusively gay/lesbian" explained:

I resisted this questioning for years—my mother has told me that at age 8 she caught me and my female friend Betty kissing and she talked to me about being gay, and I repeatedly yelled "I'm not a lesbian!!" Finally at the age of 15 I was forced to come to terms with the fact that I am a gay female (I was kissed by a girl and entered a romantic relationship with her), and now I'm totally accepting of it.

Another woman who identified as "exclusively gay/lesbian" described:

I remember first questioning if I liked girls when I was about 12. The main reason was that I was never as interested in guys as my friends were. I could have cared less if I had a boyfriend or not. I was also very attracted to my female friends. I think I spent more and more time checking girls out so that was definitely a red flag.

Thus, both HQ and sexual-minority women relayed similar themes regarding processes by which their sexual orientation questioning began. While both groups noted assessing same-sex desires and behaviors as important aspects of their questioning processes, an obvious and important difference that emerged between the HQ and sexual-minority participants' narratives was that these processes resulted in facilitation of a sexual-minority identity for some and reaffirmed a heterosexual identity for others.

Discussion

A primary goal of this exploratory study was to ascertain the frequency of sexual orientation questioning among heterosexual women. Preliminary analyses revealed that two-thirds of "exclusively straight"-identified women indicated having thought about or questioned their sexual orientation, which included the recognition and consideration of alternative sexual orientation identifications. These preliminary findings suggest that among this particular population, heterosexuality may be less invisible, if not still compulsory, than previously understood. Additionally, for the 33% of women who indicated having not questioned their sexual orientation, it is still possible that this population may engage in sexual orientation questioning at a later date. As sexual identity development is a dynamic process that highly salient in young adulthood (Worthington et al., 2002), these participants may be in early stages of sexual identity exploration and may return later in their development to engage in more elaborated exploration and identity shifts (Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Diamond, 2008b; Savin-Williams, 2005). This point is supported by the finding that the HNQ group was the youngest of the three groups, and significantly younger than the sexual-minority group. Additionally, it is important to recognize that even the HQ women may start new, continue, or revisit previous questioning processes at later points; future questioning may even lead these women to consider and adopt an alternative sexual identity. Although moving away from an "exclusively heterosexual" label would challenge compulsory heterosexuality, alternative identity labels that break down the previously embraced rigid categories may better suit their experiences.

Quantitative analyses revealed that there are ways in which the HQ and HNQ women are similar and arenas in which they differ. The lack of difference in feminine gender ideology and other-sex experience suggests that both HQ and HNQ women have been equally impacted by hegemonic feminine ideals, requiring heterosexual activity to fulfill these prescribed gender roles. The finding that HQ and HNQ women held similarly high levels of sexual identity commitment was counter to our expectations, but suggests that questioning one's

orientation does not necessarily result in less commitment to one's sexual identity. HQ women's higher same-sex sexual experience and greater sexual identity uncertainty and exploration and less integration are understandable given these women's current or past history of questioning their orientation and suggest the potential for future movement in their sexual identities. These similarities and differences in sexual identity measures between HQ and HNQ women have been echoed in previous research that showed women of varying sexual identity subtypes (e.g., exclusively straight vs. mostly straight) were equally committed to their sexual identities, despite mostly straight women exhibiting more exploration, uncertainty, and less synthesis or integration (Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

Also understandable were HQ and HNQ women's divergent responses on measures of LGB knowledge and attitudes, where HQ women were overall more tolerant and knowledgeable than the HNQ women. It is possible that HQ women may have developed more tolerant views toward LGB individuals through greater contact with sexual-minority individuals and from having participated in more same-sex activities, coupled with slightly higher levels of identity exploration and uncertainty. Conversely, their openness to LGB populations may have contributed to their own same-sex behavioral and identity explorations.

Just as all heterosexual women are not a uniform group, neither are the questioning processes employed by these women. Not only do the results of this study suggest that sexual orientation questioning is fairly common among college women, but the data also reveal several important ways that college women define and describe how they have questioned their sexual orientation. Analyses of HQ women's narratives indicated that sexual identity questioning consists of evaluations of both other-sex and same-sex experiences, and includes important influences from the social context. It is not surprising that some women would rely on their other-sex experiences to guide their understanding of a heterosexual identity, but many women also viewed a dearth of other-sex experiences as a potential indicator that their orientation was possibly not heterosexual. Questioning one's sexual orientation through other-sex behavior does not require actual participation in same-sex activities, either cognitively or behaviorally, and thus may be more socially acceptable than actually testing one's sexual attraction or arousal to women. Nonetheless, although somewhat passive, the act of questioning reflects a willingness to transgress normative (hetero)sexual assumptions and make salient an often invisible identity.

Other participants relied on their social context to prompt questioning, either through introducing them to sexual-minority individuals or tolerant communities, or through others' questioning of their own sexual orientation. This finding coincides with previous

research that has indicated that sexual-minority women frequently cite sexual attraction to, and behavior with, same-sex friends as significant influences on their sexual identity development (e.g., Diamond, 2002; Morgan & Thompson, 2006). It is interesting to note that, whereas the results from this study revealed that the social context facilitated questioning, both Eliason's (1995) and Boratav's (2006) studies included references to "outside forces" like society, family, peers, and the media that encouraged and even mandated their heterosexuality. It is possible the more tolerant historical and social contexts of this study (e.g., Savin-Williams, 2005; Thompson, 2006), along with the methodology that included specific inquiries about identity questioning, account for this shift.

The two other emergent themes represented questioning processes that involved active cognitive or behavioral same-sex exploration. HQ women's descriptions of either assessing same-sex attraction or evaluating same-sex behaviors coincide with the active exploration component of Worthington et al.'s (2002) heterosexual identity development model. Through active exploration, heterosexual and sexual-minority women deviate from ideologically prescribed pathways of sexual exploration to entertain same-sex crushes, fantasies, and sexual activities—processes of active questioning that have the potential to challenge the confines of compulsory heterosexuality (Diamond, 2005a). However, despite recognition of sexual attraction toward or romantic interest in women, the HQ participants insisted on maintaining an "exclusively heterosexual" identity, which reifies the confines of compulsory heterosexuality. It is also important to note that the HQ women's same-sex sexual behavioral experiences were often fleeting or conditional, occurring within a liberal social context and under the influence at parties and in the presence of men. Because same-sex sexuality among women has become "trendy" in popular media and peer culture, questioning in heterosexual women due to behavioral experiences could be seen as a less serious questioning process and less transgressive of heteronormativity than it appears. Recent research has theorized about and focused on these behaviors and social spaces as both facilitative and hindering of women's genuine sexual-minority identity development (Diamond, 2005b; Thompson, 2006, 2009).

The qualitative comparison between HQ and sexual-minority women revealed anticipated parallels and divergences and lent further empirical support to Worthington et al.'s (2002) and McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) models of sexual identity development. Questioning processes employed by both heterosexual and sexual-minority individuals included a point at which attraction or orientation was unclear to the individuals. However, while heterosexually identified individuals turned back toward a heterosexual identity at this point, sexual-minority individuals evidenced a turning point in

which they recognized an alternative identity and progressively moved toward self-affirmation and disclosure to others (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). As such, the goals of questioning for heterosexual women did not include the construction of a completely new sexual identity but instead the reification of a previously abstract, unexplored sense of identity. Despite these differences, both heterosexual and sexual-minority women were susceptible to cultural constraints in their processes of sexual identity questioning (e.g., compulsory heterosexuality) and risked stigmatization in order to explore, challenge, and substantiate their sexual identities' through questioning experiences.

Lastly, the findings from this study offer a comparison point to a similar study assessing heterosexual men's sexual orientation questioning (Morgan et al., in press). While about 50% of heterosexual men indicated having questioned their sexual orientation, a higher percentage of HQ women emerged in this study, suggesting that perhaps there is greater space for women to explore alternative sexual identities than men as a result of other-sex directed same-sex behaviors (Diamond, 2005b; Thompson, 2006, 2009) that result in the impetuses for questioning among heterosexual women having less to do with "feelings of difference" or transgressive sexual desires (Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009). Furthermore, inductive thematic analyses revealed slightly different processes of questioning for men and women, such that men more frequently offered unelaborated and other-sex experiences as important influences, unlike the women in this study who most often offered same-sex oriented impetuses for questioning. Similarly, both men and women noted the importance of the social context, including exposure to sexual-minority individuals and communities, for prompting sexual orientation questioning.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the compelling nature of these exploratory results, they do not fully speak to the true diversity of experience within heterosexual women's identity development. Studies with participants of different ethnic, geographical, educational, and economic backgrounds could help clarify patterns and nuances in sexual orientation questioning. The participants in this study were college students at a liberal institution, which likely contributed to the potential for questioning. Examining heterosexual identity development among more traditional undergraduate institutions in more regionally conservative areas, as well as non-collegiate young adults, would be necessary for generalization of these results. Additionally, longitudinal studies would help increase our understanding of the identity trajectories of both questioning and non-questioning emerging adults, as the results from this study provide a snapshot of a developmental period in which many individuals are just

beginning to explore and adopt alternative sexual identities (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). The heterosexually identified women in this study may return to questioning their sexual orientation via different processes at a later point in time, with potentially different end results. Furthermore, research should continue to assess heterosexual individuals who have not questioned their orientation in attempts to understand their developmental experiences.

It is apparent that the heterosexual identities of the women in this study are far from uniform. As the HQ women moved into different contextual spaces, they were not only shaped by societal representations of heterosexuality, but also contributed to them in significant ways. For instance, many HQ women viewed the context of college as a venue for engaging in identity work. Among these HQ women, this context incited a new conceptualization of heterosexuality. HQ participants' beliefs that their heterosexual identities were a desirable end result, despite ongoing same-sex attraction and exploration, does not detract from the finding that the majority of young heterosexual women in this study were crafting sexual identities cultivated through processes that allowed for the possibility of a sexual-minority identity. Ultimately, the results of this study raise doubts about the current theoretical conceptualization of heterosexuality as a singular, monolithic, universal sexual identity and should prompt researchers to further explore the likely diverse trajectories of female heterosexual identity development.

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