

“Mostly Straight” Young Women: Variations in Sexual Behavior and Identity Development

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Researchers have begun to explore and identify various gradations in sexual orientation identity, paying attention to alternative sexual identity categories and attempting to clarify potential subtypes of same-sex sexuality, particularly among women. This study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the behavioral experiences and identity development processes among women of a particular sexual identity subtype, “mostly straight.” Participants were 349 female college students whose primary sexual identities included exclusively straight, mostly straight, bisexual, and lesbian. Results indicated that, on most behavioral variables, mostly straight women fell directly between and were significantly different from exclusively straight and bisexual/lesbian women. Mostly straight women were also distinct from exclusively straight women but were similar to bisexual women and lesbians on several quantitative measures of identity. Narratives about sexual identity development for mostly straight women revealed the complexities of sexual identity exploration, uncertainty, and commitment within this population. As a whole, this study encourages researchers to begin to recognize and examine mostly straight as a distinct sexual identity subtype in young women.

Keywords: sexual orientation, sexual identity, heterosexuality, bisexuality

Sexual orientation identity development is a distinct, varied, and ongoing process, particularly for women (Baumeister, 2000; Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison, 2001; Diamond, 1998, 2000, 2003; Golden, 1996; Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Historically, efforts to understand women’s sexual orientation identity development have overlooked these complexities. One of the ways theories and studies of women’s sexuality have underemphasized these complexities is by dichotomizing sexual identity, such that the only sexual identity categories acknowledged or studied are lesbian and heterosexual and, only recently, bisexual. While models of sexual identity development resulting from these studies (e.g., Chapman & Brannock, 1987; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002) remain informative and influential, some researchers and theorists have begun to discuss ways these models inadequately explain alternative same-sex identity trajectories (e.g., Diamond, 2005b; Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). This study seeks to explore a sexual identity category chosen by young women as an alternative to being heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian—namely, being “mostly straight.”

Because research positions bisexuality as a response to dichotomous conceptualizations of sexual identity (Bradford, 2004;

Klein, 1993; Rust, 1993; Schuster, 1987), theories of bisexuality can offer a platform for understanding sexual identities that do not fit with the traditional two-category (heterosexual and homosexual) system. In conjunction with studies of bisexuality, researchers have begun to discuss the oversimplification of traditional sexual identity categories (Golden, 1996; Rust, 1993) and to explore other potential subtypes of same-sex sexuality, paying attention to alternative categories that expand beyond even traditional conceptualizations of bisexuality (e.g., Diamond, 2005b; Savin-Williams, 2005; Weinrich & Klein, 2002). In particular, Diamond identified distinct patterns of behavior and developmental trajectories among three groups of same-sex-oriented women: stable lesbians, fluid lesbians, and stable nonlesbians. Her results clearly suggest the importance of acknowledging gradients in sexual identity.

In fact, recent research suggests that the sexual identities of contemporary youth are different from those of their counterparts of earlier generations; specifically, they have more options, which have led to a greater diversity of experiences relating to their sexual identity (Savin-Williams, 2005). Several studies have indeed identified women with nonexclusive attractions who affiliate themselves with sexual identity labels other than heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian. For example, female participants have chosen to identify with options such as heterosexual mostly, bi-curious, and questioning (Morgan & Thompson, 2006; Weinrich & Klein, 2002) and self-identified as pansexual, queer, and polyamorous (Diamond, 2005b; Golden, 2006).

A study using a national probability sample included *mostly heterosexual (straight) but somewhat attracted to people of your same sex* as a descriptive option (Udry & Chantala, 2006), finding that about one tenth of the young women chose this option. However, studies using this data set have either excluded this population from analysis (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2006) or failed to mention whether this group was excluded or grouped with those

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who identified as 100% *heterosexual (straight)* (Udry & Chantala, 2006). Other national probability studies have neglected to assess a mostly straight identity in the first place (e.g., Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). Taken together, the lack of attention to a mostly straight identity in the literature has served to obscure what is possibly a valid alternative sexual identity for some women.

Despite recognition of gradations and sexual identity subtypes, researchers have infrequently emphasized those who fall outside traditionally dichotomous sexual identity categories (for an exception, see Diamond, 2005b), and few studies to date have included or discussed mostly straight identities in particular. Thus, we suggest the need to further examine alternative sexual identity subtypes to increase our understanding of women's complex and diverse experiences. The present study seeks to uncover the experiences of those young women who have chosen to identify with the sexual identity subtype mostly straight, which we suggest falls somewhere between an exclusively heterosexual and a bisexual identity.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to preliminarily explore, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, what identifying as mostly straight meant to a sample of college women by examining two major components of a mostly straight sexual orientation identity: behavioral experiences (i.e., sexual orientation) and sexual identity development processes. Because studies have consistently shown that men and women differ on both sexual orientation (Baumeister, 2000; Hoburg, Konik, Williams, & Crawford, 2004; Kinnish et al., 2005; Weinrich & Klein, 2002) and sexual identity measures (Dempsey et al., 2001; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) and because women are more likely to endorse alternative identities (e.g., Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000), this study focused specifically on women. Also, because the college years are a time frame during which identities in general, and sexual identities in particular, are fashioned (Arnett, 2000; Henderson, 1984; Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006), we expected this context to be a fruitful starting place for examining the sexual identity experiences of mostly straight women.

It is important to make a distinction between sexual orientation and sexual identity, as they are conceptualized differently in the literature. Also, although we would typically expect the two to generally inform one another, this is not always the case (e.g., Savin-Williams, 2005, 2006), which warrants an examination of both. In this study, we were specifically interested in how the behavioral characteristics of mostly straight undergraduate women differed from the characteristics of those who identified with currently accepted sexual identity categories—that is, exclusively straight, bisexual, or lesbian. As sexual orientation itself generally refers to a set of predispositions toward a particular gender in sexual attraction, fantasy, and behavior (Kinnish et al., 2005; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Klein, 1993) and because same-sex sexuality is multifaceted and dynamic (Diamond, 2000, 2003, 2005b; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985; Savin-Williams, 2005), we chose to assess differences between groups regarding attraction, fantasy, and sexual relationships on a same-sex/other-sex continuum across several temporal dimensions, including past, present, and ideal.

While *sexual orientation* typically refers to more stable behavioral characteristics, sexual identity is typically conceptualized as recognition, acceptance, and identification with one's sexual preferences (Mohr, 2002), such that people are able to "adopt" or "choose" the sexual identity label that best fits their experiences (Ellis & Mitchell, 2000). While merely assessing one's self-reported sexual identity does, indeed, reveal one's self-ascribed sexual identity label, we also chose to assess differences between the aforementioned sexual identity groups regarding levels of identity exploration, uncertainty, commitment, and synthesis/integration (Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2006). Using identity exploration and a commitment continuum (e.g., Marcia, 1987) as themes of interest, we also reviewed narratives from mostly straight college women to deepen our understanding of how these women made meaning of their experiences and sexual identity development processes (e.g., McAdams, 2001; Schachter, 2005).

Method

Participants

The initial sample of participants who completed all measures consisted of 575 undergraduate college students, although only women were included in this study ($n = 388$). As with many college samples, participants were mostly young (ages ranged from 18 to 29; $M = 19.27$, $SD = 1.35$). One hundred forty-four participants were 1st-year students, 144 were sophomores, 54 were juniors, and 45 were seniors (1 participant left this question blank). Participants' racial backgrounds included White/Caucasian (68%, $n = 265$), Asian/Pacific Islander (14%, $n = 55$), Mexican American/Latina (9%, $n = 36$), bi- or multiethnic identities (6%, $n = 22$), and other or nonspecified ethnic identities (3%, $n = 10$; e.g., Black/African American, 0.8%, $n = 3$).

Primary sexual identification was assessed via the question, "When you think about your sexual orientation currently, what word do you most often use to describe yourself?" Participants were asked to check one of nine response options (*exclusively straight/heterosexual*, *mostly straight/heterosexual*, *bisexual*, *mostly gay/lesbian*, *exclusively gay/lesbian*, *curious*, *questioning*, *I prefer not to label myself*, and *other*). Despite conceptualizing participants' responses to this question (and other later questions) as responses about sexual identity, to avoid confusion we consistently used the more accessible term *sexual orientation* throughout our study instead of switching back and forth between terminologies. On the basis of responses to this question, participants were grouped into four sexual identity categories, which included exclusively straight/heterosexual ($n = 225$, 58%), mostly straight/heterosexual ($n = 79$, 20%), bisexual ($n = 26$, 7%), and lesbian ($n = 19$, 5%). The lesbian group consisted of two subgroup identifications, which were combined to increase the size of that group. Nine of these women indicated they were mostly gay/lesbian, and 10 indicated that they were exclusively gay/lesbian.

Ten percent of participants were not included in the subsequent comparative analyses because they either did not report a primary sexual identity ($n = 3$) or indicated one of four "other" identifications, including *questioning* ($n = 5$), *curious* ($n = 8$), *I prefer not to label myself* ($n = 14$), and *other* ($n = 9$). We regretfully excluded the participants who indicated an other sexual identity

because they did not clearly fit into any of the heterosexual or sexual-minority subcategories and because there was a small number of individuals in any one group. Additionally, while these sexual identity categories could feasibly be combined into a group representing other identity labels, we believed that this comparison would be conceptually meaningless, as there was too much heterogeneity between the groups that would be represented in that category. Analyses indicated that primary sexual identification did not significantly differ by race/ethnicity, $\chi^2(16, N = 382) = 11.99$, $p = .75$, but was marginally different by age, $\chi^2(32, N = 385) = 45.39$, $p = .06$, such that as age increased, the percentage of women identifying as mostly straight increased.

Procedure

All participants were college students enrolled in a lower division psychology course at a public university in northern California who participated in the study to fulfill a course requirement. Participants were given information about the questionnaire and chose to participate in this study through an online educational experiment system. After giving consent, participants completed demographic information and a set of open-ended questions, two of which were included in these analyses. Next, participants completed several additional measures of sexual attitudes and experiences, two of which were analyzed here. The entire questionnaire took approximately 90 min to complete.

Measures

Modified Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (Moore, 2000). The current study used a modified version of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (Klein et al., 1985) to gather information about various aspects of sexual orientation. This version of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid was modified by Moore (2000) for readability and consisted of seven variables. This study reports on the three behavioral characteristics that have been consistently conceptualized as integral to sexual orientation: attraction, fantasy, and sexual relationships (e.g., Kinnish et al., 2005; Savin-Williams, 2006; Weinrich & Klein, 2002). For each variable, participants rated themselves across three time periods (past, present, and ideal), which resulted in nine total items. Items included "To whom are you sexually attracted?" "About whom do you have sexual fantasies?" and "With whom do you have sexual relationships?" Response options ranged from 1 (*other-sex only*) to 7 (*same-sex only*), with a midpoint of 4 (*both sexes equally*).

Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment (MoSIEC; Worthington et al., 2006). The MoSIEC, developed by Worthington et al. (2006) applies Marcia's (1987) identity framework to sexual identity. This 25-item scale has four distinct factors that are common across all sexual identities: Exploration, Uncertainty, Commitment, and Synthesis/Integration. Sample items include "I am actively trying new ways to express myself sexually" (Exploration), "I sometimes feel uncertain about my sexual orientation" (Uncertainty), "I have a clear sense of the types of sexual activities I prefer" (Commitment), and "My understanding of my sexual needs coincides with my overall sense of sexual self" (Integration). Responses options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with a midpoint of 3 (*neither disagree nor agree*).

Qualitative measures of sexual identity development. Participants' responses to two open-ended questions provided narratives used to assess sexual identity development. The first question asked, "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." For these two questions, participants were provided with unlimited text space to answer. Only responses given by the mostly straight women in the sample ($n = 79$) were analyzed for this study.

Coding of Open-Ended Responses

Employing the exploration and commitment continuum framework of identity development (e.g., Marcia, 1987; Worthington et al., 2006), we both coded each participant's open-ended responses exploration, uncertainty, and commitment. *Exploration* was defined as being open to or actively experimenting with the same sex in the past, currently, or in the future. An example of a response coded for active exploration is "I experimented with girls in my teenage years," and an example of openness to exploration is "I'm leaving myself open if I experience the same feelings towards another woman." Narratives were coded for presence or absence of exploration. Intercoder reliability analyses reached an acceptable level ($\kappa = .90$), and percentage of agreement was high (96.2%).

Narratives were also coded for both uncertainty and commitment. *Uncertainty* was defined as being uncertain or unclear about one's sexual needs or desires. An example of uncertainty is "I cannot honestly say I very well know where I lie in the sexuality spectrum." *Commitment* was defined as a clear identification, certainty, or understanding of one's sexual needs and preferences. An example of a response coded for commitment is "I am definitely attracted to both sexes." Interrater reliability reached acceptable levels for the presence or absence of uncertainty ($\kappa = .95$, 97.5% agreement) as well as the presence or absence of commitment ($\kappa = .92$, 96.2% agreement). All coding categories were nonmutually exclusive, such that one participant could describe past uncertainty and current commitment and thus receive codes for the presence of both of these categories.

Results

This section first reports on quantitative comparisons between mostly straight women and exclusively straight women, bisexual women, and lesbians on sexual behavioral and identity measures. Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) revealed differences among these groups, and Table 1 provides means and standard deviations for all groups on these measures as well as F statistics and effect sizes for each univariate analysis. Because the number of bisexuals and lesbians was small, Levene's test for equality of variances revealed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was violated on several measures. As a result, mean differences were examined with Games-Howell post hoc analyses and a Bonferroni adjustment; however, where noted, the more conventional test of Tukey's honestly significant difference was used when Levene's was nonsignificant and all post hoc analyses yielded the same mean differences. This section ends with a brief

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, F Statistics, and Effect Sizes for Exclusively Straight, Mostly Straight, Bisexual, and Lesbian Women Across Sexual Behavioral and Identity Measures

Variable	Exclusively straight		Mostly straight		Bisexual		Lesbian		F	η_p^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Behavioral variables ^a										
Sexual attraction										
Past	1.40 _a	10.90	2.08 _b	1.05	3.40 _c	0.91	5.00 _d	1.16	98.32**	.47
Present	1.45 _a	0.95	2.29 _b	1.04	3.92 _c	0.91	6.25 _d	0.68	163.76**	.60
Ideal	1.44 _a	1.00	2.45 _b	1.21	4.08 _c	1.35	5.81 _d	1.42	115.49**	.51
Sexual fantasy										
Past	1.57 _a	1.04	2.32 _b	1.20	3.88 _c	1.27	4.94 _c	1.48	72.81**	.40
Present	1.63 _a	1.09	2.67 _b	1.37	4.20 _c	1.16	5.75 _d	0.93	95.95**	.47
Ideal	1.60 _a	0.99	2.79 _b	1.38	4.12 _c	1.17	5.81 _d	1.11	110.01**	.50
Sexual relationships										
Past	1.17 _a	1.44	1.55 _{a,b}	1.07	2.56 _{b,c}	1.45	4.56 _c	2.28	64.13**	.37
Present	1.13 _a	1.43	1.59 _a	1.27	3.00 _b	1.58	6.44 _c	0.89	163.72**	.60
Ideal	1.33 _a	1.40	2.27 _b	1.31	4.00 _c	1.23	6.25 _d	1.07	159.68**	.59
Identity variables ^b										
Commitment	3.31 _a	0.72	3.25 _a	0.72	3.47 _a	0.83	3.11 _a	0.61	1.06	.01
Exploration	3.38 _a	0.74	3.7 _b	0.50	3.98 _b	0.52	3.79 _b	0.49	11.97**	.10
Uncertainty	1.94 _a	0.82	2.7 _b	0.85	2.95 _b	0.84	2.97 _b	0.80	32.53**	.22
Integration	3.70 _a	0.68	3.45 _a	0.59	3.74 _a	0.70	3.73 _a	0.52	3.18*	.03

^a Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at $p \leq .005$ on Games–Howell follow-up comparisons and Bonferroni adjustment. Higher means are associated with more same-sex-only oriented responses. Degrees of freedom associated with F s are 3 and 328. ^b Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at $p \leq .0125$ on Games–Howell follow-up comparisons and Bonferroni adjustment. Higher means are associated with stronger endorsement of the corresponding identity subscale. Degrees of freedom associated with F s are 3 and 343.

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

review of narrative responses provided by mostly straight women concerning their processes of identity development.

Sexual Behavior Comparisons Between Groups

A MANOVA was conducted to test for associations between primary sexual identity category (independent variable) and nine dependent variables from the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid: sexual attraction, sexual fantasy, and sexual relationships across all three time aspects (past, present, and ideal). The omnibus test detected a statistically significant relationship between sexual identity category and at least one of these variables (Wilks's $\lambda = .26$, $p < .001$), and subsequent univariate tests detected significant associations among the four sexual identity categories and all nine dependent variables (Bonferroni adjustment: $\alpha < .005$; all F s > 64).

Sexual attraction. For sexual attraction, there were significant differences among exclusively straight, mostly straight, bisexual, and lesbian women regarding sexual attraction across all past, present, and ideal responses. Tukey's honestly significant difference post hoc tests and an examination of the means showed an identical pattern across all three aspects; that is, mostly straight women were more same-sex oriented than exclusively straight women and less same-sex oriented than bisexual women, who were less same-sex-only oriented than lesbian women in their past, present, and ideal situations.

Sexual fantasy. Sexual fantasy scores across all aspects (past, present, and ideal) for these categories resulted in an almost identical pattern to that of sexual attraction. Games–Howell post

hoc analyses revealed that mostly straight women's sexual fantasies were significantly more same-sex oriented than the fantasies of exclusively straight women but less same-sex oriented than those of both bisexual and lesbian women across all time aspects (past, present, ideal). Lesbian and bisexual women were equally same-sex oriented regarding their past sexual fantasies, but lesbians were significantly more same-sex-only oriented in their present and ideal fantasy life.

Sexual relationships. Games–Howell also revealed significant differences regarding these women's sexual relationship experiences. In particular, mostly straight and exclusively straight women's actual sexual relationships in the past and present were similarly same-sex oriented, and both groups were significantly less same-sex oriented than both bisexual and lesbian women in the present. In the past, mostly straight women and bisexual women reported equally same-sex oriented sexual relationship histories, and while mostly straight women were less same-sex oriented than lesbians, bisexual women and lesbians were equally same-sex oriented. In their ideal situation, results were identical to both ideal attraction and fantasy variables, such that mostly straight women were more same-sex oriented than exclusively straight women but less same-sex oriented than bisexual women (who were significantly less same-sex-only oriented than lesbians).

Sexual Identity Comparisons Between Groups

A MANOVA was conducted to test for associations between primary sexual identity category (independent variable) and four

dependent variables (subscales) from the MoSIEC. The omnibus test detected a statistically significant relationship between sexual identity category and at least one of these variables (Wilks's $\lambda = .71, p < .001$), and subsequent univariate tests detected significant associations among the four sexual identity categories and two of the four dependent variables: exploration and uncertainty (Bonferroni adjustment: $\alpha < .013$; significant F s > 11).

When we examined mean differences for identity exploration, Games–Howell post hoc analyses revealed that mostly straight participants indicated significantly greater sexual identity exploration than exclusively straight women but equal levels to bisexual and lesbian women, who were equally exploratory. For identity uncertainty, Tukey's honestly significant difference examination of the means showed that mostly straight women were more uncertain about their sexual identity than exclusively straight women but were equally as uncertain as bisexual and lesbian women (who were also equally uncertain). However, exclusively straight, mostly straight, bisexual, and lesbian women were all equally committed to their identity, and while a nonsignificant univariate test precluded follow-up comparisons, an exploratory examination of the means using Games–Howell indicated that mostly straight women were less integrated in their identity than exclusively straight women but integrated similarly to bisexuals and lesbians.

Processes of Identity Development Among Mostly Straight Women

Exploration. Mostly straight women noted same-sex exploration in more than one half of the narratives (58%, $n = 46$). Participants described exploring their identity through past and current experimentation with same-sex attraction, desire, sexual behaviors, and an increased interest in pursuing same-sex romantic relationships. One participant explained, "I never actually thought I would carry out a romantic act with a woman, when I did I understood that the same type of physical attraction I had with men was possible with a female." Exploration was also expressed through openness to future same-sex experiences or relationships. For example, one woman wrote, "I don't think that I would want to be involved with a woman more than a kissing level. I have an open mind though, so anything could happen."

Uncertainty/commitment. Narratives were also examined for the presence of identity uncertainty and identity commitment. Uncertainty was present in 42% ($n = 33$) of the narratives. Uncertainty regarding one's sexual identity emerged as a result of difficulty in making meaning of same-sex experiences. For example, one woman described being "drawn toward my best friend at the time, who was a girl. That's when I first began to question whether I was straight or gay. . . . The thought that there could be an in-between never occurred to me." Uncertainty also manifested as a struggle to find an appropriate label for feelings and experiences. For example, one participant wrote, "I came to realize that I wasn't comfortable being 'bi' and haven't really decided what exactly I am." Another participant explained, "I don't really know how to label myself, because I don't consider myself bisexual. I'll do sexual acts with a woman, but I'm not interested in women romantically." Participants' uncertainty when making meaning and finding an appropriate label was also often related to their simultaneous desire for and experiences with both men and women.

Commitment was present in 58% ($n = 46$) of the narratives. Commitment included being clear or certain about one's sexual desires, knowing and understanding one's identity, and/or claiming a sexual orientation label. Participants often made identity-affirming statements such as, "I am heterosexual for the most part" and "I define myself as 'mostly straight'." One participant explained, "I'm still predominantly straight, and I am attracted to men more than I am to women, but clearly I can have feelings for women as well." Other participants indicated commitment by describing what they knew they were not. This occasionally took the form of a sexual-minority identity, such as, "I know I'm not bisexual or homosexual." For other participants, the result of this commitment was describing a nonstraight identity, as in the following example: "I feel I might be straight, but if I am ever asked I would say that I am bi because I don't want to deny anything that might happen in the future or deny what has happened in my past."

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to provide a glimpse into the behavioral experiences and processes of identity development for young college women who identified as mostly straight. The goals of this research were twofold. First, we compared mostly straight women's behavioral experiences as a group to those of exclusively straight, bisexual, and lesbian women. Second, we examined mostly straight women's individual narratives for insight into their potentially distinct processes of identity development.

Quantitative analyses of sexual behavioral measures generally indicated that mostly straight women were more same-sex oriented than exclusively straight women but less same-sex oriented than bisexual women and lesbians regarding sexual attraction and fantasy in past, present, and ideal situations. This pattern shifted slightly regarding past and present sexual relationships, in that exclusively straight and mostly straight women were not different from one another but were less same-sex oriented than bisexual women and lesbians, except that mostly straight women were not different from bisexual women in terms of the past. It seems that this particular finding likely has more to do with opportunity than desire, as the linear results returned regarding ideal sexual relationships, with all groups differing from each other along the other-sex only to same-sex only continuum.

Overall, these results indicate several behavioral differences among all four sexual identity categories. Similar to results that have located bisexual women between heterosexuals and lesbians on same-sex attractions, fantasies, and sexual relationships (Klein et al., 1985; Weinrich & Klein, 2002), these findings tentatively suggest that mostly straight women inhabit a behaviorally unique space, one that falls between exclusively straight and bisexual women. A conceptualization of the mostly straight identity ensuing from these findings is that it is not simply a more appealing alternative sexual identity label but one that fits into a linear placement within the exclusively straight to exclusively lesbian conceptualization of sexual identity.

Quantitative analyses of sexual identity development using the MoSIEC provide further evidence that mostly straight women differed from exclusively straight women, particularly as they showed higher levels of identity exploration and uncertainty (and marginally lower levels of synthesis) than their exclusively straight

counterparts. However, unlike the behavioral variables, mostly straight women shared similar levels of exploration and uncertainty (and synthesis) with both bisexual and lesbian women. In addition to these differences, all four groups were similarly positioned regarding identity commitment. In all cases, these results indicate that mostly straight women's processes of identity were more similar to those of other established sexual-minority populations, suggesting that mostly straight women should no longer be grouped in with exclusively straight women or excluded from studies of sexual identity development. However, it seems unlikely that mostly straight, bisexual, and lesbian women have identical experiences with their identity, and thus further examination comparing these three groups is needed.

To begin to understand experiences related to sexual identity development among mostly straight participants, we examined narratives that provided information regarding same-sex exploration, uncertainty, and commitment and revealed complexities within this identity category. Like with bisexuals (Schuster, 1987), it does not seem from these women's narratives that there is a prototypical mostly straight identity. For example, many women expressed uncertainty about their sexual identity because of non-exclusive attractions and because of a failure of conventional sexual identity categories to describe their experience, in that the opportunity to have actual relationships with women was less available. In contrast, others were strongly committed to their identity. This commitment took several forms, as some participants explicitly affirmed a mostly straight identity, while others adopted traditional sexual identity categories with some modification (e.g., "I don't know anyone else who is bisexual the way that I am.").

Ultimately, these narratives further imply that mostly straight women are continuously undergoing processes of identity exploration, uncertainty, and commitment regarding their same-sex attractions and/or experiences, which likely makes them distinct from the majority of their exclusively straight counterparts (for an exception, see Eliason, 1995). Their confusion, though, regarding behavioral experiences with both men and women and their inability to make meaning and find a suitable label aligns them with bi-curious and some bisexual women (Bradford, 2004; Morgan & Thompson, 2006) but separates them from many individuals solidified in their sexual-minority identity (Chapman & Brannock, 1987; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Rust, 1993; Weinberg et al., 1994).

While informative, this study has two major limitations. First, the sample gathered makes generalizability difficult beyond highly educated, young, White women currently in supportive and liberal sexual environments. While we found no significant differences in primary sexual identification across race or age, it is unclear whether this finding was a result of a truncated range and/or the representativeness of the sample. Similarly, despite highly significant results, the numbers of bisexual and lesbian young women were too low to merit full confidence in our between-groups comparisons. Future research should attempt to gather a more representative sample and, in fact, might oversample sexual-minority (including mostly lesbian women) and other nonheterosexual women if between-groups comparisons of potentially "in-between" identities are of continued interest. In fact, it is possible that the questioning and curious women excluded in this study were, in reality, mostly straight. Given that more and more women

are beginning to identify with labels such as curious and questioning, more deliberate examinations of the similarities in developmental histories and ideal sexual and romantic situations could elucidate whether these groups of women could be combined in future research.

Second, because of the exploratory nature of and particular methodology used in this study, it is difficult to know whether a mostly straight identity is actually a distinct sexual identity or whether it is instead merely a transitory space through which young college women pass because it is trendy to be "heteroflexible" (Diamond, 2005a; Essig, 2000), before ultimately settling into more conventional and potentially safer (hetero)sexual identities. Additionally, it is possible that some of the women who identified as mostly straight may actually be passing through on their way to identifying with a bisexual or lesbian identity, which would make the mostly straight identity a developmental substage on the way to a more traditional sexual-minority identity. While our results do suggest some linearity, longitudinal research is needed to assess this prospect.

However, in further examinations of this phenomenon, variation within sexual identity categories, which has been consistently shown in studies with both lesbians (e.g., Golden, 1996; Diamond, 2005b) and bisexual women (Berenson, 2002; Golden, 1996; Kinish et al., 2005; Rust, 1993), should be acknowledged. In fact, many bisexual women specifically have expressed a desire to transcend sexual identity as rooted in gender preference (e.g., Berenson, 2002; Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002; Rust, 2000), and, as a result, a linear conceptualization of sexual identity along a gendered continuum does not correspond with their experiences. Future research that utilizes more in-depth and longitudinal analyses, yet still retains a mixed methods approach, is needed to more adequately capture (in)consistency in sexual identity development (e.g., Diamond, 2005b), and to determine whether a mostly straight identity rises to the status of a distinct sexual orientation identity.

In sum, this study offers a starting point for understanding mostly straight as a distinct sexual identity subtype. By examining the experiences of women who literally bridge the gap on the sexual continuum between heterosexual and bisexual, this study tentatively suggests that mostly straight women differ from exclusively straight, bisexual, and lesbian-identified women on most quantitative measures of sexual orientation and that they also differ from exclusively straight women on most quantitative measures of sexual identity. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, we hesitate to definitively argue that mostly straight should necessarily be an actual sexual orientation identity. Instead, results from this study should encourage researchers to incorporate the mostly straight sexual identity label as an option for participants, with an understanding that identity labels can be elusive and may not map perfectly onto young people's behavioral experiences (Savin-Williams, 2005). Additionally, researchers should recognize and examine more closely the potential for a mostly straight sexual orientation identity to be discrete from an exclusively heterosexual or sexual-minority orientation identity in young women.

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