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Caught in a double bind:  
Young bisexual women's sexual identity narratives in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

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## **Abstract**

Although research on sexual identity and LGBTIQ+ issues have produced valuable knowledge about gay and lesbian populations, research about bisexuality remains minimal. This oversight reflects the wider erasure of bisexual identities in general. Organised around binary conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, Western understandings of bisexuality typically degrade and invalidate the legitimacy of bisexual identities, leading to the marginalization of bisexual individuals and their stories. Responding to this gap, I explore the narratives of young bisexual women in Aotearoa (New Zealand), drawing on the theoretical notions of spoiled identities and cultural (un)intelligibility. The aim of this research is to explore the possibilities of young women's construction of intelligible bisexual identities.

Ten bisexual women (aged 18-24 years) living in Aotearoa were interviewed and their narratives were analysed using Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive method. This approach allows for a synthesis of macro and micro level analyses and consideration of personal identity work, as well as collectively held narratives that may shape identity construction. In the analysis I identify the discursive resources and positions available to participants and examining how these enable and constrain their sexual identity construction.

The narratives of the young bisexual women in this study reflect how they must navigate heteronormativity and monosexism to construct their identities. Caught in a double bind, participants negotiated claiming the spoiled identities (i.e., the hypersexual bisexual, either straight or gay, just a phase, fraudulent) offered by discourses of bisexuality and modifying gay/lesbian discourses (i.e., the coming out story, normalisation, visual identities) to construct an intelligible identity. The findings of this study highlight the complexities of bisexual identity construction and the lack of alternative discourses available to these young bisexual women.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*When I was younger, the term bisexuality (.) in my mind didn't exist. So obviously it existed, but I'd never heard of it, or had never heard of it applied to a situation like ME. So, I had always maintained throughout that relationship, that I was straight; it was just this one woman. ... That was kind of reinforced by everyone around me who was like, "You know, you're either this or you're this. You're either gay or you're straight". That was kind of the two options that I had available to me. So, my family were very much like "Well then, which one is it?" (Elena)*

In the story above Elena, one of the participants in my study, recounts her experience of a same-sex relationship during her teenage years. This excerpt provides an insight to the unrecognizability of bisexual identities and the types of double binds that young bisexual women often encounter. Central to this quote is the discourse of monosexism, which purports that “you’re either gay or you’re straight” and underpins a multitude of bi-negative stances.

Heteronormative assumptions underpinning both academic and popular conceptualisations of sexuality have rendered heterosexuality the “default” and gay/lesbian identities the “other” (Galupo et al., 2017). The othering of gay/lesbian identities not only reinforces heterosexism, but also establishes a hetero-/homosexual dichotomy that privileges monosexual identities: heterosexual and homosexual identities characterised by attraction to *only one* sex/gender. As a result, the diversity of experiences that exist under the LGBTQ umbrella are not acknowledged; with non-monosexual identities, such as bisexuality, erased.

Owing to this erasure, bisexuality has become a contested sexual identity in popular Western discourses, and those who identify as bisexual are subject to negativity from both straight and queer populations. Following the wider cultural silencing of bisexuality, there is little research that allows space for voices and experiences of bisexual people. Responding to this gap, this thesis aims to contribute to emerging research about bisexual/non-monosexual identities by exploring the narratives of young bisexual women in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

It is important to note at the outset that while it is important that bisexuality is recognised as an independent identity category, definitions of bisexuality are variable and contested.<sup>1</sup> Since my research has a particular focus on monosexist discourses of sexuality, I include the voices of

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<sup>1</sup> See Flanders, LeBreton, Robinson, Bian, & Caravaca-Morera, 2017 for a discussion of defining bisexuality.



young women who are *attracted to two or more genders* and therefore combine non-monosexual identities (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, queer) under the “bisexual umbrella”. Other key terms that I refer to often throughout this thesis include heteronormativity/heterosexism, which is defined as the privileging of heterosexuality as the default or preferred sexual orientation (Gibson & Macleod, 2012); and mononormativity/monosexism, referring to the privileging of sexual identities that are exclusively hetero- or homosexual, which enables the oppression of individuals who are attracted to more than one gender (Roberts et al., 2015).

This thesis contributes to research about bisexuality by centring the narratives of young women who identify as bisexual, pansexual, or queer (termed bisexual in this thesis for simplicity) and attending to the macro level factors that influence their identity narratives. Existing research tends to focus on *others’* perceptions of bisexuality (e.g., Eliason, 1997; Morrison et al., 2010) or views bisexuals’ experiences through a lens that constructs issues of bi-negativity or non-disclosure as problems at the interpersonal (micro) level (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016; la Roi et al., 2019). By individualising these issues through discourses of mental health or “internalised” biphobia, the research neglects to acknowledge the broader macro-level factors (e.g., socio-cultural meanings) that make it difficult to claim, articulate, or perform bisexual identities. Employing Taylor and Littleton’s (2006) narrative-discursive approach, this study aims to combine analysis of both micro and macro levels in order to address these gaps and call attention to the voices of young bisexual women.

Following the wider trend of bisexual erasure in academic literature, minimal research has been carried out in Aotearoa that pertains to bisexual identities. Given the pervasiveness of bi-negativity highlighted in international research (Borver et al., 2001; Hayfield et al., 2014; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017; McLean, 2007; Morrison et al., 2010) an exploration of bisexual identities in Aotearoa is needed. When conducting research about sexual identity in Aotearoa, it is essential to acknowledge that bisexuality (and LGBTQ identities more broadly) are Western concepts that may not resonate across cultures. Traditionally, Māori – the indigenous people or tangata whenua of Aotearoa – were accepting of sexual diversity; and today the term *takatāpui* is being reclaimed to describe Māori who identify with diverse genders and sexualities (Aspin & Hutchings, 2007; Kerekere et al., 2017). Therefore, acknowledging the imposition of Western understandings of sexuality on tangata whenua, it is important to consider the ways in which homophobia and bi-negativity have an impact, not only in relation to hetero- and monosexism, but as an ongoing process of colonisation.

Western conceptualisations of sexuality and sexual identity are typically dichotomous – based on gender (male or female), sex role (feminine or masculine), and sexual orientation (homosexual or heterosexual) (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977) as well as disclosure (“out” or closeted) (Klein et al., 2015). Although Aotearoa is often claimed to be one of the leading countries for LGBTQ rights, the hegemony of Western understandings of sexuality in Aotearoa means that these conceptualisations are likely to (in various ways) impact the identity construction of all young bisexual women in Aotearoa. Especially pertinent to identity construction are the numerous negative assumptions about bisexuality that have resulted from Western understandings of sexuality. Assumptions about bisexuals include that they are promiscuous, sexually irresponsible, and unable to commit to monogamy (Klesse, 2011); in a transition phase between hetero- and homosexuality (Hayfield et al., 2014); frauds, lying about their true sexual identity, or “fence sitting” (Callis, 2013); and that they are using bisexuality to maintain heterosexual privilege (Lynch, 2012). These negative conceptualisations of bisexuality render bisexual identities undesirable/“spoiled” (Goffman, 1963); or unintelligible (Butler, 1999), making it difficult to claim or articulate a positive bisexual identity. (These theoretical terms are explained in more detail in chapter 2.)

The impact of bi-negativity and bisexual erasure on young bisexual women’s ability to construct an intelligible sexual identity in the Aotearoa context is central to this thesis. In this research, I consider the possibilities for the construction of intelligible bisexual identities by examining the ways in which discursive resources available in Aotearoa are drawn on in participants’ sexual identity narratives. As part of this, I examine the spoiled identities negotiated by young bisexual women, as well as the complexities associated with the “coming out story”, disclosure, and visual identities, which have received little attention in existing research. Thus, working from a narrative-discursive approach to investigating identity construction, my research explores the following questions:

1. What are the available discursive resources and positions related to bisexuality?
2. What are the possibilities for participants to use these to construct an intelligible bisexual identity?
3. How is participants’ identity construction constrained by these discursive resources?
4. How do participants resist these discursive resources in order to construct an intelligible identity?

As a young, queer, Pākehā<sup>2</sup> woman, I come into this research primarily as an “insider”, sharing a variety of positions with participants in this study – including similarities in age, gender, sexual identity, and being able-bodied. Like me, most of the young women in this study were privileged in that they have been/are currently engaged in higher education. The participants in this study are a diverse group and of course, in some ways, we differed – for example, in terms of ethnicity and religious identity. As Hayfield and Huxley (2015) note, the researcher can be an insider and an outsider simultaneously. My identity and self-presentation are salient in the context of this research, as participants’ assumptions and perceptions of me, our similarities, and our differences influenced the co-construction of participants’ identity narratives, as well as my analysis of their narratives (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). While, on one hand, my analysis of participants’ narratives was influenced by my own experiences and understandings of queerness; on the other hand, I was continually challenged by participants and keenly aware of the diverse experiences that this thesis represents.

Although I am not aware of any research of this kind in Aotearoa, there is an emerging field of international research exploring bisexual identities as a distinct social category. In chapter two, I provide an overview of the literature that pertains to bisexual identity – including a discussion of traditional sexual identity and coming out theories, the widely recognised coming out narrative, bi-negativity and bisexual erasure, and the stigmatisation of bisexual identities. This chapter offers a critical discussion of the research carried out in these areas and the ways in which dominant constructions of sexuality function to erase bisexuality, as well as highlighting other gaps in the literature that require further exploration. In chapter three, I broadly outline social constructionist views of identity and go on to describe the theoretical frameworks and procedures that comprise the methodology for this research. Following that, I present my analysis in chapter four, in which I discuss the discursive resources available to young bisexual women in Aotearoa and the ways in which these enable and constrain their sexual identity construction. Finally, chapter five provides a concluding discussion, emphasising the key points of my analysis and offering thoughts about the study’s limitations and future directions for research in this area.

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<sup>2</sup>Aotearoa New Zealander of Settler descent also commonly referred to as New Zealand European

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **1. Introduction**

In both popular culture and academic literature, understandings of and discussion around gay/lesbian identities has grown in recent decades. However, bisexuality remains silenced in these discussions and little is known about bisexual identity construction. Despite the strong emergence of research about “LGBTQ” issues, research that focuses on bisexuality as a distinct social identity category is scarce. However, studies that explore LGBTQ issues and sexual identity more broadly contain elements that are relevant to the topic of bisexual identity construction. In this chapter, I review the available literature pertaining to bisexual identity construction, while demonstrating the substantial gaps in the literature that indicate a need to research bisexual identities.

Throughout this chapter, I give priority to literature that takes a social constructionist approach to sexual identity. First, I outline theories of sexual identity development and “coming out”, which are situated within common, essentialist, rhetoric of sexual identity. Although these theories are not situated in the social constructionist paradigm, it is important to outline this area of literature as it demonstrates the context in which bisexual identities are understood, discussed, and constructed. Next, I examine the available literature around bi-negativity and bisexual erasure. Since bisexual identities and experiences are under-researched, this section will explore the research in this area at a broad level. The literature examined will involve a variety of methodologies (i.e., both quantitative and qualitative), as well as various samples (i.e., bisexuals, LGBTQ individuals, heterosexuals). This leads to the third section of this chapter, in which I examine a small portion of literature that ties together stigma and bisexual identities. In this section, I identify literature that challenges common rhetoric surrounding sexual identity – introducing ideas of the “disclosure imperative” and “cultural intelligibility”. Finally, I outline some of the limitations of current social constructionist research pertinent to bisexual identity construction and highlight the gaps in this area of literature.

## **2. Sexual Identity and “Coming Out” Theories**

### **2.1 Developmental models of sexual identity/coming out.**

The widely recognized idea of “coming out” is located within broader discourses of sexual identity development and many academics have put forward models depicting the process of forming a non-heterosexual identity. Earlier models of non-heterosexual identity development fall into the developmental paradigm, in which theoretical models share common stages, illustrating a progression from the awareness of same-sex attraction, through the exploration of these feelings, and toward the “endgame” of coming out (Shapiro et al., 2010). Key developmental models of non-heterosexual identity development, including work by Troiden (1979) and Cass (1984) demonstrate these common ideas.

Both Troiden (1979) and Cass (1984) draw on essentialist understandings of identity and see homosexuality as a stable and innate aspect of one’s identity. Homosexual identity is proposed to follow a linear, stage-like developmental path, centred on the idea of “coming out” as the endpoint of an individual’s sexual identity development. Early psychological theories of sexual identity development share common views on the developmental stages involved: (1) identification of behaviours, thoughts and feelings that may indicate homosexuality; (2) an exploration of these feelings; (3) progression from negative to positive feelings about one’s homosexual identity; (4) socializing within homosexual communities; and (5) relinquishing one’s heterosexual identity for a completely disclosed homosexual identity (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1979). The emphasis placed on public disclosure (i.e., “coming out”) as the main goal of sexual identity development has become a dominant way of talking about sexual identity. This is commonly seen, both in psychological research and in public discourse about sexual identity, where “coming out” represents the attainment of a “healthy” sense of identity for sexual minority individuals.

Developmental models share common expectations across each stage of sexual identity development, as well as what constitutes a “healthy” sexual identity. As noted by Shapiro, Rios and Stewart (2010), developmental models place emphasis on an individual’s eventual ability to form committed romantic (monogamous) relationships, maintain a positive sense of self, and integrate sexuality with other aspects of identity. These expectations are underpinned by some fundamental assumptions of the developmental paradigm, which warrant criticism. Both Troiden (1979) and Cass (1984) have received criticism for their models of homosexual

identity development as the formation of a non-heterosexual identity is far more nuanced and multidimensional than developmental theories allow for (Morris, 1997). A common criticism of developmental theories pertaining to sexual identity is that they are typically linear and unidirectional (la Roi et al., 2019; Rust, 1993; Shapiro et al., 2010). This means that theories do not consider the complex reality of identity formation, which often involves “missing” stages or returning to previous stages for some time (Rust, 1993). Developmental models of sexual identity also tend to neglect social and contextual factors, and other aspects of identity such as gender, culture, and class; resulting in a narrow view of sexual identity development that fails to adequately explain the vast diversity of experiences pertaining to sexual identity formation (Rust, 1993; Shapiro et al., 2010). Moreover, psychological theorizing about the development of “non-normative” sexual identities sets up heterosexuality as the default identity, marginalising other sexual identities.

The dominant expectations about “healthy” sexual identity development that underpin developmental models cause problems when considering sexual identities that fall outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The assumption that sexual identity development is a sequence of stages that lead from a heterosexual identity to a homosexual identity has implications for understandings of bisexuality. In dominant psychological theories, sexual identity development is considered stage-like, linear, and unidirectional. So, if heterosexuality is represented by the start line and homosexuality is the finish line, a bisexual person is either considered to be way off track (e.g., confused) or passing through a stage on the way to the finish line (e.g., “it’s just a phase”). Thus in developmental models, bisexuality is either neglected as a potential identity altogether, or positioned as a transitional stage (Diamond, 2008; Hayfield et al., 2014; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017; Roberts et al., 2015). This contributes to the erasure of bisexual identities, which I will discuss in more depth later.

Rust (1993) also notes that when non-heterosexual identity is theorized from a developmental perspective, the final stage of public disclosure (or “coming out”) becomes the goal of the developmental process. Thus, under a developmental paradigm, the acquisition of the final stage denotes maturity of one’s sexual identity. Linear models of non-heterosexual identity that fail to acknowledge the validity of bisexual identity therefore position bisexuality as immaturity; a failure to successfully complete one’s sexual identity development. Indeed Troiden’s (1979, p. 296) final stage is characterized by the individual believing “nothing is to be gained by choosing bisexuality or heterosexuality”. Troiden (1979, p. 296) also asserts that

“the taking of a lover confirms gay identity”, allowing no room for bisexuality or fluidity in sexual identity. The underlying assumption that engagement in a same-sex relationship is an absolute confirmation of gay identity means that developmental models do not allow for longitudinal change in sexual identity, and erases bisexuality’s position as a valid sexual identity entirely.

A further criticism of theoretical models such as Troiden (1979) and Cass (1984), is that the expectation of an end stage to sexual identity development demonstrates a failure to consider the longitudinal impacts of forming a non-normative sexual identity. “Coming out” is commonly referred to in both popular and academic discourse surrounding non-heterosexual identity, and disclosure – the act of revealing one’s sexual identity to others – is considered one of the central aspects of “coming out”. However, Cass (1984, p. 152) states that in the final stage of homosexual identity development “the homosexual identity is no longer hidden, so that disclosure becomes a non-issue”. The notion that the issue of disclosing one’s non-normative sexual identity has an endpoint indicates an oversight regarding the realities of maintaining a non-normative sexual identity.

Disclosure (or non-disclosure) of one’s sexual identity is an ongoing process that must be negotiated across a variety of contexts (Bonet et al., 2007). Developmental theories of sexual identity portray disclosure as a sign of “healthy” sexual identity, rendering non-disclosure as indicative of “unhealthy” sexual development (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1979). However, given the various social and cultural contexts in which sexual minority individuals are situated, disclosure of same-sex relations may be met with significant legal or social sanctions. In this sense, not “coming out” may be a rational and protective response to contextual factors, rather than a sign of “unhealthy” sexual identity development. Furthermore, “coming out” is an ongoing process that sexual minority individuals negotiate throughout their life span (Bonet et al., 2007). The issue of continual disclosure may also be particularly salient for individuals who identify as bisexual, given that bisexuality is subject to invisibility and erasure (Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017). Therefore, despite “coming out” being frequently referred to as a primary indicator of sexual identity formation, developmental models have neglected to consider the limitations on disclosure, and the lifelong nature of “coming out” - reducing it to a singular event.

Based on these critiques, scholars began to question the assumptions central to developmental understandings of sexual identity. A social constructionist approach to sexual identity signified a move away from linear stage-like progressions and essentialist views of sexual identity. Within the social constructionist epistemology, identity is viewed as an ongoing situated practice, constructed and enacted through engagement with social and cultural resources.

## **2.2 Constructionist understandings of sexual identity.**

Rust (1993, p. 70) posits that individuals typically “experience their own sexuality as stable and essential, and they retrospectively perceive challenges in their sexual identities as part of a goal-oriented process of discovering and accepting this essential sexuality”. Accordingly, developmental models of sexual identity formation may appear to be an intuitive approach to theorizing sexual identity formation. However, individuals do not necessarily comprehend their experience of sexual identity formation in terms of a set of stages, and variance from the sequential steps of developmental models is extremely common (Shapiro et al., 2010). The developmental approach also fails to consider the hegemony of the cultural norms and regulations within which individuals are embedded and the implications of this for identity construction.

The aforementioned critiques of the developmental paradigm have led to an emphasis on social constructionist models of sexual identity formation. Within these models, sexual identity formation is understood as flexible, ongoing, and as influenced by a multitude of social and contextual factors. Rather than viewing identity as an internal state that is possessed by someone, social constructionists understand identity as constructed and enacted in social contexts. Thus, non-heterosexual identities are not conceptualized as “true identities” waiting to be discovered by the individual, but as identities that are influenced by various social factors, formed in interaction with social contexts, and subject to change at any point in one’s lifespan (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Rust, 1993).

Several studies about sexual identity have taken a social constructionist approach. For example, Shapiro and colleagues (2010) explored the narrative accounts of 4 lesbian feminist scholar-activists from China, India, Poland, and the United States. Based on these interviews, Shapiro et al. (2010) suggested that the way in which sexual identity is thought about, acted on, and experienced is contingent on the interaction between individuals and their social



context. Gibson and Macleod's (2012) research is another example. By exploring the narratives of lesbian women at a South African university, Gibson and Macleod highlighted the discursive resources available to and drawn on by participants in various "geographical, institutional, and familial spaces" (2012, p. 463). From a social constructionist perspective, constructing and claiming a sexual identity is intimately intertwined with the available societal discourses and cultural resources that can be drawn on to describe and define oneself (Rust, 1993).

Rather than focusing on goal-oriented models and dichotomous understandings of sexual identity, social constructionists are concerned with how one interacts with social and contextual factors to form a coherent identity and allow for fluidity in sexual identity. Therefore, unlike the developmental paradigm, which places limitations on the sexual identities available to individuals; there is space for bisexual identities within this paradigm. Blumstein and Schwartz (1977) highlight the impact of social constructions of sexuality and gender (and other social constructs) on self-identity; stating that cultural and socio-political ways of thinking and talking about sexuality - such as dichotomous thinking, bi-negativity, political ideologies, and gender role expectations - heavily influence the formation of one's sexual identity. Recognising the way in which social norms and regulations influence identity construction is particularly important when considering the availability of cultural resources for constructing a bisexual identity. How might one construct a bisexual identity when bisexuality is continually marginalized and erased?

### **3. The "Coming Out" Narrative and Disclosure**

*Coming out* remains a central feature in academic and popular discourse around minority sexual identities. The coming out narrative has become the typical way in which many sexual minority individuals narrate their experiences of claiming and managing their sexual identity within the context of heterosexist cultural norms and expectations (Bacon, 1998; Gibson, 2010). Although early developmental theories of sexual identity development (see Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1979) defined coming out as a singular construct and a one-off event, more recent work has led to a consensus that coming out encapsulates numerous events within a continual process (Gibson, 2010; Rust, 1993; Shapiro et al., 2010).

Shapiro et al. (2010) found that sexual minority individuals described more than one aspect of coming out - *naming* and *disclosure* were considered distinct experiences within the coming out process. Naming refers to the identification of one's sexual identity and recognition of it conflicting with one's self concept or the attitudes and norms of one's social context, while disclosure involves making decisions about how to communicate one's sexual identity to others, and who is told (Shapiro et al., 2010). Across the literature, more emphasis has been placed on disclosure as it aligns with traditional conceptualizations of "coming out" in the public sphere.

The coming out narrative constructs the disclosure of one's sexual identity as a necessary and ideal step for all non-heterosexual individuals. This idea, referred to as the disclosure imperative, is taken for granted in sexualities literature as a positive outcome of holding a non-heterosexual identity (McLean, 2007). On the other hand, concealment of one's sexual identity is portrayed as problematic and, in psychological literature, is often linked to mental health problems (Barker, 2015; la Roi et al., 2019; Russell & Fish, 2016). This taken for granted notion that disclosure of one's sexual identity is the ideal is rooted in discourses that position non-disclosure as unhealthy and inauthentic. This is illustrated in popular phrases associated with non-disclosure, such as "hiding in the closet" or "living a lie" (McLean, 2007; Orne, 2011). Embedded within this discourse is a failure to acknowledge the dangers and negative outcomes that may be associated with the disclosure of a non-normative sexual identity.

Experiences of othering, rejection, and stigmatization subsequent to disclosure of one's sexual identity have been highlighted in quantitative research pertaining to sexual minority individuals' experiences. These dangers may be particularly salient for bisexual individuals due to widespread misunderstandings about bisexuality. For example, Roberts and colleagues (2015) conducted an online survey with 745 bisexual participants and found that disclosure of bisexuality to family and friends was positively correlated with experiences of anti-bisexual discrimination. These findings suggest that, for particular groups, disclosure may heighten the risk of adverse experiences.

At a broader level, Legate, Ryan and Weinstein's (2012) survey of 161 LGB-identified individuals found that the relationship between disclosure and wellbeing varied according to social contexts. Therefore, disclosure of one's sexual identity may have positive or negative ramifications depending on the social climate in which an individual is located (Legate et al.,

2012). This emphasis on social context dismantles the notion that disclosure and non-disclosure exist in a good/bad dichotomy. Not only is disclosure associated with diverse experiences and outcomes across different people, but individuals are likely to experience varying outcomes, dependent on social contexts. Thus, the literature indicates that disclosure is not likely to be experienced as an entirely positive or negative process by any one individual.

It is important to note that the process of bisexual identity construction occurs against the socio-cultural backdrop of widespread misunderstanding and negative constructions of bisexuality, which will inevitably impact on identity construction. As I explain in the following section, the negativity that bisexual people face differs from that of other sexual minority groups. This is due to a) heteronormative views in mainstream culture (i.e., the privileging and normalisation of heterosexual identities and practices) and b) monosexist assumptions (i.e., a person can be *either* homosexual or heterosexual; a person can be attracted to *either* men or women). For this reason, when bisexuality is acknowledged, it is often met with unique forms of discrimination stigmatisation, and denigration, termed “bi-negativity” and/or bisexual erasure (Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017), as I explain next.

#### **4. Bi-negativity & Bisexual Erasure**

Bi-negativity, often referred to as biphobia, is described as the social marginalisation of bisexual people and encompasses negative conceptualizations of and attitudes toward bisexuality, anti-bisexual discrimination, and the erasure of bisexual identities in popular and academic discourse. Alarie and Gaudet (2013) explain that bi-negativity occurs through oppressive practices, including interpersonal and systemic violence, discrimination across a variety of contexts, the perpetuation of negative representations, and epistemic erasure.

Since homosexuality and homophobia are widely recognised, bi-negativity (or biphobia) has been understood by a number of researchers as an aspect of homophobia more broadly. Monro, Hines and Osborne (2017) state that bisexual individuals are subject to homophobia and heterosexism, however, they emphasise the distinction between homophobia and bi-negativity on the basis of the disparate assumptions and beliefs underpinning bi-negativity. Hayfield and colleagues’ (2014) paper supports this notion, stating that mononormativity and monosexism are the primary cultural assumptions underlying bi-negativity. Mononormativity is resultant of dichotomous binary understandings of sexual identity, which renders homosexuality and

heterosexuality to be the only valid sexual identities. Numerous academics support the notion that binary understandings of sexuality and mononormativity are the underpinnings of bi-negativity.

Seminal work on bisexual erasure by Yoshino (2000) implicates a desire to maintain heterosexual/homosexual and male/female binaries as the ontological basis for understanding sexuality, leading to bi-negativity from both heterosexual and lesbian/gay communities. Further academic work, including Khuzwayo and Morison (2017) and Roberts et al. (2015), has also highlighted the way in which mononormativity and binaristic views of sex and gender have contributed to bi-negativity - underpinning negative conceptualisations about bisexual individuals and perpetuating the erasure of bisexual identities in popular and academic discourse. Literature on this topic highlights four themes: (1) bisexual erasure in social and cultural contexts, (2) bisexual erasure in academic literature, (3) negative conceptualisations of bisexuality, and (4) the impact of bi-negativity. I deal with each of these in turn in the following sections.

#### **4.1 Bisexual erasure in socio-cultural contexts.**

Bisexual erasure is an aspect of bi-negativity that works to dismiss and invalidate bisexual identities, essentially rendering such identities invisible. While some may argue that bisexuality is invisibilised due to a small population self-identifying as bisexual, numerous studies suggest that bisexuality is at least as common as homosexuality and is becoming increasingly prevalent (Hayfield et al., 2018; Yoshino, 2000). Thus, the term bisexual erasure refers not simply to the invisibility of bisexuality but to the systemic erasure of bisexual identities. A small amount of literature brings to light the erasure of bisexual identities and makes explicit the issue of bisexual erasure in (a) social and cultural contexts and (b) research and academic literature.

Yoshino (2000) provides a detailed discussion of the strategies in place that contribute to the erasure of bisexual identities. He identifies three strategies: class erasure, individual erasure, and delegitimation. Class erasure refers to the use of the heterosexual/homosexual binary to describe everybody, completely ignoring the existence of bisexuality. The conceptualization of bisexuality as a temporary phase, or as a fad or fashion statement (as opposed to a valid identity) is one way that class erasure is carried out. At the individual level, erasure occurs

though the recognition of bisexuality as a sexual identity, yet individuals are discredited and accused of being deceitful or “on their way” to becoming homosexual. This type of erasure further demonstrates the cultural belief that bisexuality is a phase, and that expression of a non-monosexual identity is met with disbelief and scepticism. Finally, Yoshino (2000) posits that when individuals’ bisexual identities are acknowledged, they are often delegitimised through stigma and negative representations from both heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities. Therefore, bisexual erasure is a salient issue in social and cultural contexts and can be perpetuated even by those who recognize bisexuality as a possible sexual identity.

Research on bisexual erasure in social and cultural contexts tends to focus on the opinions of the general population regarding bisexuality. For instance, participants in Alarie and Gaudet’s (2013) study were French Canadian university students of various sexual identities. These participants drew upon cultural understandings about bisexuality that erased and delegitimated bisexual identities. Alarie and Gaudet (2013) reported that participants ignored bisexuality by discussing sexuality in dichotomous terms (i.e., heterosexuality versus homosexuality), portrayed bisexuality as a phase rather than an enduring identity, depicted bisexual individuals (particularly women) as “imposters”, and further delegitimated bisexual identities through the use of negative stereotypes. Interestingly, bisexual erasure has been found to occur even when people express tolerance and acceptance of bisexuality. Morrison, Harrington and McDermott (2010) administered various measures to heterosexual university students in Ireland and found that their participants’ level of tolerance of bisexuality was significantly higher than their perception of bisexuality as a valid long-term identity. Thus, even when negative representations are not explicitly expressed, the idea of a stable bisexual identity appears unintelligible. A study by Roberts et al. (2015) supports the findings of Alarie and Gaudet (2013), in particular discussing the way in which discourses that dichotomize sexuality reinforce the idea that bisexuality is a transitional phase situated between the two valid sexual identities: heterosexuality and homosexuality.

The gay-straight binary and portrayal of bisexuality as a phase highlighted in the above studies are also salient in studies of bisexual individuals’ experiences of bisexual erasure. Yoshino (2000) described the difficulties faced by bisexual individuals attempting to communicate their sexual identity to others. Even if one clearly states that they are bisexual, this is rendered invisible when the individual engages in a romantic or sexual relationship with someone of the same or other gender. Due to monosexist understandings of sexual identity, once a woman is

seen with another woman, she is assumed to be a lesbian, and if she is seen with a man, she is assumed to be straight (Yoshino, 2000). Cultural terms such as “hasbian”, “gay, straight or lying”, “bi now, gay later”, and “weekend lesbianism” are also commonly used in social contexts to invalidate bisexual identities (Hayfield et al., 2014; Yoshino, 2000).

The influence of mononormativity is also emphasised in the accounts of bisexual individuals in a study in the United Kingdom by Hayfield et al. (2018). Participants in this study reported that their bisexuality was invisibilised most of the time, and that they felt it was completely erased once they entered a relationship with someone. Once they were in a relationship, participants reported, they were either perceived to be in a “gay relationship” or a “straight relationship” and the idea of a “bisexual relationship” was unintelligible, even to the participants (Hayfield et al., 2018). Research that draws upon the experiences of bisexual individuals is extremely limited, but Hayfield and colleagues’ (2018) study is an example of the way in which cultural assumptions such as the gay-straight binary and the conceptualization of bisexuality as a temporary phase work to marginalize, delegitimize, and ultimately erase bisexual identities.

#### **4.2 Bisexual erasure in academic literature.**

Recent work on bisexuality has signalled that bisexuality has been overlooked, undertheorized, and silenced in sexual identity development and coming out literature. Early sexuality research highlighted issues of heterosexism and primarily focused on gay men. In the 1980’s, sexuality research was driven by lesbian-feminist theoretical orientation, highlighting heteronormativity and patriarchy. Monro et al. (2017) note that the erasure of bisexuality complimented the political goals of sexuality research in the 1970’s and 1980’s. In the 1990’s, bisexuality began to receive attention in literature due to queer theory, however, this was through positioning bisexuality within a “framework of transgression” (Monro et al., 2017). In their paper, Blumstein and Schwartz (1977) asserted that no effort to include bisexuality in scientific views of sexuality had been made, and that the hegemony of dichotomous conceptualizations of gender, sex role, and sexual orientation had received little challenge.

An overview of the literature suggests that this statement remains accurate, as these dichotomies remain present in sexuality literature today. Monro and colleagues (2017) suggest that the presence of bi-negativity and monosexism in society has affected the development of

research about sexuality. Similarly, Lynch (2012) posits that while sexuality research has developed to attend to diverse sexual identity categories, a heterosexuality-homosexuality binary has deeply influenced the way in which sexualities are approached, analysed, and discussed in academic literature. This notion is evidenced in the literature, as the same conceptualizations of bisexuality that contribute to bisexual erasure in social/cultural contexts can be identified in the assumptions underpinning academic research in this area.

The erasure of bisexuality in academic literature is certainly an ongoing issue within the aforementioned sexual identity development and coming out literature, with consideration of bisexuality as a valid identity category a rarity, relative to the substantial literature concerning gay and lesbian identities (Bonet et al., 2007; Gurevich et al., 2007; Yoshino, 2000). Furthermore, despite a growing area of research focusing on bi-negativity, the experiences and narratives of bisexual individuals themselves is lacking. When bisexuality is attended to in research, the research is predominantly focused on others' perceptions of bisexual individuals, silencing the voices of those who self-identify as bisexual and are likely to experience bi-negativity first-hand (Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017).

#### **4.3 Negative conceptualizations of bisexuality.**

In addition to the erasure and invalidation of bisexual identities, bisexuality is subject to negative conceptualizations that stigmatize and marginalize those who claim a bisexual identity. Stemming from the same societal understandings of sexuality that contribute to bisexual erasure, these negative conceptualizations are more overt expressions of both heterosexist and monosexist views. Negative conceptualizations of bisexuality include stereotypes that devalue the validity of bisexual identity and portray bisexuality as a “deviant” sexual identity. As stated by Klesse (2011, p. 234) these stereotypes ensure “epistemic erasure and denigration through negative representations”.

As previously mentioned, bisexual erasure is maintained in part through the use of negative stereotypes about bisexual identities. Bisexual identities are commonly positioned as transitory, with the validity of such identities threatened and viewed as “unstable” by both heterosexual and gay/lesbian groups (Diamond, 2008; la Roi et al., 2019). In order to erase and invalidate bisexual identities, bisexual people are positioned by others as confused, in denial, and lacking self-awareness (Diamond, 2008; Gurevich et al., 2007; Khuzwayo &

Morison, 2017). This was supported by findings from a UK based study conducted by Hayfield et al. (2014). Through interviews with 20 bisexual women, Hayfield and colleagues (2014) found that participants were required to navigate conceptualisations of bisexuals as immature, confused, greedy, hypersexual, untrustworthy, attention-seeking, and going through a phase. The positioning of bisexuals as immature, confused, and going through a phase reflects developmental models of sexual identity development that construct bisexuality as a transitional stage between heterosexuality and homosexuality (e.g., Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1979). Moreover, negative attitudes toward bisexuality may be held by lesbian/gay communities specifically, with bisexual identity invalidated through discourses of cowardice and disloyalty. Lesbian groups, in particular, often perpetuate ideas of bisexual people as not committed to the LGBTQ+ community and politics and as using their bisexuality to maintain heterosexual privilege (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Belmonte & Holmes, 2016; Gurevich et al., 2007). Thus, bisexual individuals are subject to “double discrimination” in the form of negative attitudes and stigma from both heterosexual and lesbian/gay communities.

While negative conceptualisations of bisexuality are pervasive, bisexual women are likely to have unique experiences of stigma and discrimination. Bi-negativity differs qualitatively according to gender, due to prevailing gender prejudices and the positioning of women as subjects of the male gaze (Faehs, 2009). For instance, Wandrey, Mosack and Moore (2015) interviewed young bisexual women in the USA and found that bisexual women must manage the combination of heterosexism and monosexism that comprises bi-negativity, as well as navigating the exploitation of bisexuality for the pleasure of heterosexual men. The intersection of gender and sexuality also means that bisexual women tend to experience greater stigma because female bisexuality is constructed as equivalent to promiscuity and sexual irresponsibility (Hayfield et al., 2014; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017; Morrison et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2010). Moreover, the hypersexualisation of bisexuality is not only more commonly associated with bisexual women, but women also are more harshly judged for their sexual behaviours (Klesse, 2005).

Simultaneously, the legitimacy of bisexual identities is continually contested. Bisexual women’s identities are only permitted to exist for the sexual pleasure of heterosexual men but are unintelligible as a stable identity or in the context of a long-term serious relationship (Hayfield et al., 2018). The hypersexuality discourse of bisexual identity is reinforced by the positioning of bisexual people as predatory, unable to commit to monogamy, and as carriers of



sexually transmitted infections and/or AIDS (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016; Gurevich et al., 2007; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017; Morrison et al., 2010). Furthermore, subjecting female bisexuality to the male gaze contributes to the view of bisexuality as a transitional stage rather than a valid, long-term sexual identity. Cultural terms such as “bisexual until graduation” and “weekend lesbianism” are pervasive and typically ascribed to bisexual women more so than bisexual men (Hayfield et al., 2014; Wandrey et al., 2015).

#### **4.4 Impacts of bi-negativity.**

Prejudice towards bisexuality and the systemic erasure of bisexual identities has a substantial impact on the wellbeing of bisexual individuals. The pervasiveness of bi-negativity is linked to internalized bi-negativity and issues with identity, social and relational difficulties, and adverse mental health outcomes.

##### ***Mental health.***

Bisexuality has been consistently linked to an increased risk of mental health problems, even more so than sexual minority populations generally (Barker, 2015). According to Bostwick et al. (2010), bisexual women in the USA experience the highest rates of mood disorders (58.7%) when compared to women who identify as heterosexual, lesbian, or “not sure”. This finding is mirrored by la Roi and colleagues (2019), who reported that bisexual individuals experience heightened risk of depressive symptoms, mood and anxiety disorders, and suicidality, when compared to other sexual minority individuals. A large study (n=2651) conducted by Taylor, Power, and Smith (2019) found that Australian individuals who identified as bisexual were also at an increased risk of experiencing psychological distress. The association between bisexuality and poor mental health outcomes has been supported globally and numerous scholars have attributed this heightened risk to experiences of bi-negativity and bisexual erasure (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016; Taylor et al., 2019). A particularly vulnerable population may be bisexual youth, as some studies (e.g., Russell & Fish, 2016) suggest that as sexual minority individuals are disclosing their sexual identity at younger ages, coming out now often intersects with adolescence – a time when social interactions are of particular importance, and when the risk of mental health problems is already heightened.

##### ***Social marginalization.***

Bisexual people tend to experience bi-negativity in multiple contexts. Prejudice towards bisexuals is pervasive in cultural representations of bisexuality and in spaces that otherwise

provide support to LGBTQ individuals. Therefore, bisexual individuals' immediate social support systems may be of particular importance. According to Roberts et al. (2015), acceptance and support from family and friends was negatively correlated with experiences of bi-negativity. Furthermore, Belmonte and Holmes (2016) found that partner relationships were identified as promoting positive feelings about one's sexual identity. However, although positive relationships with partners, family and friends is important, two studies (Hayfield et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2010) highlight that bisexual individuals often encounter partners' lack of knowledge and misunderstandings about bisexuality. Moreover, monogamous relationships may lead to feelings of invisibility regarding one's bisexual identity. Participants in Hayfield and colleagues' (2018) study expressed feelings of frustration and isolation in response to the loss of their bisexual identity within monogamous relationships. Academic literature supports the notion that bisexual women face unique challenges in being accepted and supported by friends and family members. Prejudice surrounding bisexuality may lead to subsequent difficulties with self-acceptance, interpersonal relationships, the disclosure of a bisexual identity to others, and mental health problems (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016; Roberts et al., 2015; Ross et al., 2010; Shapiro et al., 2010).

### ***Identity.***

The stigmatised status of bisexuality impacts heavily on those who are constructing a bisexual identity. Negative feelings about holding a stigmatised identity is commonly referred to as internalized - for instance, "internalized" homophobia. Both internalized homophobia and internalized bi-negativity appear to be salient issues for bisexual individuals, as demonstrated in several studies in the USA and Canada. Belmonte and Holmes (2016) found that, in comparison to lesbians, bisexual women felt more negatively about their sexual identity and experienced more internalised homophobia. These findings are supported by la Roi et al. (2019), who also found that bisexual individuals experience higher levels of internalized negativity about their sexual identity than other sexual minority individuals. Internalized negativity surrounding both same-sex attraction - and bisexuality more specifically - is said to result in challenges for bisexual individuals to understand, accept, and feel pride in their sexual identity. Participants in Ross et al.'s (2010) study reported past and ongoing difficulties accepting their bisexuality and associated this with sociocultural representations (or lack thereof) of bisexuality. Due to widespread negative representations of bisexuality, even individuals who express acceptance of their bisexuality face difficulty feeling positive about their bisexual identity (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016). la Roi et al. (2019) also found that

individuals who self-identify as bisexual were more likely to experience more identity confusion, and less identity centrality and identity integration. Therefore, bisexual individuals may experience less coherence between their sexual identity and other aspects of their identity, which is likely attributable to the unintelligibility of bisexual identities and dearth of positive and diverse representations of bisexuality.

Ross and colleagues' (2010) Canada-based study involved focus groups and interviews with 55 bisexual individuals. Participants in this study placed emphasis on the pressure to conform to a monosexual identity and how this influenced questioning of their bisexual identity in relation to heterosexual or homosexual identities. This aligns with Blumstein and Schwartz' (1977) discussion of the way in which bisexual individuals often internalize binary and monosexist thinking about sexuality, despite experiencing sexual attraction and/or sexual experiences involving more than one gender. More recent research also supports this notion, with self-identified bisexual people describing themselves within heterosexual/homosexual confines. In a study by Wandrey et al. (2015), participants in the USA spoke of being partially or incompletely homosexual, thus positioning themselves within a binary of "completely homosexual" and "completely heterosexual" people. Thus, not only do bisexual individuals negotiate negative representations of bisexuality, they must also construct an identity that is restricted by the cultural unintelligibility of identities outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The issue of un/intelligibility is pertinent to the study of bisexual identities and I discuss this further below.

A growing body of qualitative work conducted with bisexual participants, predominantly in North America (e.g., Ross et al., 2010; Wandrey et al., 2015) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018), has emerged in recent years. These studies have demonstrated the way in which bisexual individuals must simultaneously negotiate bisexual erasure and the stigmatization of bisexuality, in order to claim a legitimate bisexual identity. In the following section I focus on the implications of social stigma for bisexual identity construction.

## **5. Stigma and Bisexual Identity Construction**

The complexities associated with (non)-hetero/sexual identity disclosure are significant, and the range of potential consequences associated with disclosure have very real impacts on the lives of sexual minority individuals. Recent work in sexualities literature explores how

individuals negotiate stigmatized identities, referred to as stigma management. Stigma management involves a variety of strategies that individuals may draw upon when making decisions about the disclosure (or non-disclosure) of their sexual identity. Cultural understandings of bisexuality, based on heteronormativity and monosexism, mean that bisexual individuals' experiences of the coming out process are likely to differ from the gay/lesbian coming out narratives that we are more familiar with. Stigmatizing responses towards bisexuality have been suggested to influence the disclosure and non-disclosure practices of bisexual individuals. Indeed, alongside the aforementioned impacts associated with bi-negativity, lower levels of disclosure among bisexual individuals (relative to other sexual minorities) has been attributed to experiences of bi-negativity (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016).

Stigma management, then, refers to the interpersonal communication strategies that individuals use to negotiate the presence or potential presence of bi-negative views and responses in a variety of interpersonal contexts. Antaki et al. (2005) define disclosure as a voluntary, significant, and personal report of one's news. Stigma management strategies may range from non-disclosure to "full" disclosure, and the strategies an individual chooses to draw on may differ across contexts. In Scherrer et al.'s (2015) study, bisexual individuals who chose to "come out" reported wanting to help their family understand their past, present and future relationships. These participants also considered bisexuality to fit in with their families' understandings of sexuality more so than gay/lesbian identities, as bisexuality would present less of a challenge to family members' expectations of what one's life would look like (Scherrer et al., 2015). Thus, the participants in this study were not simply disclosing their bisexuality, rather they selected direct disclosure as a technique to manage their families' expectations. The findings of Scherrer et al. (2015) highlight Orne's (2011) concept of "strategic outness", which encapsulates the complexities of the coming out process and the ways in which sexual minority individuals continually manage their identities in accordance with their social relationships.

Direct disclosure of one's sexual identity aligns closely with the classic coming out narrative. However, research suggests that sexual minority individuals engage in a variety of disclosure techniques in which their sexual identity is not directly communicated. In an Australian study, McLean (2007) found that bisexual participants used the strategy of "testing the waters" by hinting at same-sex attraction, in order to assess whether the particular social context was likely

to be a safe space to directly disclose one's bisexual identity. Similarly, Orne's (2011) study with gay men found that the use of hinting or "clues" was engaged in as a subtle form of disclosure.

Another strategy that can be described as a subtle form of disclosure involves finding a balance between concealment and disclosure. Orne (2011) found that participants did not use direct disclosure, but also did not stop anyone from finding out about their sexual identity. One way that this was carried out by participants was through the "interested in" field on social media sites (Orne, 2011). In a similar vein, Wandrey et al. (2015) conducted qualitative research about bisexual women's experiences of coming out to their family. One of the only existing studies on bisexual women's coming out experiences, this study found that some women preferred to come out as "queer", strategically placing the onus on others to ask questions about their sexual identity. This demonstrates that disclosure operates on a spectrum. In addition, Wandrey et al.'s (2015) findings illustrate the way in which bisexual women use stigma management strategies to gain control over their sexual identity disclosure and reject the disclosure imperative enforced by the traditional coming out narrative. I will discuss this notion of "the disclosure imperative" further in the following section.

Research that pertains specifically to the experiences of bisexual people is scarce. However, Belmonte and Holmes' (2016) paper looking at the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women suggests that the distinct assumptions attached to bisexuality may make the disclosure of a bisexual identity more difficult. In contrast, gay/lesbian identities are increasingly understood and accepted (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016). Emerging research that focuses specifically on the coming out experiences of bisexual people found that some bisexual individuals may decide to come out as gay/lesbian, rather than disclosing a bisexual identity (Scherrer et al., 2015). In the same study, other bisexual participants reported disclosing their bisexual identity or not disclosing a (non-hetero)sexual identity altogether (Scherrer et al., 2015). The variety of disclosure strategies reported by participants in Scherrer and colleagues' (2015) study a) demonstrates the heterogeneity of bisexual people's experiences and b) emphasizes the significant role of social context in choices around identity management.

The social stigma and bi-negativity discussed earlier are recognized ubiquitously by bisexual participants in studies about sexual identity, bi-negativity, and coming out. With heteronormativity and monosexism saturating popular discourse about bisexual identities,

reasons for non-disclosure are based around the perception that others' hold negative perceptions of bisexuality. Reasons for non-disclosure identified by Schrimshaw et al. (2018) included anticipation of negative emotional reactions or changes in relationships, fear of rejection because of cultural or religious beliefs, fear of being "outed" by others, as well as having experienced or witnessed these negative outcomes of disclosure in the past. These findings are supported by the aforementioned literature surrounding bi-negativity, however, Schrimshaw and colleagues' (2018) study focused solely on bisexual men. There are clear indications that due to the gendered understandings of bisexuality (see Hayfield et al., 2014; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017; Klesse, 2005), the experiences of bisexual women who choose not to disclose their sexual identity are unique and require further research.

In addition to the dearth of literature addressing bisexual individuals, particularly bisexual women, the literature reviewed above also highlights another avenue for further research. While a number of studies have looked into the interpersonal stigma management strategies of sexual minorities, it is important to note that the disclosure of sexual identities does not occur within a vacuum. From a social constructionist perspective, disclosure is not only pertinent to interpersonal interactions but is also related to the broader sociocultural context in which disclosure is enacted. Therefore, further research about sexual identity construction that extends the focus to the macro level is required. This would allow for a consideration of disclosure that is located within broader sociocultural discourse and norms (Morison et al., 2016).

### **5.1. Rejection of the disclosure imperative.**

Non-disclosure may also be influenced by the value that one places on coming out. McLean (2007, p. 154) posits that "there is a disclosure imperative attached to living as gay, lesbian or bisexual" and challenges the taken for granted position that this imperative to disclose has taken up. Coming out has been a strategy in queer political movements (Orne, 2011). However, sexual minority individuals have also expressed contention with the idea of the disclosure imperative. As mentioned, this is illustrated in by Wandrey and colleagues' (2015) research. In this study, several bisexual individuals asserted that they should not be required to disclose their bisexual identity. A number of participants based their resistance to disclosure in the fact that a) heterosexual people do not need to come out and b) lesbian/gay people are able to avoid directly disclosing their sexual identities as others will make assumptions about their sexual identity based on the gender of their partner (Wandrey et al., 2015). Bisexuality,

on the other hand, is typically invisibilized by monogamous relationships, resulting in the continual need to disclose one's bisexuality - if one places value on being "out".

In response to this, numerous studies (see McLean, 2007; Ross et al., 2012; Scherrer et al., 2015; Wandrey et al., 2015) have found that bisexual individuals may reject the disclosure imperative or disclose only when they deem it necessary. Two recent studies looking into bisexual identities were carried out in Germany, with bisexual women aged 22-34 years (Beyer, 2016) and the Netherlands, with bisexual people aged 18-37 years (Maliepaard, 2020). These studies illustrated that, for some bisexual individuals, disclosure/coming out "makes one's sexuality a big deal" (Maliepaard, 2020, p. 53). Placing emphasis on one's sexual identity and highlighting difference or deviance from the norm is constructed as undesirable for many bisexual individuals who do not consider their sexuality to be a central aspect of their identity or daily lives (Beyer, 2016; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017; Maliepaard, 2020). It is therefore important that attention is paid to the value that bisexual individuals place on their sexual identity and disclosure. As stated by McLean (2007), coming out (in the traditional sense) may not be integral to the construction and maintenance of a bisexual identity for particular people.

## **5.2. The cultural unintelligibility of bisexual identities.**

In addition to the threat posed by the stigmatization of bisexuality and resistance of the disclosure imperative, another reason that bisexual individuals may not engage in disclosure is the cultural unintelligibility of bisexual identities. According to Butler (1999) identities that do not conform to social norms and regulations are unintelligible – that is, they are neither recognisable nor acceptable. In a similar vein, Rust (1993) put forward that individuals construct and manage identities based on the social constructs available. Yoshino (2000) coined the term "bisexual erasure" soon after.

Taken together, Butler (1999), Rust (1993), and Yoshino (2000) provide a strong foundation for understanding the cultural unintelligibility of bisexual identities. Due to monosexist and dichotomous understandings of sexuality, bisexual identities are not recognisable as a valid or long-term identity. Yoshino (2000) suggested that self-identification as bisexual may be hindered as no template of bisexual identity exists. Almost 20 years on, it remains that bisexual identity is far less culturally intelligible than gay/lesbian identities. Indeed, a study conducted by Ross et al. (2010) found that some participants were not aware of bisexuality during their

adolescence and young adulthood, meaning that they were unable to understand or construct their bisexual identity until later in life.

Similarly, work by Alarie and Gaudet (2013) shows that young adults perpetuate bisexual erasure, thus creating a barrier for individuals who may otherwise have self-identified as bisexual. Furthermore, bisexual individuals may self-identify as bisexual yet still describe themselves in relation to the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy, as seen in Wandrey and colleagues' (2015) study, where bisexual participants indicated understandings of bisexuality as partially or incompletely homosexual.

The cultural unintelligibility of bisexuality may constrain bisexual individuals' identity construction, even if they are aware of the possibility of bisexual identities, and even if they have disclosed a bisexual identity. Participants in a study by Ross et al. (2010) expressed that - due to others' lack of understanding of bisexual identities - they felt "burdened" by the need to constantly disclose their sexual identity. This finding is supported by research that suggests some bisexual individuals instead choose to "pass" as heterosexual based on the assumptions that others make about their sexual identity (McLean, 2007). Scherrer et al. (2015) also reported that others' responses to the disclosure of a bisexual identity include silence and ignoring bisexuality, positioning bisexual individuals as "actually gay" or "actually straight", or holding onto hope that bisexual individuals will "end up" heterosexual. These responses represent the cultural unintelligibility of bisexual identities. Further, this can create feelings of uncertainty among bisexual individuals and, in turn, constrain one's agency in the construction and disclosure of a bisexual identity.

## **6. Limitations of the Critical Research on bisexuality**

The literature on bisexual identity construction provides consistent findings that indicate individuals' decisions around disclosure are embedded in social context and influenced by the dominance of heteronormativity and monosexism in these contexts. Although coming out has been researched heavily within sexualities research, the conceptualization of coming out varies widely across studies, and research on disclosure and non-disclosure specifically is lacking. Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature focusing on bisexual women's experiences.



Despite the clear strengths of social constructionist understandings of identity construction in comparison to developmental models of sexual identity formation, Blumstein & Schwartz (1977) note that minimal effort has been made to include bisexuality in any social scientific work on sexual identity, and the hegemony of dichotomous views of sexuality is maintained. Although Blumstein and Schwartz (1977) highlighted bisexuality in their work, this acknowledgement of bisexuality within theories about sexual identity was (and continues to be) a rarity. Social constructionist understandings of sexual identity formation do illustrate the potential for the incorporation of bisexual identity, but research using these theoretical approaches has neglected to do so.

Mirroring the general tendency toward bisexual erasure in sexuality literature, discussed earlier, bisexuality as a category is typically assimilated into the LGBTQ acronym, meaning that bisexual issues and experiences are not distinguished from gay/lesbian issues and experiences. Meanwhile, research that does specifically address bisexuality is typically focused on bisexual men (Gurevich et al., 2007; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017). The silencing of bisexual women in literature has implications for policy and constrains the possibilities for social and political action in bisexual and feminist communities. The emerging research that has been highlighted in this section also indicates a need to explore alternative discourses to the traditional coming out narrative, particularly in the context of more complex sexual identities, such as bisexuality.

When research does consider bisexual identities, it tends to focus primarily on negative perceptions and experiences associated with bisexuality. Young queer populations have been established as an “at-risk” group that requires research and intervention. As Chancellor (2012) points out, rhetoric of risk and empowerment, invisibility and visibility has shaped the politics of queer identities in recent history. As has been illustrated throughout this literature review, rhetoric of erasure and risk is particularly salient to bisexual identities. On top of these broader discourses associated with queer identities, bisexuality is also continually associated with a plethora of constructions – bisexuality as temporary, greed, immaturity, promiscuity, and so on – that work to delegitimise and spoil bisexual identities. However, most research in the area of bisexual identities does not extend the focus beyond micro-level interpersonal contexts, to attend to these discourses and norms at the macro-level.

## **7. My Study**

The erasure of bisexuality in popular and academic discourses highlighted in this literature review emphasises the need for research on bisexual individuals' experiences related to their sexual identity. The coming out narrative is dominant in existing research, and findings that indicate this narrative may not encapsulate the complexities of identity construction for bisexual individuals. Therefore, my study will focus on how bisexual individuals narrate their own sexual identity construction. Emerging thought about the cultural un/intelligibility of bisexual identities provides a lens through which the interrelatedness of heterosexism, monosexism, bi-negativity and bisexual identity construction can be understood. I discuss the relevance of this idea further in the methodology chapter.

This literature review also highlighted the propensity to focus on men's experiences within the minimal research about bisexuality. In response to this gap in the literature, this study focuses exclusively on bisexual women. Furthermore, young people may be particularly vulnerable to the impact of bi-negativity, as age is a strong influence in all aspects of identity development, including social development and sexuality (Russell & Fish, 2016). Thus, young bisexual women (aged 18-24 years) were recruited for this study.

Finally, the existing research regarding bisexual individuals' experiences has predominantly been carried out in the USA, with notable work emerging from the UK, Canada, and South Africa as well. I am not aware of any research about bisexual individuals' identity construction having been conducted in the Aotearoa context. This demonstrates a clear need to explore issues relating to bisexual identity within our unique cultural context.

In line with the gaps that I have identified in the literature above, my study explores young bisexual women's identity construction in Aotearoa, organised around the research questions presented in the introduction. In the next chapter, I present my methodology for this study, including discussion of the social constructionist paradigm, the theories that provide a backdrop to my thesis, and the narrative-discursive approach to analysis.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **1. Social Constructionist Views of Identity**

The focus of this thesis is sexual identity construction – drawing on the social constructionist notion that identity is not inherent but is constructed through language and interaction. Social constructionism has influenced a number of approaches to studying identity, including narrative theory, positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1990), and Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning theory, which informs the research methodology for this study.

Social constructionism is the broad paradigm in which this study is situated. Social constructionist approaches to psychological research developed as a challenge to mainstream psychological theory and research, providing an alternative to concepts - such as essentialism, individualism, and the intrapsychic model of the person - that dominate understandings of psychological phenomena (Burr, 2015). Whereas mainstream psychology views the self in terms of personality, attitudes, emotions, and motivations, social constructionism focuses on the role of language and interaction in the formation of identities. Thus, in contrast to essentialist understandings of personhood, through a social constructionist lens identity is understood as fragmented, constantly changing, and produced through social interaction (Bamberg, 1997; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Burr (2015) posits that because identity is constructed in interaction, identity is not a unitary or stable phenomenon; it exists in multiplicity and identities are continually constructed and reconstructed across the discursive terrain.

Theory and research in the social constructionist paradigm can be differentiated into two camps, “light” and “dark” social constructionism (Danziger, 1997), perhaps more accurately described by Burr (2015) as “micro” and “macro” social constructionism. Micro social constructionism emphasises the way in which social construction occurs through every day social interactions. This view aligns with certain discursive approaches to psychology, in which processes of social construction make available multiple versions of the world around us. In contrast, macro social constructionism recognises the role of language use in interaction in social construction, but places emphasis on power. This view highlights the way in which material or social structures, social relations, and institutionalised practices hold authority over language use, enabling or constraining particular versions of selves and identities. The

emphasis on power seen in macro social constructionism can be attributed to the post-structuralist work of Foucault (Burr, 2015).

Micro and macro approaches to social constructionism are distinct, however, they are not mutually exclusive. Constructing identities through interaction simultaneously involves the constraining influence of wider systems of meaning or “discourse”, and the potential for personal agency to engage with, employ or resist said discourses. Examples of this blend of micro and macro social constructionism can be seen in Davies and Harre’s (1990) positioning theory, and extended in Bamberg’s (1997) narrative positioning theory, which provides the basis for this study.

## **2. Theoretical Orientation**

Within the social constructionist paradigm that this study is located, I will draw upon narrative positioning theory to examine how young bisexual women construct their identities. In order to provide a contextualized discussion of narrative positioning theory, earlier pieces of work regarding narrative studies and positioning theory will be expounded, before moving into a discussion of narrative positioning theory and its place in the current research.

### **2.1. Narrative theory.**

The “narrative turn” in social sciences brought about a focus on the way in which stories are used to fashion identity. In conceptualising identity, emphasis was placed on narrator’s representation of an experience, and what this experience means to the narrator (Bamberg, 1997; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Traditionally, narrative approaches to identity contended that identity has the structure of a life story, a concept termed “narrative identity” (Deppermann, 2013). However, this structuralist approach to conceptualising identity places narrative identity within the individual, emphasising unity and coherency in the conceptualisation of identity (Deppermann, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). This runs counter to social constructionist views of identity as fragmented, contingent on social exchanges and embedded in wider context. A shift towards narrative approaches to identity that align with post-structuralist and social constructionist theory was necessary in order to challenge essentialist constructions of identity (Burr, 2015; Hammack & Cohler, 2009).

This shift centred on narrative in interaction, highlighting the idea that identities are fashioned through the telling of narratives, and situated within social relationships (Gergen, 1994; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). This demonstrated a move away from essentialist conceptualisations of identity as situated within the individual, towards an understanding that identity is co-constructed. One perspective that conceptualises identity narratives as social actions is the storied resource perspective (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). From the storied resource perspective, narratives of identity are constructed within interaction, influenced by local and wider sociocultural resources. This perspective is apparent in discursive approaches to narrative studies, including Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive analysis, which will be discussed later.

## **2.2. Positioning theory.**

In order to highlight the way in which identities are constructed and situated in narrative interaction, Davies and Harre (1990) introduced the concept of positioning. Positioning proceeds from Foucault's (1969) notion of subject positions, which postulates that discourses position subjects, thereby enabling or constraining certain practices and speech acts. However, encompassing both macro and micro aspects of social constructionism, Davies and Harre (1990) simultaneously acknowledge the actors' agency to position themselves in particular ways within situated interaction. Therefore, while individuals may be positioned by others as bad, for example, through the use of cultural terms such as "gay, straight, or lying", bisexual individuals have the agency to position themselves as good, perhaps as having the ability to transcend gender binaries (e.g., loving the person, not the gender).

Positioning is defined by Davies and Harre (1990, p. 48) as "the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines." Davies and Harre (1990) suggest that speakers are able to position themselves and others within particular topics and storylines, through the telling of personal stories, or autobiographies, in interaction. Positioning theory also attends to the cultural resources and ways of speaking that speakers draw upon, which allude to the "ways of being" (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 49) that the speaker associates with. For example, cultural resources such as social categories (e.g., male/female) and stereotypes (e.g., hero/heroine) may be invoked by speakers in order to position one's self and others as good or bad, agentic or helpless.

### 2.3. Narrative positioning theory.

Bamberg (1997) built upon the concept of positioning to construct *narrative positioning theory*. Within this theory, positioning encompasses the “situated, action-oriented and practice-based nature of identity construction (Deppermann, 2013, p. 9). The dual nature of narrative interaction is also recognized, highlighting functions of both representation (the telling of a particular story about a particular event) and action (the active positioning of selves and others with evaluative consequences). These functions of narrative can be seen in level one and two of narrative positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Deppermann, 2013). Furthermore, positioning reinforces the notion that narratives are co-constructed and based in interaction with immediate and wider audiences, attending to the way in which local acts of positioning are intertwined with societal discourses and identity structures (Deppermann, 2013). In acknowledging the power of societal discourses but placing emphasis on the agency of narrators, narrative positioning theory demonstrates a bridge between micro and macro social constructionist views of narrative, seen in Foucault’s (1969) conceptualisation of “subject positions”, towards an emphasis on narratives co-constructed in interaction.

Narrative positioning theory is based upon three levels of positioning, reflected in the following questions (Bamberg, 1997, p. 337).

*Level 1: How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?*

*Level 2: How does the narrator position themselves to the audience?*

*Level 3: How does the narrator position themselves to themselves?*

At level one, focus is on the way in which the narrator uses linguistic devices to construct others in the narrative. Specifically, how is one character marked as either active and agentic, or passive and helpless? The second of Bamberg’s (1997) levels of positioning addresses the linguistic means that the narrator uses to communicate their own position within the narrative. At this level, emphasis is placed on the effect of the interactive setting on one’s talk. Attention is paid to the way in which the narrator draws on particular modes of discourse to highlight certain subject positions to the audience. Modes of discourse, in this instance, may include placing blame, making excuses, giving advice, and other linguistic means of positioning oneself to the audience (Korobov, 2001). At the third level, the narrator positions themselves in answering the question: “who am I?” Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) explain that the narrator constructs their identity in relation to dominant discourses or master narratives,

portraying themselves as a particular type of person. Although the narrator employs linguistic means to establish a certain identity, it is important to note that this identity construction is situated within the interaction and is not necessarily maintained across contexts.

Thus, through language and interaction, narrators situate themselves and others in relation to one another, and with reference to broad societal discourses.

### **3. Narrative Discursive Analysis**

Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning theory informs the analysis method for the current research, which will be based on Taylor and Littleton's (2006) *narrative-discursive approach*. The narrative-discursive method is a discursive approach that builds on the aforementioned areas of social constructionism, narrative theory and positioning. In this approach, discursive analysis techniques are applied to narratives, which provides a means for studying the identity construction of young bisexual women. The narrative-discursive framework focuses on how language is used in personal identity construction (called identity work as I explain below) across varied interactions, and considers how an individual's narrative is influenced by wider sociocultural contexts and collectively held narratives that may enable or constrain identity construction (Morison et al., 2016; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Emphasis is placed on the ways that speakers draw on meanings that are available to them from the wider discursive conditions in which they are located, and how these meanings are "taken up or resisted and (re)negotiated" in one's talk (Taylor & Littleton, 2006, p. 23). The narrative-discursive framework mitigates tension between macro and micro social constructionist approaches, by synthesising the two levels of analysis (Morison & Macleod, 2013). Thus, in narrative-discursive analysis, personal narratives are understood as situated constructions that are shaped by broader discursive conditions and produced in social interaction.

Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive analysis rests on a number of assumptions that influence the way we look at identity. From the narrative-discursive perspective, identities are socially constructed, maintained, and altered through talk and interaction. Identity is also conceptualised within the narrative-discursive approach as performative, meaning that identity is acted out through one's talk. Talk, therefore, is constitutive; and identities are produced through narrative. Taylor and Littleton (2006) emphasise that speakers are agentic beings who are active in their own identity work, including the construction of a personal narrative in which they position themselves in particular ways. Simultaneously, the narrative-discursive approach

understands individuals' identity construction as being influenced by wider social discourses, which in turn enable and constrain certain types of speech and action (Morison & Macleod, 2013).

### **3.1. Identity work.**

The way in which individuals construct their identities by actively employing the discursive resources made available to them within their broader social context is referred to as *identity work*. Because the narrative-discursive approach is based in social constructionism, disclosure is understood in regard to the broader sociocultural context, as well as one's immediate interpersonal context. Approaching sexual identity construction and disclosure from the perspective of identity work allows for an exploration of "coming out" that takes into consideration wider social norms surrounding sexuality and sexual identity.

Identity work provides a way to extend the research on the disclosure of sexual identities. Existing studies about disclosure work from a perspective of stigma management, in which emphasis is placed on how individuals conceal or disclose their sexual identity in interpersonal settings (e.g., Orne, 2011; Scherrer et al., 2015; Wandrey et al., 2015). However, individuals do not engage solely in stigma *management*. In disclosing a stigmatised sexual identity, individuals may actively resist or reject stigma (Morison et al., 2016). Thus, working from a perspective of identity work provides a means of exploring the ways that individuals resist or reject stigma, in order to negotiate broader social norms and values or avoid "identity trouble".

#### ***Trouble and repair.***

Speakers often engage in identity work in attempt to avoid *identity trouble*. Social discourses, and the ways in which an individual has been positioned, work to place limitations on one's identity work by troubling new positionings that may violate cultural norms or contradict previous positionings (Taylor, 2005). Identity trouble, then, may occur within a narrative of identity when one makes inconsistent statements, or positions themselves in contradictory ways. Moreover, identity trouble is also encountered when the speaker positions themselves in ways that are negatively viewed or culturally illegitimate (Morison et al., 2016). In this way, identity trouble is largely determined by broader social and cultural discourses that associate positive or negative values to certain positions. Therefore, in narrative-discursive analysis, we look at how personal identity narratives are shaped both by who the speaker already is, and by collectively held narratives (Linde, 1997; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Furthermore, we look at



inconsistencies between these existing positionings and new identity work within a speaker's account, and the trouble that this may cause.

As outlined above, identity trouble can arise when individuals position themselves in contradictory ways. Speakers are continually negotiating a variety of particular subject positions in their talk, and these positions do not always fit together to produce a unified and coherent identity (Gibson, 2010). For example, tension between one's religious identity and sexual identity may create identity trouble for an individual. Thus, a bisexual individual may decide not to disclose her sexual identity within religious settings, despite contradicting previous positionings.

Secondly, identity trouble may occur when one's subject positions do not align with the ideals of their social/cultural context. Widely established discourses and social norms communicate which identities are desirable and undesirable. Drawing on Goffman's (1963) stigma theory, identities that are undesirable can be understood as "spoiled identities". Various spoiled identities are assigned to bisexual individuals (e.g., hypersexual, greedy, confused). Identity trouble arises at the site of spoiled identities, which speakers are required to negotiate to construct positively valued identities (Morison et al., 2016; Morison & Lynch, 2019; Riessman, 2012).

As Taylor and Littleton (2006) explain, peoples' identities are likely to differ across varying contexts and interactions, and some inconsistencies in identity work are able to be integrated. However, identity trouble occurs when these inconsistencies do not fit into one's ongoing work towards a coherent identity; in these cases, *identity repair* is necessary. In response to instances of identity trouble or spoiled identity, speakers draw on available rhetorical strategies in order to negotiate troubled positions and produce alternative positions that either resist or take up cultural norms and positively valued ideologies (Morison et al., 2016). Therefore, identity repair refers to the process of reconciling inconsistencies within one's personal narrative, or "saving face" in regard to collective understandings and social norms (Morison & Macleod, 2013). Alternatively, speakers may engage in rhetoric or argumentation in order to actively resist the dominant ideology that is contributing to the identity trouble. Engagement with discursive resources is one such rhetorical strategy that provides opportunity for identity repair.

### 3.2. Discursive resources.

Consideration of how *discursive resources* are employed and negotiated in identity work is a central focus of narrative-discursive analysis. Identity work, and associated trouble and repair, is only meaningful when interlocutors share an established set of understandings, constituted in sociocultural contexts (Reynolds et al., 2007; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). These sets of understandings, termed discursive resources, are employed, negotiated and/or resisted by the narrator as they engage in identity work. Because discursive resources exist within the constraints of broader sociocultural understandings, certain discursive resources are made available or unavailable to narrators, depending on the context and particular interaction in which they are situated (Lynch & Maree, 2017). Two types of discursive resources are specified in Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive approach, representing two different ways of discussing meaning-making in narratives of identity; these are interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and canonical narratives (Bruner, 1987).

#### *Interpretative repertoires.*

Discursive resources provide speakers with the ability to construct culturally intelligible narratives. Understood by Taylor and Littleton (2006, p. 26) as "established interconnections of meanings and associations", *interpretative repertoires* are a primary analytical concept in narrative-discursive analysis. Interpretative repertoires were initially defined by Potter and Wetherell as "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" (1987, p. 149). Potter and Wetherell (1987) conceptualised interpretative repertoires as a discursive approach to analysing phenomena typically understood in psychology as attitudes, beliefs and attributions. Thus, interpretative repertoires are understood, not as innate entities of particular individuals or social groups, but as socially constructed sets of meaning made available through shared group membership (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Edley (2001) describes interpretative repertoires as varied linguistic resources that can be employed in social exchanges. These repertoires are embedded in "common sense" notions of various social groups, providing a basis for the shared understandings that make narratives meaningful in interaction (Reynolds et al., 2007). Interpretative repertoires, put simply, are culturally familiar ways of talking about the world. They are small and fragmented sets of terms – recognisable as common images, metaphors, figures of speech, or tropes (Korobov, 2001). The availability of certain repertoires within social groups highlights the constraints

that are placed on one's identity construction, and what can or cannot be said. However, interpretative repertoires can be employed in numerous ways by speakers, who may choose to reject interpretative repertoires that constrain their identity construction (Edley, 2001). Tropes such as "everyone is bi", "bisexual until graduation", and the "depraved bisexual" are examples of interpretative repertoires that may place limitations on the way in which bisexual women construct their identities. However, although constrained by cultural ideologies, speakers are viewed as agentic in that they are able to engage with a range of repertoires in a variety of different ways.

As interpretative repertoires are socially constituted ways of talking about subjects, narratives surrounding subjects such as race, class, gender and sexuality are constructed and altered in interaction. In terms of bisexual identity, the interpretative repertoires available to speakers will differ across context, meaning that bisexual identity construction is likely to differ accordingly. Identity work involves being positioned through the constraints put in place by shared cultural understandings of a subject, as well as utilising these repertoires in order to position oneself (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Therefore, bisexual women's identity construction can be understood as produced through the use of interpretative repertoires in situ, and in interaction with socially constructed identity categories such as gender and sexuality.

### ***Canonical narratives.***

In order to be culturally intelligible, narratives tend to follow certain structures and trajectories. Taylor and Littleton (2006, p. 26) explain that narrative structures and trajectories are devised through "expected connections of sequence and consequence". Termed *canonical narratives* by Bruner (1987) these kinds of narratives are described as culturally situated models that reflect notions of the possible lives that one may lead, and talk about, in the given context. In this sense, the construction of bisexual identities is further constrained by the dominance of canonical narratives that privilege heterosexual identities (i.e., girl meets boy, marriage, 2.5 kids, white picket fence) or homosexual identities (i.e., the coming out story). Hammack and Cohler (2009) posit that personal identity narratives are always constructed through speakers' engagement with master narratives. How, then, does one construct a bisexual identity?

Like interpretative repertoires, canonical narratives provide speakers with a resource that allows them to talk about their identities, lives, or the world, in a culturally intelligible manner. However, while interpretative repertoires are described as small, fragmented, and localised to

specific social groups, canonical narratives are widely understood, well-established and dominant cultural narratives (Bruner, 1987; Edley, 2001; Reynolds et al., 2007). Additionally, canonical narratives do not only provide culturally intelligible ways of conceptualising subjects, they also provide well-recognized patterns of temporal ordering and socially-sanctioned endpoints (Morison & Macleod, 2013). Canonical narratives provide an overarching narrative structure that guides the way in which speakers narrate their identities. Interpretative repertoires, as smaller and more fragmented resources for identity construction, may be utilised within the framework of a canonical narrative.

The idea of a canonical narrative can be demonstrated by the “coming out story”. The coming out story is a widely recognised narrative (in Western cultures), with most people having witnessed somebody tell a coming out story (Bacon, 1998). As Hammack and Cohler (2009) depict, coming out stories are typically recognisable as a narrative beginning with self-discovery, followed by a struggle with societal norms and ideologies that position non-heterosexual identities negatively, and finally the triumph of self-actualization and “coming out”. Similarly, coming out stories have been characterised as narratives that centre self-discovery as “the victorious product of a struggle with self” or emphasise one’s realisation of “something that has always been true” (Bacon, 1998, p. 255).

The dominance of a particular sequence of events with an expected endpoint that characterises canonical narratives can clearly be seen in the coming out story. Furthermore, the integration of certain repertoires can be seen in descriptions of individuals’ coming out narratives. For instance, a “born this way” repertoire is commonly drawn upon within coming out narratives. Emphasis is placed on biology and childhood experiences, leading to the notion that their non-heterosexual identity is “the most natural thing in the world” (Bacon, 1998, p. 251). These repertoires are made available through membership to particular social groups and are employed by speakers to construct their identity within the confines of the dominant canonical narrative – the coming out story.

### **3.3 Conclusion.**

This research is informed by the theoretical principles of social constructionism and, more specifically, Bamberg’s (1997) narrative positioning theory and Taylor and Littleton’s (2006) narrative-discursive analysis. Acknowledging that identity construction is an ongoing process, and that identity narratives are subject to constant change, this study focuses on how young

bisexual women in Aotearoa construct their identity, in negotiation with the characteristics of various social contexts. The procedural aspects of data selection, collection, and analysis will be discussed in the following section.

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Participants.**

The sample criteria for this study included women who identified as attracted to more than one gender. Thus, the study was open to individuals who identified as bisexual, pansexual, polysexual, omnisexual, ambisexual, queer, or fluid. People who identify with these labels share the commonality that gender does not necessarily influence their sexual attraction to someone (Galupo et al., 2017). As age is a strong influence in all aspects of identity and sexuality, young adults were chosen as the focus of this study. The age criterion was set at 18-24, in line with common age brackets for “youth” or “young adults” in Aotearoa. This research only sought to explore the narratives of cisgender women, as the complexities of transgender identity construction could not be separated from sexual identity and were beyond the scope of the current research.

The strategy was used to recruit participants for the present study was based upon both convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling was utilized by posting a flyer providing details of the study (Appendix A) online; which was made available for sharing through social media. Potential participants were invited to email the researcher to express their interest, thus participation was based on individuals’ willingness to be involved in the study. Those who were interested in participating received an email providing further information about the study (Appendix B), and the link to an online questionnaire (Appendix C), which they were asked to complete if they were still interested in participating after reading the information sheet. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions, which were used to ensure that participants met the requirements for the study. The questionnaire was also used to ensure diversity among the participants selected for the study, in order to capture a diverse range of voices and experiences, acknowledging that bisexual women are not a homogenous group. In this sense, purposive sampling was used to select a sample that represented the diversity of the bisexual community. When selecting participants for the study, it was a priority that women of colour, particularly wāhine Māori, and women of varying religious and

educational backgrounds were included in the study. A minimum quota of four women of colour, including at least one wāhine Māori, was set to reflect the population of Aotearoa (Stats NZ, 2019). This strategy of quota sampling ensured that the voices of those who have been historically marginalized in both psychological research and queer contexts would be represented, as well as providing flexibility in the final sample to make the recruitment process practicable (Robinson, 2014). This strategy resulted in the recruitment of a diverse sample, as displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Breakdown of Participant Characteristics*

Age	Sexual Id.	Disclosure	Rel. Status	Ethnicity	Religion	Education
22	Bisexual	Yes	Relationship	Indian	None	NCEA Level 3
20	Bisexual	No	Single	NZ European, Māori	None	Honours Degree
22	Bisexual	Yes	Open Relationship	NZ European	Catholic	Bachelor's Degree
24	Bisexual	Yes	Single	Vietnamese, Trinidadian, Pākehā	None	Honours Degree
21	Bisexual	Yes	Single	NZ European	Christian	Bachelor's Degree
21	Bisexual	Yes	Relationship	Pākehā, Māori	None	NCEA Level 3
22	Pansexual	Yes	Relationship	Māori	None	NCEA Level 3
24	Bicurious/Bisexual	Yes	Married	NZ European	Secular Humanist	Level 4 Cert.
22	Bisexual	Yes	Single	Niuean, NZ European	None	NCEA Level 2
24	Bicurious/Bisexual	Yes	Single	NZ European	Agnostic	Bachelor's Degree

*Note.* Sexual Id. Refers to the participant's sexual identification. Rel. Status refers to the participant's relationship status. Disclosure refers to whether or not a participant has disclosed their sexual identity to at least one person.

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Because semi-structured interviews are useful for generating rich and detailed data, a large sample size was not required (Braun &

Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, the study's narrative approach entails searching for themes not only across the data, but within individual accounts as well (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Thus, it was necessary for the sample size to be small enough for individual voices to be locatable within the data set (Robinson, 2014). The sample for this study included 10 participants, which provided enough data to identify themes across the interviews yet allowed for varied and in-depth questioning in the individual interviews.

#### **4.2 Data collection.**

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants. One-to-one interviews provide a setting in which participants may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive issues (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This proved particularly important, as the experiences associated with sexual identity were deeply personal and challenging for some participants to talk about. The qualitative interviewing method was also useful to explore participants' experiences, understandings, perceptions, and constructions surrounding their sexual identity, as the interview setting made the topic of sexual identity construction salient and participants had a vested interest in the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Semi-structured questions were used as they allowed for the focus of the interview to align with the research questions, whilst providing scope for participants to raise issues that were not anticipated (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Importantly, semi-structured interviewing allowed participants to provide in-depth and detailed narrative accounts in response to research questions, which helped to capture rich data and a diversity of responses.

A qualitative interviewing method was also chosen as it is thought to be particularly useful for research interested in identity narratives, as the talk produced in the research interview can be considered part of one's ongoing identity work (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). The way in which a participant constructs their narrative in the interview is of direct interest in narrative-discursive approaches to data analysis. Therefore, the use of semi-structured interviews in which the interview guide allows for flexibility and responsiveness to the participants' responses, was an ideal fit for the narrative discursive approach underpinning the current study.

Prior to the interviews, I developed a set of questions that were to be used as a guide, or as prompts for the participant if needed. These questions covered: describing sexual identity, disclosure/coming out, instances of non-disclosure, supports/barriers to sexual identity construction and/or disclosure, and experiences related to sexual identity across social contexts.

The starting point of each interview, however, was broad. I explained that the purpose of the interview was to hear the participant's story, and that I did not want to impose any of my own ideas by asking questions that may not be relevant to the participant's individual understandings and experiences. To begin, therefore, I asked participants to describe their sexual identity and what it means to them. Following this, I asked them to tell me about themselves in relation to their sexual identity. For participants who found this difficult, I asked them to think about the most important things that come to mind when they think about themselves and their sexual identity. From there I asked questions that delved deeper into their responses or used questions from the interview guide to explore other aspects of their sexual identity construction.

I piloted these questions in an interview with one of the participants, Charlie. The pilot interview lasted approximately 70 minutes. Charlie did not appear to have any difficulty beginning her narrative after I asked her about the most important things that come to mind when thinking about herself and her sexual identity. The questions in the interview guide were useful for myself, in that I could see at a glance whether or not we had covered a certain topic in the interview and appeared to prompt Charlie to discuss a broad range of experiences. At the end of the interview, I asked Charlie how she found the experience and she responded positively. After reflecting on the pilot interview and looking over the interview transcript, I added a few questions to the interview guide but left the structure of the interview unchanged.

The following nine interviews ranged from 60 to 100 minutes in duration, and were held in cafes, university libraries, or participants' homes. Prior to the interview, I went over the study information and consent form with the participant, and they received a koha for volunteering in the study (see Section 5.4 for a discussion of ethical considerations). In order to adhere to important cultural practices in the Aotearoa context, at the beginning of each interview I asked the participant whether there was a way they would like to open the interview (e.g., with a karakia, prayer/incantation). The interviews typically began with casual conversation to create a relaxed atmosphere and establish rapport with the participant – in some instances participants specifically requested talking about “something else” for a while to calm their nerves. In line with the narrative-discursive approach that underpins this study, the interview itself was also conducted in a conversational manner, acknowledging the co-constructed nature of narratives that are produced in social interaction (Taylor & Littleton, 2006).



The questions I posed were typically based on the information that the participant had presented, with the purpose of clarifying or gaining more information about a topic. I also used minimal responses (e.g., nodding, “mhm”, “ok”, “yeah”) and paraphrasing (e.g., “Sounds like...”) to encourage the participant to continue talking. Furthermore, I occasionally used evaluative statements (e.g., “That must have been hard”) and self-disclosure (e.g., “That’s happened to me, too”) in order to create a safe, supportive environment and incite further discussion. For example, one participant, Kate, spoke about her reluctance to disclose her sexuality to “friends who still think it’s cool to say gay for something negative”. In response, I disclosed a similar experience to show an understanding of the situation and to facilitate further discussion:

**Cassie:** Yeah, that is a weird one. Like I have friends that do that.  
**Kate:** Really?!  
**Cassie:** Yeah, and it can just feel awkward even though you know that (.) they’re good friends.  
**Kate:** Yeah, and you don’t... (continues discussion)

In addition to encouraging Kate to speak further about this experience, this sense of shared experience appeared to create a more relaxed and collaborative atmosphere within the interview context. This interaction also highlighted the way in which the interview context provides the groundwork for the (co)construction of one particular version of a participant’s sexual identity narrative (Taylor & Littleton, 2006).

Finally, before ending the interview, I asked participants if they had anything to add. This was to ensure that the participant had the chance to share all the thoughts and experiences that they felt were relevant to their sexual identity. This was important to ensure that participants had the opportunity to share their story and to fulfil the purpose of the research interviews.

#### **4.3 Data analysis.**

To begin the analysis process, interviews were transcribed using a combination of naturalized and denaturalized methods (see Appendix D for transcription codes). Naturalized methods involve transcribing the interviews verbatim, including features of conversation such as notable pauses, inhaling/exhaling, laughter, mumbling, and gestures (Oliver et al., 2005). I also made note of voluntary noises indicating feelings such as disgust, irritation, and so on, and changes in tone, volume, and emphasis that were meaningful. In line with denaturalized methods, I sometimes made changes during transcription – typically changing grammar in instances where incorrect grammar made the meaning of speech difficult to understand. I also did not include

response tokens (e.g., “mhm”, “yeah”) that I uttered throughout the interviews, as they did not add meaning to the interaction. However, I included the use of slang in transcripts, to ensure that the sociocultural characteristics of Aotearoa speech and jargon from queer culture was not lost (Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

According to Mero-Jaffe (2011), a critique of the naturalization approach to transcription is that researchers may misinterpret speaker’s voices or tone during the interview. Once transcription was complete, I sent the participants’ their transcript and invited them to make changes or clarifications before approving the transcript for analysis. This ensured that participants voices were represented accurately, promoted transparency in the research process, and ensured that participants were able to give fully informed consent (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). This aligns with the social justice orientation of the study and research aims of empowering bisexual women.

Throughout the transcription process I became familiar with the data and began to note preliminary ideas in terms of patterns across the data set. Braun and Clarke (2013) note that immersion in the data is an essential aspect of qualitative data analysis. Further familiarisation with the data involved reading and re-reading transcripts, beginning to generate codes that encompass interesting aspects of the data set, and collating relevant data according to these codes.

Taylor and Littleton’s (2006) narrative-discursive method was used to analyse participants’ accounts of their sexual identity construction. The central aim of narrative-discursive analysis is to make explicit features of the data that are not apparent at a superficial level, through the analyst’s immersion in the data set (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Narrative-discursive analysis occurs at two levels – a micro level and a macro level – and is concerned with highlighting patterns both across the entire data set, and within individual interviews.

The analysis procedure involved two tasks. However, as is typical of constructionist methods of analysis, the tasks involved in narrative-discursive analysis were performed iteratively, rather than in a sequential manner (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). One task involved consideration of the discursive resources drawn upon by participants in their narratives (Reynolds et al., 2007). Analysis categories were constructed by searching for commonalities across the data set, as well as within individual interviews. These included interpretative repertoires –signalled

by recurring images, metaphors, figures of speech, tropes, and ideas (Korobov, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and canonical narratives – common patterns of narrating particular events (Bruner, 1987; Morison & Macleod, 2013). This aspect of analysis considered the way in which established meanings and norms around gender, sexuality, race, religion, and so on, were made available to speakers and drawn upon in their accounts.

In the second task, the context in which an utterance occurred was attended to. In this task, consideration was given to the how the discursive resources I identified related to the particular context, for instance, the interview, as well as the biographical details of the speaker (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Furthermore, this task involved an exploration of how a discursive resource was being used, and what purpose this served. This aspect of analysis involved attending to speakers' identity work, as well as analysing instances of identity trouble and/or repair, that were achieved through the mobilising of discursive resources (Morison et al., 2016).

In order to explore how participants engaged with discursive resources to reconcile identity trouble, it was necessary to consider positioning. Based upon Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning theory (introduced in Section 2.3), this aspect of analysis involved consideration of how the narrator positioned themselves and others in relation to the immediate discursive context (i.e., the research interview) as well as the broader discursive context. I attended to speakers' positioning of others through reported dialogues and narrative design (i.e., how they structured the story to present their point-of-view); and positioning of the self through retrospective and evaluative comments, narrative design, and interaction with the interviewer (Deppermann, 2013). Furthermore, the speakers' self-positioning was considered with regard to dominant discourses, master narratives, and prior positionings imposed upon the speaker through membership to social categories such as gender, sexual identity, race, and religion (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Taylor, 2007).

Thus, data analysis involved employing Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive method, supported by elements of narrative-positioning theory outlined by Bamberg (1997), Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), and Deppermann (2013). This approach ensured that participants' sexual identity construction was analysed with consideration of immediate and broader discursive contexts, demonstrating a synthesis of both micro and macro levels of analysis.

#### **4.4 Ethical considerations.**

This study was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) before recruitment commenced. In line with MUHEC guidelines, ethical considerations of autonomy, confidentiality, avoidance of harm, beneficence, and cultural responsiveness were adhered to.

##### ***Autonomy.***

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Information about the study, and contact details for myself and my research supervisor were provided via email to those who expressed interest in participating (Appendix B). Information about the study and the interview process was reviewed at the beginning of each interview. At this time, participants were encouraged to ask questions about the study, and it was emphasised that they had the right to withdraw at any time before data analysis begun. Written consent was also obtained before commencing the interview, using consent forms (Appendix E).

##### ***Confidentiality.***

Confidentiality and anonymity were of particular importance in this research, given the focus on sensitive topics, personal experiences, and biographical information. Confidentiality, and its limits, were explained to participants in the pre-participation information sheet and at the beginning of the interview. Participants were advised that the interview would be recorded, and that audio recordings and transcriptions of their interview would be kept in secure storage, accessible only to myself and my research supervisor. To ensure anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms and identifiable information was redacted during the transcription process.

##### ***Avoidance of harm and beneficence.***

Due to the potential that participant may have had negative experiences related to the topics discussed in the interview, the possibility of participant distress was acknowledged. At the beginning of the interview it was made clear that participants were not required to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with, and it was emphasised that participants could let me know if they felt uncomfortable at any point throughout the interview. Information about relevant support services was offered to all participants, regardless of whether they showed discomfort or distress during the interview process. If a participant were to become particularly distressed, I planned to end the interview and emphasise options for support. While this situation did not arise, there were two interviews in which I took extra measures to (1) ensure

the participant was comfortable continuing and (2) felt safe and supported post-interview. This involved pausing the interview and switching off the digital recorder during one interview and sending a follow up email to another participant who was visibly emotional while sharing her story.

Acknowledging the potential harm associated with conducting interviews about a deeply personal topic, safety and beneficence were of utmost importance in this study. The research interview provided a space in which young bisexual women will be able to voice their experiences, which may be considered beneficial in and of itself (Finlay & Gough, 2003). At the summation of each interview I asked the participant to evaluate the experience, and if they had any questions about the remainder of the research process. Participants' responses were consistently positive, with many participants commenting that they had spoken about things they had never had the opportunity to say aloud before. It appeared that participants felt that the interview was a safe space in which they could share their stories. For example, Ashley commented that she could tell I was a "safe person" to talk to and was "so grateful for being a part of this". Similarly, Paget concluded the interview by stating that it had been "almost therapeutic". Moreover, giving voice to a marginalised group through reflexive research has the potential to benefit the bisexual community more broadly, as well as the individuals involved in the study.

### ***Cultural responsiveness.***

A diverse range of participants was involved in this research, and careful consideration was given to working with participants' who's sexual, ethnic, and religious identities differed from my own. Although this research is not specifically Māori-centred, it is recognised that all research carried out in the Aotearoa context has the potential to impact Māori (Hudson et al., 2010). For this reason, I engaged in cultural supervision to ensure that recruitment methods, interview questions, and interview processes were culturally appropriate, and continually sought guidance about cultural matters that arose during the study. Demonstrating cultural responsiveness to both Māori and non-Māori women was paramount throughout the research process.

### **4.5 Quality assurance.**

The use of qualitative research methods represents a rejection of positivist approaches to knowledge and research; therefore, evaluation criteria that are sensitive to the aims of

qualitative research (rather than attending to positivist concepts of truth-telling, reliability, validity, and generalisability) are required (Crossley, 2011; Finlay, 2006). Yardley (2000) outlines four principles of quality assurance in qualitative research: sensitivity to context; commitment, rigour, transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. Consideration of these principles will be used to discuss quality assurance in this research as they align with the aims of this research, rather than attending to the idea of “truth-telling” that arises in positivist approaches to evaluating research.

### *Sensitivity to context.*

As Yardley (2000) notes, immersion in literature and theory undoubtedly influences the interpretation of data, however, analysis must be sensitive to the data itself. The value of considering social and cultural context is emphasised in qualitative research, thus attending to the unique cultural factors associated with queerness in Aotearoa is paramount. This research involved young bisexual women who reside on the North Island of Aotearoa at the time of interviewing. Several key contextual factors are salient in discussions pertaining to sexual identity in Aotearoa; these include the distinct rural and urban contexts, LGBTQ+ rights, and Māori worldviews surrounding gender and sexuality.

### *Rural and urban Aotearoa.*

Aotearoa’s North Island consists of two main city centres (i.e., Auckland, Wellington), numerous smaller cities, and many small rural towns. It has been noted that migration from rural areas to cities may be an important aspect of LGBTQ+ identity and safety, as rural communities are often perceived as less tolerant of sexual and gender diversity (Henrickson et al., 2007; Power et al., 2014). This notion was supported by several participants. For instance, Kate, who had moved from a small rural town to a major city, commented:

**Kate:** I feel like if I still lived in [my hometown] I don’t know if I would have ever (pause) like acknowledged this part of me, let alone come out. Like um yeah... I don’t know. I feel like being in [current city] and (.) like having just a lot more diversity around me, um (.) has made me feel a little bit more comfortable with who I am.

As can be seen here, the culture of rural contexts may present a barrier to sexual identity construction. Major cities, on the other hand, may provide spaces in which queer identities are considered distinctive and celebrated characteristic of the community (Power et al., 2014).

### *LGBTQ+ rights in Aotearoa.*

Aotearoa is a part of the British Commonwealth and is a democratic nation. Considered a fairly progressive country in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, Aotearoa prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation – thus gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities have been protected by law for the entirety of the participants’ lifetime (Henrickson et al., 2007; Human Rights Act 1993, s. 21). Moreover, Aotearoa legalised same-sex marriage in 2013. One participant, Lydia, brought up the legalisation of same-sex marriage during the interview. She stated:

- Lydia:** I think the first wedding I went to was not a real wedding, cos it was um my Aunties. And that was before gay marriage was legalised.  
**Cassie:** Yep, pre 2013.  
**Lydia:** I remember being in social studies when that happened, it was fantastic!

As participants in this study were aged between 18 and 24 at the time of the interviews, this means that same-sex marriage was legalised during the participants’ adolescent years. Thus, participants were likely exposed to debate and rhetoric surrounding same-sex relationships at an age when sexual identity was becoming more salient for themselves and their peers.

### *Māori worldviews of gender and sexuality.*

Māori worldviews of gender and sexuality, as I have already intimated, are complex and nuanced, particularly in the contemporary context of colonisation and the imposition of Western values. Today, commonly held views construct same-sex attraction as not “Māori enough” (Kerekere et al., 2017). However, it has been recognised that these contemporary understandings are the product of colonisation and the imposition of Western religion on Māori, beginning in the eighteenth century. As in many indigenous societies, gender and sexual diversity and fluidity were accepted and embraced in Māori society prior to the onset of colonisation (Aspin & Hutchings, 2007). Subsequently, colonial and religious influences have drastically changed the way in which gender and sexuality is understood in Te Ao Māori, both historically and in the present day.

Not only have the effects of colonisation resulted in a disconnection between contemporary Māori worldviews and sexual diversity; but the dominance of Western understandings of diverse gender and sexuality has also been imposed on Māori. Widely used categorisations of gender and sexuality, such as “LGBTQ+”, represent Western understandings of gender and

sexual diversity. As highlighted by Kerekere et al. (2017), these narrow definitions of gender and sexual diversity do not fit within the Māori cultural context. Thus, the hegemony of Western constructions of gender and sexuality affect Māori communities, in terms of both shame and stigma surrounding sexual diversity, and the expression of sexual diversity even when it is accepted. Over recent years, takatāpui, which is a Māori term historically defined as “intimate companion of the same sex” has been reclaimed as an all-encompassing term that celebrates the interconnectedness of one’s cultural and gender/sexual identity – emphasising whakapapa (genealogy), mana (prestige), identity and inclusion (Aspin & Hutchings, 2007; Kerekere et al., 2017). The resurgence in the use of the term takatāpui demonstrates a challenge to the notion that queerness is a Western concept. Thus, an understanding of colonisation’s role in constructing queerness in Aotearoa was an essential element of this research.

### ***Commitment, rigour, transparency, and coherence.***

Commitment and rigour within the research process is, in part, demonstrated by the “completeness” of data collection and analysis (Yardley, 2000). Rather than focusing on data saturation, the evaluation of narrative research specifically should attend to the richness and depth of data (Crossley, 2011; Yardley, 2000). Likewise, the method of analysis should demonstrate an approach to analysing data that goes beyond superficial interpretation.

Transparency is a key element of quality assurance in qualitative research (Finlay, 2006; Yardley, 2000). Within qualitative research, it is recognised that (1) the researcher is central to all aspects of the research, including data selection, collection, and analysis; and (2) research is a collaborative process between research and participants, thus influenced by the relationship and power dynamics existing between them (Finlay, 2002). This aligns with the narrative-discursive understanding of the narrative as co-constructed (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Given the centrality of the role of the researcher, engaging in ongoing researcher reflexivity is an essential methodological strategy.

The term reflexivity refers to critical self-awareness, reflection, and analysis, which involves consideration of how one’s assumptions, positionings, sociocultural background, and behaviour influence the research process (Finlay & Gough, 2003). The purpose of reflexivity in this research was to think critically about how my identity influenced the research process, acknowledging that the construction of knowledge is embedded in context and interaction. In order to engage in reflexivity at each stage of the research, I kept a research journal in which I



recorded ideas, observations, impressions, and moments of discomfort, particularly throughout the recruitment, data collection, and analysis stages of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The presence/absence of existing relationships with participants, power relations within the research, my positionings (my sexual identity, gender, race, age, and class), and my appearance, were highlighted through engagement with reflexivity – as I will explain.

Several of the participants in the study I was acquainted with prior to carrying out the research, while others I had never met. Thus, in addition to participants' own positionings influencing how they responded to aspects of my identity – a white middle-class woman, queer, educated, an interviewer/researcher, my appearance, approximately the same age as the participants – for those participants who already knew me, my prior positionings could also have influenced the research relationship. Regardless of whether I knew the participants, the research relationship inevitably entails certain power dynamics (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Participants were in a position of vulnerability, as they were asked to discuss thoughts and experiences that were deeply personal. Although I used instances of self-disclosure in attempt to mitigate this power imbalance, my positioning as the “expert” or researcher could not be erased.

A major aspect of my identity that may have influenced the participants' responses to me, and thus the co-construction of a narrative, was my sexual identity. I self-identified as “queer” in the study information – thus my identification with the LGBTQ+ community allowed me an “insider” perspective at times, assuming a shared set of experiences, understandings, and jargon (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). However, it became apparent that participants who did not know me assumed that I was also bisexual; whereas participants with whom I was acquainted may have assumed that I was lesbian. In an interview with Lydia, for instance, I noticed that she talked about lesbians in a way that constructed a distinction between “us” the bisexuals, and “them” the lesbians. Further, participants often drew on my appearance when commenting on what gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer women “look like” and I reflected on this in my research journal:

**25 August:** A couple of participants have begun talking about stereotypes/expectations of “what a queer/gay/lesbian/bi person looks like” and either nodded towards me or paused to look at me before restructuring how they talk about it. I don't think the content of their discussion necessarily changes, but I think they rephrase it - looking to avoid offending me because I do kind of fit a stereotype.

Therefore, it is important to note that how I was positioned by participants may have facilitated (or restricted) the discussion of certain topics or influenced the way in which participants approached these topics.

Participants' responses to other aspects of my identity were also important to consider. Commonalities between the participants and I – namely gender, age, and identification with a queer identity – enabled me to establish rapport with participants, which facilitated the co-construction of narratives (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). However, it was also important to recognise that commonalities do not erase points of difference (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). My positioning as a white, middle-class woman affords me a level of privilege that inevitably shapes power relationships between myself and the women of colour in the study. It is also important to recognise that these points of difference may create a barrier to my ability to fully understand the narratives, experiences, and contexts of women of colour.

Moreover, on reflection I became aware that commonalities and differences between me and participants influenced the questions I asked or did not ask during data collection. For example, I questioned women of colour about their experiences negotiating their cultural and sexual identity but did not ask the same questions of white women in my study. By ignoring this question with white participants, it became apparent that both my and the participants' "whiteness" was the norm, and thus invisibilised in the research interview (Mazzei, 2004). In this sense, critically reflecting on what was not said is just as important as understanding what was said.

### ***Impact and importance.***

Sound methods surrounding data selection, collection, and analysis that are sensitive to context are essential, but as Yardley (2000) asserts, the value of research lies in its usefulness in terms of achieving the research objectives and providing some benefit to relevant communities. Thus, the quality of the research can be ascertained in relation to the practical, theoretical, or sociocultural impacts that the presentation of the findings has in terms of increased understanding of positive change for a particular group – in this case, bisexual women. Given the marginalised status of bisexual women, particularly bisexual women of colour, the political interests of the research are a powerful element of qualitative research and cannot be ignored (Finlay, 2006). Challenging taken-for-granted constructions of bisexuality, increasing

understandings of bisexual women's experiences, and empowering the participants and wider bisexual community are central to the purpose of this research.

## **5. Conclusion.**

Within this study, young bisexual women's identity construction is seen as an ongoing process, influenced by the wider sociocultural contexts in which an individual is situated, as well as contingent on the features of the immediate interactional context (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Various prevailing discourses (in the wider context) and relational dynamics (in the immediate context) mean that bisexual women's identity narratives are continually changing across time and social context. The use of narrative-discursive analysis provides insight into these ongoing identity projects. Further, engaging in reflexivity highlights Taylor and Littleton's (2006) idea that narratives are co-constructed in situ – my identity, my role as researcher, and the context of the research interview are inextricably linked to the knowledge produced about young bisexual women's identity construction. Moreover, recognising this does not devalue the legitimacy of the study, but only enriches the findings (Pillow, 2003).

## **Chapter 4: Analysis**

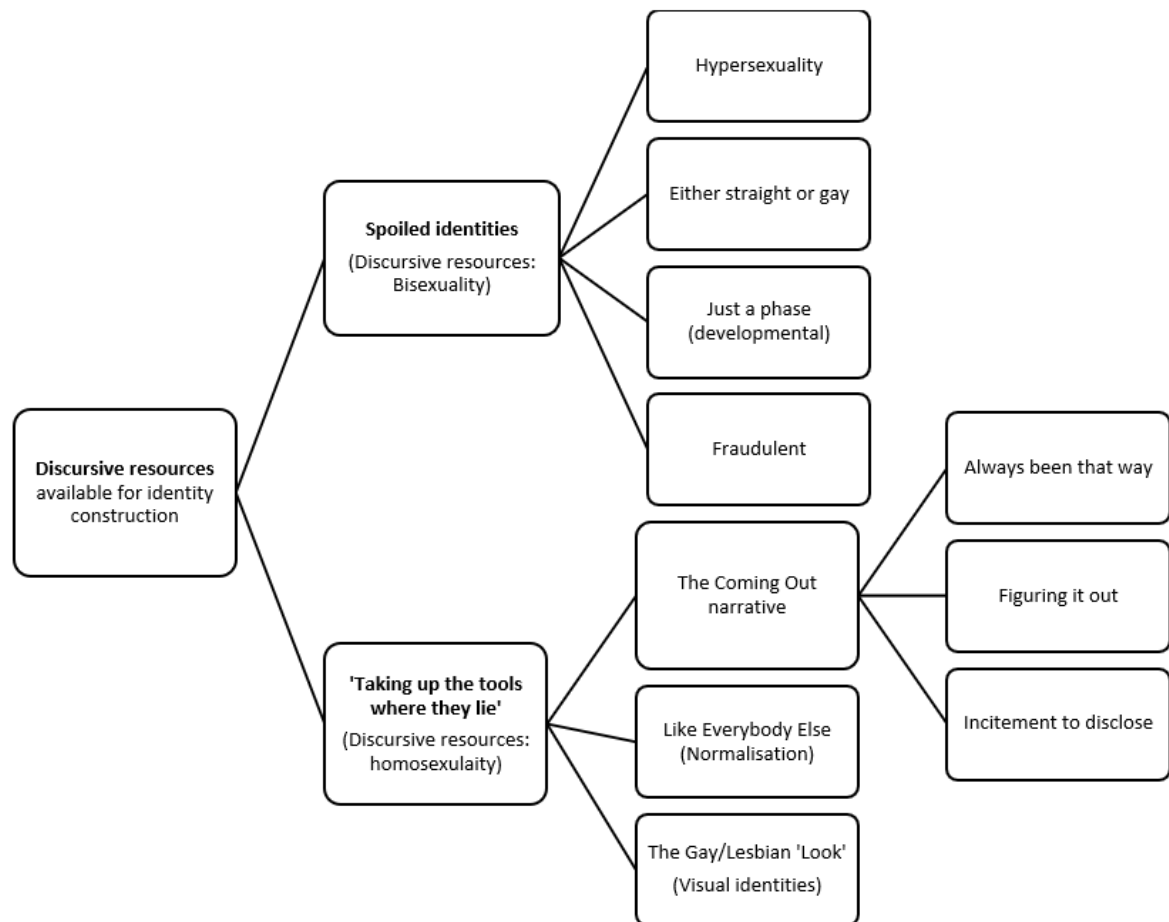
### **1. Introduction**

This analysis explores how possible it is for young women to construct an intelligible identity as a bisexual person. According to Butler (1999), cultural rules and norms re/produced in and through discourse determine what identities can and cannot exist within a particular discursive context. Identities that do not conform to the rules and norms of a particular context are unintelligible in that space and “appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities” (p.24). In order to construct a culturally intelligible identity, as previously discussed, individuals draw on discursive resources. In the context of the present research, participants drew on interpretative repertoires of bisexuality, in order to construct their identities. However, as I demonstrate below, it became apparent that the available interpretative repertoires associated with bisexuality do not lend themselves to the construction of a positive identity. The hegemony of heteronormative and monosexist assumptions constrained individuals’ ability to construct bisexual identities, because bisexuality disrupts taken for granted notions of both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory monosexuality (James, 1996). Subsequently, bisexual identities have been hypersexualised, and presented as greedy, confused, fraudulent, temporary, and unstable, so that it is not a truly viable identity.

An overview of my analysis is presented in figure 1 below. In this chapter, I begin by exploring the interpretative repertoires of bisexuality that were drawn on by participants. Next, I examine the discursive resources associated with monosexual identities that were mobilised. I then discuss how these interpretative repertoires constrain and trouble young bisexual women’s identity work, and the extent to which these interpretative repertoires give rise to resistance from speakers.

**Figure 1**

*Summary of Analysis*



## **2. Spoiled Identities: The Limitations of Bisexuality Discourses for Sexual Identity Construction.**

### **2.1 The hypersexual bisexual.**

All participants drew on an interpretative repertoire of “the hypersexual bisexual” to narrate their experiences of being viewed as a “unicorn” or “wild” upon disclosing a bisexual identity. Several scholars, including Fahs (2009), have highlighted the way in which female sexuality has been subject to the male gaze, and in this vein how female bisexuality has been located within a discourse of hypersexuality. Constructing bisexuality as synonymous with promiscuity, and as a fetish existing for the pleasure of heterosexual men, has rendered bisexual identities largely unintelligible outside of this (hyper)sexualised context (Hayfield et al., 2018).

In attempting to construct their identities, therefore, participants had to “talk against” this dominant construction. This is illustrated in the following extracts.

***Extract 1***

**Grace:** Yeah, especially with dating, it's annoying when the second you say it you just become “...and you're now a fuckbuddy — a friends with benefits.” [...] Um you're no longer a potential girlfriend, because you're bi and that puts you in that category. And that's dumb.

***Extract 2***

**Paget:** I feel like the second you come out as bi, there's this expectation that you're gonna be VERY sexual and you're gonna be open to so many different things; and it's almost like you're no longer somebody who is deemed fit to engage in a romantic relationship or a long term relationship, you're kind of seen as this um (.) one-off unicorn or something to spice up their life.

These quotes illustrate how participants’ identity work was troubled by the positioning of bisexual women as sexual objects. Participants drew on various colloquial terms that contribute to this positioning, such as “unicorn”, which refers to bisexual women who sleep with heterosexual couples. Here, bisexual women are positioned as exotic, potentially promiscuous and therefore not “fit” for a committed relationship. As shown in the extracts above, several participants reported that they were no longer seen by others as “relationship material” because of their sexual identity. Therefore, identity construction is constrained by the “hypersexual bisexual” repertoire. As hypersexuality is one of the most common stereotypes associated with bisexuality (Callis, 2013), it is within this discourse that bisexual identities are most visible. However, in claiming a bisexual identity, young bisexual women are subject to being positioned by others as sexual objects.

The finding that young bisexual women are subject to objectification and oversexualisation resonates with Lynch’s (2012) analysis of bisexual women’s accounts of their sexual identities in South Africa. Lynch (2012) found that female bisexuality is equated to promiscuity or men’s erotic fantasies, a finding that has been highlighted in research about others’ perceptions of bisexuality (Callis, 2013; Morrison et al., 2010). This objectification and oversexualisation of bisexual women and female same-sex sexuality has also been discussed by researchers as a consequence of coming out that has to be navigated by sexual minority women (Herek, 2003; Wandrey et al., 2015).

The common positioning of bisexual women as hypersexual limited participants’ identity construction in various contexts, including the research interview. In terms of constructing

their identity over time, some participants reported taking longer to “figure out” their sexual identity because they did not consider bisexuality as an identity that could exist outside of a sexual context. In discursive terms, there was no intelligible alternative identity for them to take up. This is demonstrated in extracts 3 and 4.

***Extract 3***

**Grace:** I feel like, yeah, people just think of sex. So... [pause] Yeah it kind of... Yeah, I don't know... It just took me a lot longer to figure out because I only really thought of it in a sexual context. And I was kind of like “How am I supposed to explore this?” Do I just go out and sleep with a bunch of chicks and be like “Do I like it?”

***Extract 4***

**Fiona:** I thought “Well I can make out with a girl, and sleep with a girl, but I could never be in a relationship with a girl cos that's just...” I don't... See, I don't think about it! But then, the more I thought about it “Oh yeah, it actually would be OK to be in a relationship with a girl.” [...] And then the more I think about it “Oh actually girl-girl relationship wouldn't be so bad.” [Inhales.] But your ideas in your head... Yeah... Does that make sense? It's not an option, it's not a possibility, until you start to reflect.

Both Grace's and Fiona's talk reflects the cultural impossibility of a bisexual identity being a valid, stable, and enduring identity. Given that sexual activity and behaviours are centralized in discourses of bisexuality, speakers struggled to construct a bisexual identity that is intelligible beyond this focus. Future possibilities, such as committed monogamous relationships or parenthood, were difficult for participants to construct within a hypersexual discourse. This difficulty has been reflected by research that highlights the way that assumptions of hypersexuality lead to the invisibility of bisexual identities – particularly in terms of parenthood (Ross et al., 2012).

Further, participants' identity construction through means of disclosing or claiming a bisexual identity was constrained by their awareness that bisexuality may be viewed as a sexual “fetish” by others. In the following extracts, speakers construct bisexuality as something that is perceived by others as hypersexual. In extract 5, Ashley also constructs harassment as a real-world consequence of disclosing a bisexuality identity.

***Extract 5***

**Ashley:** I don't wanna be harassed because of it, you know what I mean? People would be like “Oh she must be, you know, wild.” Or [noise: disgust] you know the stuff people say...

***Extract 6***

**Grace:** I think it's very difficult to bring it up in my professional life — not with my patients of course, but with my co-workers, because it's seen as something so sexual. Cos if

someone says, “Oh I'm gay.” Then they're like, “Oh you (.) have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, that's nice.” But if I say, “I'm bisexual.” My parents immediately thought that meant I was having three-ways, you know? It immediately goes to “You sleep with both people, and I'm gonna imagine at the same time.” It goes to a sexual place, and it really doesn't feel appropriate to disclose that.

The use of “you know” at several points throughout these excerpts demonstrates the participants' awareness that bisexuality is typically hypersexualized by others, and that this hyper-sexualisation is commonly encountered by bisexual women. Instances of identity trouble can also be seen in Grace's talk when she speaks about her sexual identity as inappropriate because of the highly sexual connotations ascribed to bisexuality and constructs this as conflicting with a professional identity. Extracts 5 and 6 also demonstrate how the spoiled identities associated with bisexuality work to silence bisexual women. Both Ashley and Grace position themselves as silenced by others' assumptions about bisexual individuals being hypersexual. The real-world consequences of disclosing a bisexual identity (e.g., harassment, being perceived as unprofessional) are presented by participants as reasons to justify silence around their sexual identity.

In participants' narratives, the interpretative repertoire of the “hypersexual bisexual” limited bisexuality to a sexualised context and meant that the existence of a long-term, stable bisexual identity was unintelligible. However, many participants drew on the “hypersexual bisexual” repertoire to position others as hypersexual and position themselves as a “real bisexual” in comparison. Participants resisted being positioned as the “hypersexual bisexual” in order to construct bisexuality as a possible valid long-term identity — as the following extracts illustrate.

#### ***Extract 7***

**Grace:** I think that people think that we're straight, we'll just have three-ways to keep our boyfriends happy. But again, that can fairly often be the case, and that's fine. Some people are biSEXUAL bisexual, whereas other people — like myself — identify as like “No, I'd actually date a woman, I'd marry a woman”. You know? It's a little bit different.

#### ***Extract 8***

**Fiona:** When I was in university, going to university, (.) um going clubbing a lot in my first few years, and [...] you'd see girls that would make out with girls in clubs. And I remember thinking... That would put me off, really hard out. Because even though it was two girls, I would feel like they were kind of just doing it for the attention and doing it for — to be attractive to other guys around them. Which [...] And so that would make me think “Ew.” That kind of put me off it a little bit.

**Cassie:** How come?



- Fiona:** Because I would want it to be genuine. Yeah and not just as a show for other people.
- Cassie:** So, did seeing it in a way that looked like a show for other people put you off identifying with that altogether?
- Fiona:** Yeah it did. Cos I'd always wanted to kiss a girl, but I'd want to do it on my terms. And (.) yeah in a genuine way. I guess it... (.) I don't like people that... I'm not the type of person that likes to do things because other people do them, or for other people's... Yeah. I'm not the type of person that would just follow the crowd or do... Or wanna be "sexy" or... That kind of stuff doesn't appeal to me.

These excerpts show how speakers were able to resist the interpretative repertoire of the “hypersexual bisexual” by drawing a distinction between constructions of bisexuality as an authentic identity versus bisexuality simply as a sexual activity, behaviour, or fetish. Grace creates a distinction between “bisexuals” and “real bisexuals”. By creating this distinction, Grace is able to separate herself from a “problematic” group, actively positioning herself in desirable terms (e.g., authentic) and placing positioning “other” bisexuals as hypersexual and illegitimate. In doing so, Grace deflects judgment from herself without disrupting the powerful “hypersexual bisexual” repertoire.

Similarly, Fiona positions herself as a “genuine” bisexual, again creating a distinction between herself – a real bisexual – and other women who are *doing* bisexuality “as a show” for male gratification. In these excerpts, the participants associate the “hypersexual bisexual” interpretative repertoire with a “certain type of bisexual”, and instead position themselves as “real bisexuals” through references to normative behaviours (e.g., dating and marriage) and intentions (e.g., being genuine). By creating a distinction between themselves and *other* bisexuals, participants were able to construct *their* bisexual identities as valid.

However, participants also had to navigate this interpretative repertoire of the “hypersexual bisexual” in the context of their own dating and sex lives. Several participants talked about engaging in open relationships and threesomes. Trouble arose in these instances, where participants demonstrated a pressure to justify their non-normative sexual activities, particularly regarding their ongoing resistance of the “hypersexual bisexual” repertoire.

#### **Extract 9**

- Paget:** I feel bad because every time I have a threesome, I'm like, “Well I'm conforming to this ideal that I really detest”. But then it's like “I wanna do this”. So, you know, I'm gonna do what I want kind of thing. [...] I feel like maybe I'm perpetuating those really negative stereotypes that we're all trying to avoid. But at the same time, I want to engage with people the way that I want to engage, (.) I'm just having fun. And it's not [...] But then it's like “Well, OK, everything's political”. So, it's kind of like how do I avoid that? (.) I can't.

- Cassie:** Yeah, because if a straight person engaged in a threesome, they'd just be engaging in a threesome.
- Paget:** Yeah! Whereas if a bi person does it, it's because they're this hypersexual um (.) freak basically, who will get with anybody. Which is not true, but...

In this excerpt, Paget constructs tension between engaging in threesomes and simultaneously rejecting the negative stereotypes associated with bisexuality. She positions herself as powerless to resolve this tension, due to overarching monosexist assumptions that place limitations on how she can construct her identity (e.g., hypersexual bisexual). This acknowledgement of the differing assumptions about hetero- and bisexuals engaging in threesomes was co-constructed between researcher and participant. This demonstrates awareness that bisexuality is commonly associated with “deviant” sexual activities (Callis, 2014).

Other participants’ talk also demonstrates tension between participants’ behaviours and their desire to challenge the “hypersexual bisexual” repertoire. As shown below, speakers engaged in identity work (repair) by separating their sexual identity from the types of sexual activities or relationships they engage in. For example, Lydia talked about being in an open relationship for some time.

***Extract 10***

- Lydia:** But, you know, it was definitely something I tried and then (.) running into that same concept of “Oh of course you did, you're bisexual.” And being like “Well actually, no. Of course I did because I was young and didn't know what kind of sexual relationship I wanted.”

Here we see how participants are able to engage in identity repair to an extent. For instance, Lydia constructs her behaviours as age-related by drawing on developmental discourse that normalises young peoples’ exploration of their emerging sexuality (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). By locating her behaviours within a developmental discourse, she deflects blame from herself and provides an alternative narrative that alleviates the identity trouble created by engaging in an open relationship as a bisexual woman.

The “hypersexual bisexual” repertoire remains particularly troublesome for bisexual *women* in particular, as the hyper-sexualisation of bisexuality is not only more commonly associated with bisexual women, but women in general are more harshly judged for their sexual behaviours (Klesse, 2005). Thus, young bisexual women are caught in a double bind: balancing tensions

between engaging in sexual activities (e.g., threesomes, non-monogamy) and maintaining resistance of the “hypersexual bisexual” repertoire. Constraints are placed on identity construction at the intersection of gender and sexual identity, where the expectations ascribed to female sexuality (e.g., fidelity, monogamy, passivity, modesty) are further complicated (and non-conformity is met with harsher consequences) for non-heterosexual women (Gavey, 2012). These constraints impacted participants’ identity construction in their talk and also affected decisions around the disclosure of a bisexual identity.

## **2.2 Either straight or gay.**

A dichotomous conceptualisation of sexuality was evident in the “either straight or gay” interpretative repertoire that participants engaged with, which is underpinned by the norm of compulsory monosexuality. James (1996, p. 220) defines compulsory monosexuality as “the social ideology that demands of individuals a singular sexual object choice [...] [It is] the instrument by which the false, but nonetheless pervasive, dichotomy of homo/heterosexual definition is enforced.” Constructing homosexuality and heterosexuality as opposing ends of the same spectrum places demands on individuals to “choose a side” or proclaim their “true” sexual identity as either straight *or* gay. In line with this dominant understanding, participants narrated experiences of being positioned by others as “greedy” or “indecisive” and pressure to commit to “either side of the spectrum”.

The “either straight or gay” interpretative repertoire constrained participants’ identity construction, as participants described “second guessing” their sexual identity, as shown below.

### ***Extract 11***

**Fiona:** I feel like I need to pick. I know I shouldn't feel like that, but I feel like I do.

### ***Extract 12***

**Ashley:** Sometimes I think if I—I sort of try in my head to be like “Surely you're one or the other? Maybe you are just this or maybe you are just that”. But then it just keeps coming back to no, but I FEEL like this.

All participants constructed bisexuality as a valid identity throughout the research interviews, continually challenging the spoiled identity positions that were accorded to them. However, the extracts above show that participants were required to negotiate monosexist constructions of sexuality. Reflecting the findings of Wandrey et al. (2015) in the USA, speakers drew on

the “either straight or gay” repertoire, which creates an imperative to “pick a side” (see extract 11). However, Ashley talks against this imperative, positioning herself as powerless in controlling her sexual identity. By constructing sexuality as something outside of her control, Ashley is able to justify her rejection of the “either straight or gay” imperative and attempt to construct a bisexual identity. In these excerpts, participants construct a double bind between two impossibilities: a) choosing a “valid” sexual identity (i.e., either straight or gay) that doesn’t feel “true”, or b) choosing a bisexual identity that cannot exist within monosexual discourse.

The “either straight or gay” interpretative repertoire was presented by participants as an ideal that should be resisted by bisexual women. This idea around resistance may have been particularly salient in the context of the research interview given the focus of the research, and because participants were aware that I also identify as queer. “Insider” researchers working with queer communities are often positioned as experts or advocates by participants (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Based on this assumption about my role as the researcher, speakers may have felt the need to resist or challenge common stereotypes within the research interview. Fiona’s comment in extract 11 “I know I shouldn’t feel like that” is an example of the way in which speakers’ narratives may have been reflexively shaped by the research interview setting.

However, participants’ resistance of the “either straight or gay” repertoire also highlighted the lack of alternative discursive resources available to bisexual women in the research interview context and more broadly. In the following extracts, for instance, Paget and Grace take up positions of difference or deviance in their talk to avoid assimilating into gay or straight identity categories.

***Extract 13***

**Paget:** I guess I don't fit in a way that suits me. Because it's like “Sure, I can be a unicorn”. But (.) I don't always want to be that. And it's like “Sure, I can (.) be gay and embody all that is gay or whatever that is supposed to mean”. But I also don't wanna just fit there. I need some sort of mid-ground where I can just exist as I am, how I am, without having to go onto either side of the spectrum.

***Extract 14***

**Grace:** And sometimes I feel like my life would be easier (.) if I just ignored it, and just pretended to be straight, because, well, people seem to think it's 50% of me anyway. Um [laughs] but I think I'm quite a colourful human being, and that just makes up of yet another reason why I'm not very good at conforming to society [laughs].

These excerpts reflect other participants' talk of being "the other", "just different", or a "unicorn" and demonstrate the way in which participants positioned themselves as deviant in response to the "either straight or gay" interpretative repertoire. Since this interpretative repertoire only allows for the construction of intelligible monosexual identities, participants – lacking access to alternative discursive resources – took up the position of "other", "different", or "deviant", in order to resist the limitations enforced by the "either straight or gay" repertoire. This resonates with the work of scholars who have conceptualised bisexuality as disrupting the monosexual binary of sexuality, where individuals are "either straight or gay", by resisting the imperative to choose between these bipolar notions of sexual identity (Butler, 1990; Däumer, 1992; Lynch & Maree, 2017).

Although participants' narratives demonstrate resistance to choosing either straight or gay identity categories, bisexual identity construction is still vulnerable to, and limited by, contextual factors related to sexuality (Lynch & Maree, 2017). Findings from various studies demonstrate that bisexuals are not considered equals in straight or gay/lesbian spaces and are instead positioned as outsiders (Borver et al., 2001; Callis, 2013; Wandrey et al., 2015). Participants' extracts show awareness of this positioning and they take up these negatively valued positions in their talk. Thus, participants continue to take up spoiled identity positions because, as shown in extracts 13 and 14, there is an absence of alternative narratives that speakers can draw on. In Paget's extract, she constructs sexuality as a binary that she cannot fit inside of and so positions herself outside of this binary. By positioning themselves outside of the "either straight or gay" binary, participants can resist choosing a monosexual identity category. However, this resistance illustrates the way in which compulsory monosexuality constrains bisexual identity construction, by limiting the possibilities of sexual identification to either hetero- or homosexuality or taking up a spoiled identity.

### **2.3 Just a phase.**

Another interpretative repertoire, which I have named "just a phase", also reinforces compulsory monosexuality. This interpretative repertoire renders enduring bisexual identities unintelligible by constructing bisexuality as temporary, confusion, or developmental immaturity. The "just a phase" repertoire was commonly drawn upon – and resisted – by participants. For example, one participant, Lydia, showed awareness of the construction of bisexuality as a phase, stating: "It's a transition, it's a training ground. Until you get to your

real stage of queer.” Several participants demonstrated awareness of the “just a phase” interpretative repertoire and constructed it as a common stigma associated with bisexuality. Despite this awareness, the construction of bisexuality as a phase nonetheless impacted the young bisexual women’s identity construction, as shown below.

***Extract 15***

**Charlie:** I feel like the stigma of being... Bisexual being a phase, or being not real, or not being able to make up your mind definitely has some kind of an impact. Because it makes you feel like it should be... I don't know, it should be a very transitory sexuality. It shouldn't be YOUR sexuality. It should be on route to something else. So, you kinda sit there and you're like “OK cool, this is who I am”. And then you're kinda like “Is it though?”

***Extract 16***

**Fiona:** It feels like I'm attracted to both men and women; but then at the same time [pause] I've been reading a lot of stuff on the internet, as you do when you're trying to figure yourself out, and a lot of lesbian people that I've read their experiences have said that they identified as bisexual before they figured out they were gay. So that's another thing that's on my mind [...] maybe I'm just gay but I haven't figured it out yet, I don't know.

Like participants’ engagement with the “either straight or gay” interpretative repertoire, the common construction of bisexuality as “just a phase” was drawn upon when participants discussed “second guessing” their sexual identity. The excerpt from Charlie demonstrates the way in which the “just a phase” interpretative repertoire renders bisexuality unintelligible and causes identity trouble. In extract 15, Charlie recognises the “just a phase” repertoire as stigma ascribed to bisexuality, yet she still questions her sexual identity when drawing on this discourse. The continual questioning described by Charlie is corroborated by literature that attributes confusion and uncertainty around bisexual identification with bi-negativity and bisexual erasure (Bostwick et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2019; Weinberg et al., 1995). Further, the notion expressed by Fiona — that maybe she hasn’t “figured out” that she is gay — also reflects the construction of bisexuality as a step “along the way” to realization of a gay/lesbian identity (Bradford, 2004; Scherrer et al., 2015).

Drawing on the interpretative repertoire of “just a phase”, gay/lesbian identification is understood as a culturally sanctioned endpoint of “figuring out” one’s sexual identity. This is reliant on a developmental discourse where “sexual confusion” is constructed as an integral part of figuring out sexual identity and structuring a coming out narrative (Rust, 2003). Further, centralising confusion in the coming out narrative privileges monosexual identities (Mosher,

2001). As James (1996, p. 222) notes, individuals “are often assumed to be (truly) gay or lesbian, but are seldom assumed to be (truly) bisexual.”

The common positioning of bisexual women as confused implied by repertoires such as “just a phase” may be more pronounced for *young* bisexual women. Because figuring out one’s sexual identity is constructed as an end-goal in discourses of identity development, and because monosexual identities are privileged as the only stable and legitimate sexual identities, bisexuality is therefore constructed as a sign of immaturity (Rust, 2009). Assumptions about young women’s agency in regard to sexuality, such as that young women “don’t know what they want” or are “just experimenting”, may reinforce the construction of bisexuality as confusion — especially for young bisexual women (Diamond, 2008; Diamond, 2003; Wandrey et al., 2015). Indeed, confusion as an element of constructing a (non-heterosexual) identity was taken for granted in the young bisexual participant’s talk. However, in the following extracts, participants demonstrated awareness that individuals who identify as bisexual are often seen as confused and engaged in rhetorical work to resist this positioning.

***Extract 17***

**Paget:** I don't feel confused at what I am, or what I'm attracted to; I just feel confused at how am I supposed to be or exist when I — I can't? [...] I guess it's just that being denied of being a whole person, almost.

***Extract 18***

**Ashley:** And it's very confusing, it's almost just like (.) the pressures and subtle um (.) stigma is actually more confusing than (.) than actually just being confused, you know what I mean?

In the extracts above, Paget and Ashley construct confusion as a result of stigma and bisexual erasure, resisting the positioning of bisexual individuals as inherently confused. The “just a phase” repertoire and idea of “confusion” are common and widely recognised ways of talking about bisexuality (Diamond, 2008; Hayfield et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2015). Participants’ awareness of these constructions was illustrated by participants’ emphasis that their confusion was not related to their experiences of bisexual attraction, which was common throughout the research interviews. Extracts 17 and 18, exemplify this awareness, as speakers pre-emptively resisted constructions of bisexuality as confusion in their talk. Rather than taking up the position of the confused bisexual, speakers positioned themselves as victims of monosexism - directing blame towards external “stigma” that constrains bisexual identity construction or, as Paget stated, denies a bisexual woman of being a “whole person”. Participants thus constructed

confusion as the result of taking up of contested identity, rather than experiences of bisexual attraction. The above extracts illustrate the ongoing tension between claiming a bisexual identity and the discursive resources (or lack thereof) that render bisexuality unintelligible as an enduring identity (Borver et al., 2001). Thus, the “just a phase” interpretative repertoire restricted participants’ identity construction in a variety of ways, notably requiring bisexual women to resist positionings of “confused” and “truly gay” in order to position themselves as “truly bisexual”.

#### **2.4 Fraudulent: “I’m not gay enough”.**

The interpretative repertoires discussed so far culminate to reinforce the erasure of bisexual identities. The final interpretative repertoire of bisexuality positions bisexual individuals as “fraudulent” and reflects a history of tension between bisexual and gay/lesbian communities. As discussed by Belmonte and Holmes (2016, p. 238), bisexual individuals experience “double doses of marginalization” with bisexuality understood by some gay/lesbian groups as a strategy to maintain heterosexual privileges and a lack of commitment to queer politics. These constructions of bisexuality from within gay/lesbian communities have reinforced the interpretative repertoires discussed so far, in particular, maintaining the idea that bisexuals are not queer enough, or “fraudulent”. Research by Borver et al. (2001) found that bisexual women described tension between feeling that they had intruded on lesbian spaces and the incitement to falsely identify themselves as lesbian to achieve acceptance or validation.

In this section, I look at the ways in which participants draw on the “fraudulent” repertoire to construct their sexual identities against the backdrop of bi-negativity in queer spaces. In the following extracts, participants in the current study also construct tension between bisexual and gay/lesbian communities.

##### ***Extract 19***

**Grace:** Sometimes I do feel the struggle of “Am I gonna be accepted?’ You know, ‘Am I safe?’” But I feel like it's kind of not as legit — not seen as valid or legitimate as people who are gay or lesbian.

##### ***Extract 20***

**Paget:** It's like you're appropriating (.) the stigma and the struggles that they experienced. Um (.) and that I guess undermines the tensions and struggles that you yourself experience because it's like they don't quite match up in the same way, so it's like they're not legitimate.



In these instances, participants' show awareness of the construction of bisexuality as less "legitimate" than gay/lesbian identities in the context of experiencing struggle, hardship, or discrimination based on sexual identity. It is interesting to note Paget's use of the word "appropriating", which draws on the coming out narrative in which lesbians/gay men are positioned as "unjust social victims" who overcome the odds to achieve empowerment and authenticity (Seidman et al., 1999, p. 10). On the other hand, because the coming out narrative privileges monosexual identities, bisexuals are positioned as fraudulent — accused of abdicating responsibility and trying to maintain heterosexual privilege (Belmonte & Holmes, 2016; McLean, 2007). However, to resist the positioning of "fraudulent", both Grace and Paget allude to the tensions and struggles associated with bisexuality, which they construct as delegitimised and undermined.

Exemplifying the pervasiveness of the "fraudulent" repertoire, the view that bisexual individuals retain heterosexual privilege was commonly referred to by participants in this study and others (see Borver et al., 2001; Hayfield et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2012). For example, Charlie stated: "you would deal with so much worse if you were gay". The notion that a bisexual identity is more privileged – and thus less legitimate — than gay or lesbian identities restricted some participants' identity construction. For example, the following participant navigates the positioning of not "gay enough".

***Extract 21***

**Paget:** If I'm with a group of girls who are — all identify as lesbian, well, you've got to justify the fact that you are attracted to girls, even though you've primarily been with boys. [...] I think of it as [pause] to people who identify as lesbian, or just homosexual in general, it's like I'm (.) a fraud, basically. Like I'm not "gay enough".

In this extract, Paget draws on the "fraudulent" repertoire, which creates an imperative for her to justify her sexual identity and prove her authenticity. This requirement of young bisexual women to justify their sexual identity makes it difficult for speakers to construct an intelligible sexual identity. First, because bisexuality itself is constructed as fraudulent; and secondly, because it makes it nearly impossible for someone to be a "real" bisexual (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). In the following extracts, participants described being required to justify their sexual identity to avoid being positioned as "fraudulent".

### ***Extract 22***

- Paget:** It's like you almost have to justify yourself – “Well actually no I've been in this relationship.” Or, you know, “I've been in this.” And I feel like (.) it's stupid. If I identify as whatever, why do I have to be like [tone: annoyed/mocking] “Here's the evidence, accept me please.”
- Cassie:** “Here's my CV”.
- Paget:** Yeah, yeah! It's like why should, you know, I... Yeah. I feel like you've got to document every single encounter you've had just to be taken as legitimate.

### ***Extract 23***

- Fiona:** I guess I kind of had felt like (.) [sighs] I didn't have the (.) justification to say I was bisexual until I had tried it – tried being with a woman – to start with. Yeah...
- Cassie:** What changed?
- Fiona:** I think knowing that I'm definitely attracted to women, instead of “Am I attracted...?” Then I said “Yes, I am.” And even though I haven't been with a woman, I really want to, and I think I would enjoy it, so then I call myself bisexual.

In these excerpts, participants describe being compelled to justify their bisexuality to themselves and others, using their past experiences as some kind of “evidence”. The incitement to explain, justify, and prove one’s sexual identity constrains participants’ sexual identity construction by creating a set of conditions in which one can claim a bisexual identity. However, both Paget and Fiona resist this imperative by employing strategies such as mocking or asserting their sexual identity regardless. By rejecting the requirement to justify their sexual identity or prove their authenticity, Paget and Fiona can resist the “fraudulent” repertoire and position themselves as agentic in the construction of their sexual identity.

## **2. Taking Up the Tools Where They Lie: Adapting Gay/Lesbian Discourses for Sexual Identity Construction**

The preceding discussion demonstrated how available discursive resources of bisexuality only allow the young bisexual women in my study to take up spoiled identities, making it difficult to construct an intelligible sexual identity. In the absence of positive discourses around bisexuality, participants also drew on and modified discursive resources typically associated with gay and lesbian identities to construct a bisexual identity. Speakers’ adaptation of discourses related to monosexual identities supports Butler’s view that subversive identities cannot be constructed outside of discourse. Rather “there is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (Butler, 1990, p. 145). In other words, speakers can only draw on the existing discursive resources available to them and potentially modify these.

In this section, I discuss the discursive resources that participants engaged with in this talk, specifically focusing on three discursive resources. First, I look at the interpretative repertoires used by speakers that commonly draw on the canonical narrative of “coming out”. Secondly, I explore interpretative repertoires that are used to normalise bisexuality, drawing on a broader canonical narrative of “normalisation”. Finally, I discuss the interpretative repertoires that combine to highlight the connection between appearance/visual identities and (un)intelligibility.

### **3.1 Adapting the coming out narrative to construct bisexual identities.**

Several interpretative repertoires, underpinned by the canonical narrative of “coming out story”, are drawn on by speakers in order to construct their identity. The “coming out story” is taken for granted as the way of narrating one’s gay/lesbian sexual identity development. Reflecting psychological theories that were discussed earlier (e.g., Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1979), the “coming out story” encompasses a widely recognised pathway from confusion and adversity towards a culturally sanctioned endpoint of acceptance and successful disclosure of gay/lesbian identity. The following four interpretative repertoires, which each have the coming out canonical narrative at their heart, were commonly drawn on: (i) Always been this way; (ii) Figuring it out; (iii) Open and honest; and (iv) Paving the way. I shall discuss each in turn below.

Recalling that bisexuality is typically constructed as a mid-point or transitory stage in developmental theories of sexual identity (Rust, 2003), these interpretative repertoires (and the broader canonical narrative) were adapted, negotiated, and at times resisted in various ways by participants. The following sections explore each of the above interpretative repertoires involved in the coming out canonical narrative, discuss the ways in which participants engaged with these interpretative repertoires, and how these enable and/or constrain sexual identity construction.

#### ***Always been this way.***

Many of the participants narrated their sexual identity by drawing on the interpretative repertoire of having “always been this way”. Several participants constructed bisexuality as something that had always been part of them, but as something that they were not aware of, or something “subconscious”. In participants’ talk, the “always been this way” repertoire can be

seen in instances where participants are “looking back” on childhood and adolescent experiences that provide evidence of an enduring bisexual identity. This is evident in the following extract, where Ashley discusses having romantic feelings for both girls and boys.

**Extract 24**

**Ashley:** And now, looking back, having time to have reflect on it and been OK with reflecting on it. You know, being alright to think about it. I've felt that way for most of my life, you know. Even as a kid, you know, [it] definitely wasn't just (.) guys I thought about like that. It was girls, too. So, it was very, it's very interesting **to realise that**, no, it's definitely been there the whole time, and that. [...] you're not CHANGING from anything; you know what I mean? That's a big thing um to sort of wrap my head around. No, this is MY default. Cos I feel a lot of people probably feel — I definitely felt like I was SWITCHING from something? But I'm not, I'm just realising something and rejecting something that's been pushed onto me.

**Cassie:** Right, yeah. You didn't go FROM straight TO bi.

**Ashley:** No, I didn't. I didn't. Like 'When did you TURN bi?' [Laughs] I DIDN'T, I just realised I was.

In this extract, Ashley reflects on her experiences of romantic feelings during childhood and adolescence. She presents her feelings of desire for girls as a “realisation” and something that had existed unacknowledged, rather than something new that emerged later. In contrast, her feelings of desire for boys is not spoken about, reflecting the normative assumptions that render heterosexual attraction the default.

In Gibson's (2010) South African research with young lesbian women she also found that sexual identity was constructed as “something that was always there, even if she was unaware of it” (p.120). However, the lesbian women in Gibson's (2010) study commonly took up the position of “tomboy”. In contrast, the bisexual women in this study did not commonly draw on gendered behaviours or norms, instead constructing narratives of their early experiences in terms of romantic feelings (see extract 24). This construction was echoed by other participants who recounted that they had overlooked or dismissed attraction towards girls as “admiration” or “idolizing”. In hindsight, participants constructed these feelings of attraction to girls as “crushes”.

By emphasizing these particular experiences, speakers situate their talk within the canonical coming out narrative – providing evidence of an enduring sexual identity in a way that is recognisable and expected (Bacon, 1998). Participants use talk of early same-sex attraction to construct their sexual identity as natural, not chosen. In the above extract, Ashley positions herself as powerless to choose her sexuality, constructing bisexuality as her “default” and

something that she came to realise through self-exploration. By positioning herself as powerless to choose her sexuality, Ashley minimises potential blame for going against the (hetero)norm. Further, Ashley positions herself as a victim of heteronormativity, constructing heteronormativity as “something that’s been pushed onto me” and that must be rejected by necessity, rather than by choice. This talk continues to position Ashley as powerless in choosing her sexuality, minimising personal responsibility and creating a safeguard from stigmatizing responses to bisexuality (Morison et al., 2016). By constructing their sexual identity as natural and not chosen, participants talk against constructions of bisexuality, such as the “just a phase” and “fraudulent” repertoires discussed earlier. Speakers’ use of the “always been this way” repertoire supports research that shows how repertoires – such as the commonly used “born this way” repertoire – are drawn on to combat anti-LGBTQ stigma (Bennett, 2014; Sullivan-Blum, 2006).

As Ashley’s “realisation” above illustrates, participants commonly constructed bisexuality as an enduring and essential part of them that was always there, waiting to be “realized” or “figured out”. “Realisation” is often constructed as a one-off event in developmental theories of coming out, where an individual experiences an “epiphany” that leads them to “uncover” their gay/lesbian identity (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1979). Therefore, the construction of one’s sexual identity as innate, immutable, and waiting to be uncovered is linked to the broader Western coming out narrative, which emphasises the role of self-exploration and discovery (Mosher, 2001). These constructions of sexual identity can be used to subvert constructions of bisexuality as “just a phase”. Therefore, by drawing on the canonical coming out narrative, Ashley can resist the notion that she “turned” bisexual by constructing sexuality as something that one is born with (and cannot be blamed for), thus positioning herself as having “always been this way”.

The repertoire of “always been this way” therefore provides a discursive strategy in which bisexuality is constructed as stable and enduring, repairing the troubled positionings of bisexual women as going through a phase, experimenting, or fraudulent that render bisexual identities unintelligible. However, some participants’ identity construction was restricted by this interpretative repertoire. For these participants, trouble arises from the “always been this way” repertoire, as they negotiated the construction of a bisexual identity as enduring and essential with the feeling that they should have “figured it out sooner” (Willow). The “always been this way” repertoire exemplifies the value placed on establishing an enduring identity and a

cohesive life narrative in Western contexts, and this is destabilised by not having “figured it out sooner”, creating trouble in Willow’s narrative. Similarly, in the following extract, Fiona describes trouble between her own experience and the common “always been this way” repertoire.

**Extract 25**

**Fiona:** A lot of people say they already always knew since they were younger, and they always had a feeling. But for me it's not been like that. It's been (.) something that I've had those thoughts but have mostly thought I was straight and put those thoughts about women to the back of my head. And then now it's all coming out. And I'm thinking was I feeling this way all along? I'm only trying to figure it out now.

In this instance, the common idea that one’s sexual identity has “always been this way” places limitations on the way in which Fiona can construct a bisexual identity. As a young bisexual woman, Fiona is offered the spoiled identities of going through a phase, fraudulent, or *actually* straight or gay. While participants in this study commonly drew on the repertoire of “always been this way” to talk against these spoiled identities, Fiona constructs the “always been this way” repertoire as another barrier to understanding her sexual identity. The canonical narrative of gay/lesbian coming out is often centred on feelings of difference, knowing since a young age, with the goal of “figuring it out” (Gibson, 2010; McLean, 2007).

As seen in the brief excerpts from Willow and Fiona’s narratives, the pressure to realise and disclose that one has “always been this way” through the “coming out story” may place limitations on young bisexual women’s ability to construct a bisexual identity if their experiences do not align with this repertoire. The coming out narrative and repertoire of “always been this way” provides a structure for constructing one’s sexual identity that relies on naturalising non-heterosexual identities and the necessity of talking against heteronormativity (as seen in extract 24).

However, this restricts the stories around sexual identity that can be told (and understood or accepted). In Fiona’s extract above, the question “was I feeling this way all along?” illustrates the difficulty of constructing a sexual identity that does not fit neatly into the coming out narrative. Again, speakers encounter a double bind in which it is necessary to talk against heteronormative assumptions about their sexual identity, but impossible to construct an intelligible identity given the discursive resources available to them. The repertoires of “realisation” and “figuring it out” alluded to by Ashley, Willow, and Fiona in this section are key elements of the “coming out story” and will be discussed now.

### *Figuring it out.*

While participants used the repertoire of realisation to an extent (e.g., extract 24), they more commonly drew on “figuring it out”, a repertoire that depicts bisexual identity construction as a gradual process involving common elements of the coming out narrative: confusion, realisation, acknowledgement, exploration, and coming to terms (Rust, 2003). Most of the participants drew on the “figuring it out” repertoire to narrate their sexual identity construction. In the following extract, Kate describes an event that she constructs as a catalyst for figuring out her sexual identity.

#### **Extract 26**

**Kate:** There wasn't really any (.) really pivotal moments. There was... Oh maybe there was one. I was at one of my friend's drinks. Um it was someone's birthday, and we were out on the deck — there were about 10 of us — sitting around drinking. And one girl had recently come out, and she was — the whole group was sort of asking her about it, or how, or what it's like, or I don't know I suppose trying to understand her — and I just went mute. And I just remember just staring at her like “Oh my God, you're inside my brain right now.” [...] I can't even remember exactly what it was. I just know that how she was (.) describing what she felt, or the way she is, I was like that is me. That's... Yeah, I don't know. And so, [pause] that was, I suppose, a point of realisation. I remember I... Yeah, completely went mute. I was almost in shock, which sounds dramatic. But I went to the bathroom and I cried. Ha, which seems really dramatic now, but I remember at the time I was just so emotional and overwhelmed. Um, yeah, I went to the bathroom and I cried. And (.) I was like “Oh my God, she is me, I am her. We are ourselves but [laughs] I am... She's in my head. She's saying everything that I actually feel.” [...] And then I think, after that, I've sort of... I had started to put more thought into it and gone back in time — thought about previous events when I'm like “OK that maybe makes sense.” I don't know, just previous events that [pause] could have been moments of realisation but weren't. Whether I ignored them intentionally or not, I don't know.

In this excerpt, Kate recounts a “pivotal moment” in which her sexual identity became particularly apparent to her. This story could be constructed as a “moment of realization”. However, drawing on the “figuring it out” repertoire, Kate went on to construct this realization as an event that prompted her to “put more thought into” her sexual identity. This resonates with the narratives of other participants, who constructed “figuring it out” as a process of reflection and adjustment that occurs over time. For instance, in the extract below, Fiona constructs “figuring it out” as a process of self-discovery.

#### **Extract 27**

**Fiona:** I'm still trying to figure it out, as well.  
**Cassie:** Yeah, it's pretty hard to figure it out?  
**Fiona:** It's like you have to... Yeah, I feel like it's going deep into everything that you've ever known is true for yourself. You have to... Well that's what I've been doing is going back and re-evaluating everything.

As demonstrated by Fiona — who identifies as bisexual and “still trying to figure it out” — the process of “figuring it out” was presented as a necessary part of constructing a bisexual identity. In extract 28 below, Kate also goes on to discuss making sense of bisexuality as a part of her identity (also drawing on the “always been this way” repertoire). Similarly, several participants drew on “figuring it out” to construct bisexuality as something that “makes sense” or “fits into” other aspects of their identity, as demonstrated below.

**Extract 28**

**Charlie:** I figured out I was bi and I was like “Oh, yes that makes sense. That fits into everything else that I know about myself”.

**Extract 29**

**Demi:** As soon as I heard pansexual and what it meant, I knew straight away that that [pansexuality] was what I identified with, and that was what was more (.) ME. Um but yeah, before then I was kinda just (.) confused.

**Extract 30**

**Grace:** I had the big identity crisis. And trying to solidify my identity in my mind. And that [bisexuality] is now part of my identity.

The above extracts highlight the various elements involved in the “figuring it out” repertoire. For example, sense making, confusion, and “identity crisis”. As in extracts 24 and 27, participants again positioned themselves as passive in that they did not *choose* their sexuality; rather drawing on discourses of self-discovery to explain their sexual identity as something innate, which they have no control over (Morison et al., 2016; Sullivan-Blum, 2006). Although young bisexual women’s narratives are diverse, “figuring it out” was centralised in all of the participants’ narratives. The construction of “figuring it out” as necessary, as well as speakers’ emphasis on making sense of bisexuality within their broader identity, shows how participants worked to construct a coherent and unified identity. This reflects the expectations associated with the canonical coming out narrative, which is structured and performed in particular ways that enable the speaker to construct an intelligible (non-heterosexual) identity (DiDomenico, 2015; Plummer, 1995). Thus, engaging with the “figuring it out” repertoire as part of the broader coming out narrative typically enabled these young bisexual women to construct and narrate their sexual identity in an intelligible way.

***Coming out to others: The incitement to disclose.***

Following “figuring it out”, the public disclosure of one’s non-heterosexual identity denotes the resolution of the coming out canonical narrative. The expectation that non-heterosexual



individuals *should* announce their sexual identity to others is known as the disclosure imperative (McLean, 2007). The expectation to come out to others is located in liberal Western discourse that constructs disclosure in a binary of “out” versus “closeted” (Klein et al., 2015). Within this binary, people who come out are positioned as morally superior — “empowering themselves and others” (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 145) — while those who do not come out are positioned as bad queers — ashamed or shameful. The negative consequences of being positioned as a “bad queer” due to non-disclosure may be particularly harmful for bisexual women, who are already confronting spoiled identities around fraudulence or abdicating responsibility. Moreover, the moral imperative to disclose represents a failure to acknowledge the fact that disclosure may not always be possible for some people due to sociocultural restrictions (McLean, 2007; Schrimshaw et al., 2018).

In this study, participants drew on the “incitement to disclose” repertoire to construct disclosure in three distinct ways. First, it was rendered as “open and honest”. Secondly, the incitement to disclose was resisted through the construction of disclosure as “risky”. Finally, participants constructed disclosure as a tool to “pave the way” for other bisexual/queer individuals.

#### *Open and honest.*

The young bisexual women in this study had varying experiences of disclosure. One participant had never disclosed her bisexual identity to anyone prior to the interview, some had selectively disclosed their sexual identity, some disclosed their sexual identity differently across contexts, while others considered themselves “out” or “never really in”. Despite these varied experiences, all participants spoke to some degree about coming out *to* others in their narratives of identity construction. This speaks to the notion that the coming out narrative, typically achieved through a singular event where one announces their non-heterosexuality to another person(s), is one of the only recognisable ways that individuals can construct and narrate a non-heterosexual identity. By “coming out” to others, non-heterosexuals speak their identities into existence, shifting their sexual identity from the invisible to visible (Bacon, 1998). Engaging in coming out enables the speaker to be recognised as queer, allowing entry into the queer space.

The recognisability of this narrative and its established character are evidenced by the way that drawing on the coming out narrative appeared as a taken-for-granted way of speaking about

sexual identity for participants. Most participants drew on this interpretative repertoire in their talk by alluding to instances of coming out to others, as shown in Charlie's story below.

**Extract 33**

**Charlie:** I figured it out late 2016 and I very, very, gradually started to come out to a few friends who were bi or gay, um over the next few months. And then the next year I was going... I was moving to [a city] to go to university and so when I started university I kind of just started already out to people if it came up, kind of thing. And I just kind of posted a thing on Facebook and Instagram during, after Pride that year, to kind of be like: "Heads up, just FYI this isn't a shock at all but..." And just to let everybody else know who I just hadn't come out to.

In general, Charlie constructs coming out to others as a deliberate and ongoing process in which she chooses to disclose her sexual identity to certain people in particular ways. In the extract above, Charlie alludes to choosing disclosure strategies or audiences that involve a low level of risk; for example, coming out to bisexual/gay friends (Wandrey et al., 2015) and coming out online (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Charlie produces a recognisable and widely accepted narrative that reflects the traditional coming out narrative. The use of this framework generally enables her to construct her sexual identity as visible and recognised by others, thus establishing the authenticity of her sexual identity. Therefore, the repertoire of coming out to others allows speakers to gain entry to the queer space and position themselves as authentic. This is useful (to an extent) in aiding the construction of an intelligible sexual identity.

However, when I directly asked participants about the importance of coming out to others in their lives, it was minimised, as shown in Demi's quote.

**Extract 34**

**Demi:** Nah not really. It's been quite a small part. I guess it was a really easy transition for me, for my parents and my family, cos I was away (.) from everyone. So, I only go home 3 times a year. So, everyone was just like "OK cool." [...] I mean I didn't really announce to the world... I didn't really have a coming out thing on Facebook or the things that people go through — the things that people do to, you know, put themselves out there. But I didn't really feel I needed to do any of that. As long as my family and my friends knew, that was cool.

In this extract, Demi constructs coming out to others as "quite a small part" of her experience, in line with other participants who construct instances of coming out as, for example, "very low key" (Elena). By constructing coming out to others as unimportant, participants reject the imperative to disclose or "announce" their sexual identity to others. However, Demi constructs

coming out to others as a “transition” that impacted her and her family. This indicates that, despite resistance toward the disclosure imperative, participants continually situate their stories of sexual identity within the coming out narrative.

The tension between employing and resisting the repertoire of coming out to others may also highlight trouble around participants’ ability to construct and disclose a *bisexual* identity specifically. This is supported by literature that highlights the unrecognizability of bisexuality in comparison to gay and lesbian identities (e.g., Borver et al., 2001; Hayfield et al., 2014; Yoshino, 2000). Participants’ talk also draws attention to the difficulties associated with constructing a bisexual identity, through discussion of the way in which they negotiate disclosure across various contexts. In the following extracts, Kate and Demi describe identifying themselves as lesbian/gay (rather than bisexual/pansexual) in certain family settings.

**Extract 35**

- Kate:** I think as well, if I was to ever be in a relationship with (.) a girl, that would mean that I would almost need to come out to family members as lesbian — when that's something that I don't feel. I don't know. But I think that's a bridge I'll cross if I come to it. But yeah that makes me sad.
- Cassie:** Yeah. Do you want to talk more about the having to come out as lesbian, instead of bi?
- Kate:** Um (.) it's been a fear of mine. Not just with my Nana, but (.) um [pause] I... Yeah, I suppose I feel I would be absolutely fine with it if I was lesbian, but I'm not. And I suppose that's another fear of why I don't tell some people. If, for example, I do go on a date with a girl, or I have got a little crush, or... Yeah because then [pause] yeah that's another label that, just as much as straight is a label, neither of those fit who I am. And so, yeah... For me to come out as (.)lesbian would be like me going back to being straight. And it's just... It's not who I am. Yeah...

**Extract 36**

- Demi:** I just told them [parents] literally the day before I moved to [current city]. I was like “Hey guys, I'm gay.” I used ‘gay’ at that point, um cos I was like “I don't wanna...” I was... I was kinda still like “What am I? What is this?” I wasn't really SURE. Um so yeah, I just told them.

In these extracts, participants describe instances where they disclosed a sexual identity that was not heterosexual, but still fit within the monosexual binary. In their talk, Kate and Demi draw on some of the interpretative repertoires that offer spoiled identity positions to bisexual women, particularly the “either straight or gay” repertoire. These excerpts provide examples of the trouble that occurs at the intersection of interpretative repertoires of bisexuality and those associated with coming out. As discussed earlier, the interpretative repertoires of bisexuality reinforce monosexism and afford only spoiled identity positions to bisexual women. However,

within the canonical coming out narrative, the incitement to disclose compels speakers to confess their non-heterosexual identity in order to perform authenticity as a queer person.

Trouble arises for young bisexual women because existing repertoires of bisexuality offer no positive identity positions and, importantly, necessitate having to choose between hetero or homo subjectivities to be a “real” queer person. Thus, the disclosure of an unspoiled bisexual identity is almost impossible. Yet, speakers are required to claim some form of sexual identity, thus taking up the position of gay/lesbian (as shown in extracts 35 and 36) or “passing” as straight (Wandrey et al., 2015). In Kate’s talk (extract 35) the taking up of these identity positions is constructed as problematic because it is not “true” for her, as evident in the quote: “neither of those fit who I am”. Thus, another double bind is constructed between false identification (constructed as lying) or claiming a spoiled identity.

The notion of an authentic or true self is highly valued in Western societies, where failure to achieve an authentic or true self creates identity trouble and is socially undesirable. As the primary way of narrating non-heterosexual identities from a Western perspective, the coming out narrative reinforces the value of an authentic or true self (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Gibson, 2010). As mentioned, the incitement to disclose constructs coming out as a necessary part of claiming a non-heterosexual identity. In the same way that “figuring it out” is constructed as necessary, disclosure of one’s sexual identity is mandated in order to be positioned as a “real”, “good”, or “proper” queer.

The construction of coming out to others as necessary and positively valued was reflected in participants’ narratives through the use of common tropes such as “sharing your truth” (Willow). Echoing broader Western notions of identity, individuals who disclose their sexual identity are also positioned as honest, healthy, and committed to the LGBTQ+ community whereas those who do not risk being positioned as dishonest, lacking, and shameful (McLean, 2007). This was demonstrated in narratives such as Kate’s, shown below.

***Extract 37***

**Kate:** I don't like feeling like I am (.) either hiding something, or I'm risking (.) someone's view of me — I feel sometimes those are the two choices I have — is either basically lie about who I am, or a whole part of who I am, or risk someone not responding well.

In this extract, Kate constructs non-disclosure as hiding or lying, drawing on the repertoire of coming out to others as “open and honest”. As noted by Rust (1993), this understanding of coming out is reflected in developmental theories of gay/lesbian identity. With disclosure constructed as a successful claim to identity, non-disclosure is constructed as a failure to do one’s sexual identity properly or successfully (McLean, 2007). The young bisexual women in this study drew on the Western constructions of coming out to others versus non-disclosure in their talk, narrating disclosure as an achievement or success – and thus “hiding” as a failure.

However, note in extract 37 that although Kate constructs non-disclosure as hiding/lying, she simultaneously constructs coming out to others as risky. Recent research with bisexual men has produced similar findings: that disclosure carries the risk of stigmatising reactions including ridicule, rejection, and victimization (Schrimshaw et al., 2018). Similarly, Wandrey et al.’s (2015) study with young bisexual women found that stigma was a risk of disclosure, as well as being positioned as an object for heterosexual male entertainment. This highlights that the disclosure of a bisexual identity entails complex elements of risk that may constrain bisexual identity construction. This constraint is important to note because those who identify as bisexual are not positioned in the same way as gay and lesbian individuals (Clare, 2017).

As I have discussed, to claim a bisexual identity is often to claim a spoiled identity, and the disclosure of this identity may not be constructed as successful in the way that disclosure of gay/lesbian identities are. The acknowledgement of risk subverts discourse in which those who do not disclose their sexual identity are positioned as failing to achieve queer authenticity. By constructing disclosure as risky, Kate positions herself as a victim of hetero- and monosexism, which enables her to explain and justify her choice not to disclose — it is dangerous to do so. Given the discourses surrounding bisexuality, it is nearly impossible for bisexual individuals to achieve the status of the authentic queer – whether they disclose their bisexual identity or not.

#### *Paving the way.*

In addition to the construction of disclosure as “open and honest”, which implies that coming out to others is a necessary and important part of claiming a bisexual identity, disclosure was commonly constructed as “paving the way”. Drawing on the incitement to disclose, speakers constructed confidence in one’s sexual identity as a desirable endpoint to the “coming out

story” and this was accompanied with expectations that queer individuals should “live out loud” to act as role models for others. This message is exemplified in Lydia’s narrative:

**Extract 40**

**Lydia:** As soon as you are safe, as soon as you are happy in your queerness, you need to be open and honest. And it's [pause] maybe it's not responsibility but maybe it's a privilege. You have the privilege to be open and honest and out and queer (.) about everything. That is your gift (.) for the life that you live, for the privilege that you live in. And it's a privilege to be able to be open and honest, so you **SHOULD**. It's gift you can give these people.

In this extract, Lydia constructs disclosure as both a political action and a personal duty (Klein et al., 2015). Lydia (and other participants) draw on the “paving the way” repertoire by constructing confidence in — and disclosure of — a queer identity not just as a personal achievement but also beneficial to others. In doing so, these participants position themselves as empowered, as leaders, educators, or advocates. These positions are not only construed as desirable, but compulsory by several speakers, who use words such as “responsibility”, “privilege” and “should”. By positioning herself in this way, Lydia positions queer individuals who are not “open and honest” as “bad queers”.

The construction of “paving the way” as compulsory troubled some participants’ identity work. Drawing on the construction of disclosure as risky, Willow stated “I understand that [...] me saying something could help someone else, and all of that. But it could also harm me.” Again, participants responded to the incitement to disclose but resisted engaging in disclosure practices that may harm them personally. This is shown in Kate’s talk below.

**Extract 41**

**Kate:** I feel having more representation and role models — as a little tweeny, or when I was younger — would have been so helpful, for me. I... Yeah, I think I have let myself (.)have my sexuality affect my mental health for (.)too long now. And I would hate to think that that is... Which it is happening. But I would hate to think that other people have to feel that way, too. And that would be so awesome, to see more representation and acceptance.

**Cassie:** Mhm. In what way?

**Kate:** I don't know. I think people [pause] just owning who they... And being completely comfortable with... just role models in media, and just in life in general — owning who they are. And being OK with that. And I think I am part of the issue because, as I've said today, I do so many things to cover up who I am. And although I say I'm OK with who I am, those actions, and those little side comments, and the overcompensating — that shows that maybe I'm not fully OK with it. And I feel, as I get older, that's not OK. I'm being... I'm absolutely not being the role model that I wanted.

Without negating the importance of bisexual representation, the pressure to be confident and “pave the way” exists in tension with the realities of risk and harm associated with disclosure. This tension is the cause of identity trouble for some speakers. In the extract above, Kate positions herself as a bad queer; taking on blame as an individual without discussing the sociocultural and contextual factors that render her unable to be accepting, confident, or “open and honest” about her sexual identity (Chancellor, 2012). This can be seen in statements such as “I have *let myself* have my sexuality affect my mental health” and “I am part of the issue”. These statements highlight the tension that occurs at the intersection between hetero-/monosexism and the pressure to be confident in one’s sexual identity and “pave the way” for other queer individuals (O’Flynn, 2005). Further, the “paving the way” repertoire is an element of the Western coming out narrative, which promotes individual responsibility and blame. Embedded within this individualising Western discourse, the construction of “paving the way” as compulsory works to enforce the common idea that the onus is on queer people to make queer identities intelligible.

Consisting of several interpretative repertoires, including “always been this way”, “figuring it out”, “open and honest”, and “paving the way”, the coming out canonical narrative is a culturally recognizable way of narrating gay or lesbian sexual identities. Young bisexual women also structured their narratives in line with the coming out narrative and drew on related interpretative repertoires, even when this narrative did not necessarily reflect their experiences of holding a bisexual identity. This highlights the way in which the coming out narrative has become a dominant way of talking about non-heterosexual identities and brings light to the ways that this may enable or constrain young bisexual women’s identity construction.

The wider effects of this talk are to continue to render non-heterosexual identities as “other”. The canonical coming out narrative is a recognisable (and often expected) way for non-heterosexuals to confess or announce their sexual identity, in a way that heterosexuals are not required to. Thus, the use of the coming out narrative continues to position non-heterosexuals as different, strange, unusual, or deviant — while heterosexuals take up the position of the default. Participants’ use of the coming out narrative demonstrates Butler’s (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix. Since intelligible identities cannot be articulated outside of discourse, non-heterosexual individuals must construct their identities in relation to the heterosexual matrix, which normalises heterosexuality (Butler, 1990).

Butler (1990) would further argue that the construction of heterosexuality is reliant on the “othering” of non-heterosexuality to maintain the boundaries of what is normal, what can/cannot be said, and what does/does not need to be said. Within the confines of the heterosexual matrix, heterosexual identities do not need to be announced whereas lesbians/gay men are required to do so. When it comes to bisexuality, a double bind is constructed between this incitement to disclose (i.e., what needs to be said) and the unintelligibility of bisexual identities (i.e., what cannot be said).

### **3.2 “Like Everyone Else”: Normalising Bisexuality**

Although all the young bisexual women in this study employed the “coming out story” to some extent, participants at times resisted this canonical narrative by drawing on the alternative narrative of “normalisation” to position themselves as “like everyone else”. The canonical narrative of normalisation was highlighted by Gibson (2010) in her research with young lesbian women. She found her participants constructed their sexual identities as normal, or minor parts of their identity, and positioned others as supportive and accepting of their sexuality. In this study, several participants drew on the canonical narrative of “normalisation” as an alternative way of storying their lives, that actively resists the “coming out story” and the disclosure imperative it creates. Reflecting Gibson’s (2010) findings, the canonical narrative of “normalisation” supported an interpretative repertoire that was commonly drawn on: bisexuality as “no big deal”. This repertoire allowed speakers to construct bisexual identities as “normal” and therefore to position themselves in more positive ways than interpretative repertoires of bisexuality and the coming out canonical narrative allow. However, as I discuss below, the young bisexual women in this study did not commonly position others as supportive or accepting of their sexual identity, demonstrating a distinction between the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women.

#### ***No big deal.***

The “coming out story” centralises non-heterosexual identities and ascribes importance to “figuring out” and disclosing to others. In contrast, the canonical narrative of “normalisation” involves participants decentring their sexual identity and constructing it as “no big deal” (Gibson, 2010; Seidman et al., 1999). Across the data, the construction of bisexual identities as “no big deal” also has implications for how speakers talk about disclosing their sexual identity to others. Constructing bisexual identities as “no big deal” typically informs instances



of casual disclosure, for example: “I just let it casually slip into conversation” (Grace). This finding mirrors Gibson’s (2010) findings with lesbian women, however, Beyer’s (2016) findings with bisexual women suggest that bringing up sexual identity in casual conversation is complicated by the unrecognizability of bisexuality. Although the young bisexual women in this study adapted the canonical narrative of normalisation to an extent, Beyer’s (2016) findings may help explain why participants’ descriptions of others as supportive or accepting were rare. One such instance is shown below, where Lydia draws on the canonical narrative of normalisation to reject the necessity ascribed to coming out.

**Extract 42**

**Lydia:** I never really came out. I never had to. I brought a girl home once and was like “Mum, Dad, this is my girlfriend.” And they were like “We like her more than you”. [Laughs] And I went “That’s fair, I like her too.”

In Lydia’s brief narrative, she constructs her bisexual identity as “no big deal”, which she bases on being able to exist as a young bisexual woman without “coming out”. Drawing on the canonical narrative of normalisation, Lydia not only constructs bisexuality as “no big deal”, she also constructs “coming out” as a kind of burden that queer people are subject to. This is exemplified in extract 47 where Lydia states “I never really came out. I never *had* to.” In this extract, Lydia describes an experience that aligns more with a straight person’s narrative; rather than the queer “coming out” narrative that has become customary – and arguably compulsory (Decena, 2008; Klein et al., 2015; Wandrey et al., 2015).

However, throughout the research interview, Lydia also positioned herself as “privileged” and “lucky” to have been raised in an environment where “coming out” wasn’t necessary. Taking up the position of “privileged”, Lydia subsequently construes the construction of a bisexual identity that doesn’t involve “coming out” as exceptional. This sheds light on hetero- and mono-sexist norms that position bisexual individuals as the “other” and require one to announce their bisexuality in order to establish a coherent identity.

Accordingly, while Lydia draws on the canonical narrative of normalisation in a context where “coming out” was not required of her, other participants draw on normalisation to resist wider discourses that render bisexuality the “other”. For instance, Kate constructs her sexual identity as “no big deal” but demonstrates how this is troubled by discourse that incites non-heterosexuals to confess or explain their sexual identity.

#### ***Extract 43***

- Kate:** I feel like [pause] when it's just me and I don't have to factor in other people's feelings, or emotions, or how other people might react, or whatever — when it's JUST ME thinking about (.) my sexuality, I don't see it as (.) a huge deal. I think it is part of me, but not all of me. And [pause] yeah, I don't know.
- Cassie:** Does it become a bigger deal or something, when you do have to factor in everyone else's opinions and responses?
- Kate:** Yeah. Yeah um [pause] yeah... [Laughs] I don't really know how to expand on that, but YES. [Laughs] Um yeah it feels bigger. It feels like a bigger deal, or something that — yeah, I don't know — needs to be (.) acknowledged or brought up...

Drawing on the canonical narrative of normalisation, Kate constructs her bisexual identity as “no big deal” and just one aspect of her multifaceted identity in a similar manner to lesbian participants in Gibson’s (2010) study. However, Kate positions herself as subject to others’ feelings, emotions, and reactions, which trouble her construction of her sexual identity as “no big deal”. At the end of the extract, Kate constructs her sexual identity as “something that [...] needs to be acknowledged or brought up” against the backdrop of others’ (potential) views about her sexuality. In this instance, Kate’s construction of her sexual identity as “no big deal” is disrupted by the incitement to disclose that is associated with the canonical coming out narrative — namely, the open and honest repertoire. As Beyer’s (2016) research suggests, this may be a particularly salient and complex issue for bisexual women. Accordingly, Seidman et al. (1999) posits “that in a society organized around the norm of heterosexuality, normalization and routinization will be incomplete” (p.20) and I argue that monosexism further compounds the difficulty of normalising bisexual identities. Thus, although the canonical narrative of normalisation allows speakers to subvert the coming out narrative to an extent, they are nevertheless constrained by overarching discourses of hetero- and mono-sexism that subject bisexual women to particular requirements (e.g., the disclosure imperative).

### **3.3 Visual Identities**

#### ***The gay/lesbian “look”.***

In regard to drawing on discursive resources typically associated with monosexual identities, participants commonly drew on the canonical narratives of the “coming out story” and the narrative of “normalisation”. Another discursive resource that speakers’ mobilised reflects Hayfield and colleagues’ (2013) concept of visual identities, which refers to the way in which individuals construct and perform identities through appearance and dress. Numerous participants drew on the interpretative repertoire of the “gay/lesbian look” in their narratives

of bisexual identity construction. In the following extracts, participants construct gay/lesbian identities as highly recognisable while bisexuality is constructed as indiscernible or unseen.

***Extract 44***

**Elena:** There was this idea that I was definitely [...] You know, I had short hair, I've gotta be gay. Definitely. 100%. It was the weirdest thing, cos it's your HAIRCUT, but for some reason it had such a MASSIVE impact on the way people saw me.

***Extract 45***

**Grace:** Cos I also don't really know what bisexual LOOKS like. Cos you see on TV gay people or gay men are usually really flamboyant; that's way gay looks like. And lesbians sometimes, well in movies, they look butch. That's what they look like. No one really knows what bisexual people look like, and I was trying to figure out what does this... What am I supposed to be (.) if I'm bisexual?

These extracts illustrate how cultural expectations related to people's appearances are founded on a binary understanding of gender, with queer identities seen as subverting the "normal" order of things, so that gay men are associated with femininity and lesbians with masculinity (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Accordingly, in Elena's story, her less stereotypically feminine appearance (short hair) was associated with a lesbian identity. Elena's response that this assumption "was the weirdest thing" illustrates how participants attempted to resist this stereotyping. However, as Grace's quote shows, the binary understanding of gendered appearances offers no alternative for those who do not fit into the either/or frame of monosexual identities in which one desires either a woman or a man. As Grace concludes, "No one really knows what bisexual people look like".

Constructions of what queer identities "look like" or "can be" were pervasive across participants' narratives and placed limitations on bisexual identity construction. Several of the participants' narratives demonstrated the limitations of the "gay/lesbian look" repertoire. Above, Grace explicitly draws on the "gay/lesbian look" repertoire in order to draw attention to the invisibility of bisexual identities. The construction of a "gay/lesbian look" is situated within a discourse of monosexism, with its binary logic, that creates difficulties for participants in constructing an intelligible sexual identity, as shown below.

***Extract 46***

**Willow:** I know that for a lot people — I think for me included — bisexuality is kind of... [pause] Because there's no way to visually, or kind of no good way to indicate that you're specifically THAT, it often gets lumped into either straight or not.

***Extract 47***

**Paget:** I don't know how to overcome the barrier of being "the unicorn" or not wanting to conform to being completely (.) gay, whatever that means. [...] You know, everyone's like "You don't look gay. You don't look like you'd like girls." And how does that look? I think of probably what they're thinking about too, I don't wanna, you know? I just... Yeah. So, I feel that's probably why — is because I don't know how to overcome or get to a place where I can exist fully in all contexts.

In Willow's talk, she constructs bisexuality as an identity that cannot be recognised visually, highlighting the difficulties that young bisexual women encounter in constructing a bisexual identity through non-verbal methods. In explanation, bisexual identities can only be claimed through verbal disclosure, rather than signalling to others through appearance and dress (Hayfield et al., 2013). In Paget's talk she resists the imperative to "conform to being completely (.) gay" but this is troubled by the absence of an understanding of what bisexual identities look like.

These findings reflect previous research on the topic of visual identities, which suggests that although the "gay/lesbian look" is constructed as widely recognisable, there is no clear idea of what the typical bisexual person looks like (Beyer, 2016; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Hayfield et al., 2013).

Throughout the narratives analysed in this study, there was no talk of any distinct visual identities associated with bisexuality because, as Hayfield et al. (2013, p. 16) suggest, "a bisexual look cannot be talked about because it does not exist." This symbolic erasure of bisexuality constrains participants' construction of an intelligible sexual identity, as they are unable to signify their sexual identity as lesbians and gay men can (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Visual identities are located within a broader conceptualization of identity (Hayfield et al., 2013). Thus, the lack of availability of a bisexual visual identity can be attributed to — and implicated in the maintenance of — the unintelligibility of bisexual identities in general.

## Chapter 5: Concluding discussion

In this research I have explored the ways in which contemporary Western understandings of sexuality shape young bisexual women's identity construction in Aotearoa. To achieve this, I drew on narrative positioning theory, incorporating key concepts such as Butler's (1999) cultural intelligibility and Goffman's (1963) spoiled identities, and used Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive approach as my data analysis method. In my analysis I identified several discursive resources, which I broadly categorised as: (1) discourses of bisexuality and (2) lesbian/gay discursive resources. I have shown how discourses of bisexuality—which manifest in four discursive resources—afforded spoiled identities to young bisexual women and rendered the identity of bisexual as “troubled” and largely unintelligible.

To effect repair, I demonstrated how participants drew on and adapted gay/lesbian discourses—notably the canonical narrative of coming out—to resist the spoiled positionings inherent to discourses of bisexuality. Although drawing on discursive resources related to gay/lesbian identities offered participants some ability to construct a positive identity, the spoiled identities made available to young bisexual women continue to restrict the types of identities that can be constructed through engagement with such resources.

My findings provide insight into the ways that heteronormativity and monosexism influence the availability of certain ways of talking and being, and examine how young bisexual women negotiate these in their talk. Bisexuality has been described as a sexual identity category that has the potential to disrupt the binaries of sexuality and gender (Henry, 2018; Mathers et al., 2018; Yoshino, 2000). While bisexuality undoubtedly challenges hetero- and mono-normative constructions of sexuality, the findings from my analysis demonstrate how notions of compulsory hetero- and monosexuality continue to dictate which identities can(not) be articulated, rendering bisexual identities unintelligible. Therefore, in this chapter I argue that – even in the context of the progression of LGBTQ rights in Aotearoa – dominant contemporary Western understandings of sexuality continue to render bisexual identities unintelligible.

In this final chapter, I address my research questions, consider the potential limitations of my study, and discuss possibilities for future research in this area.

## **1. Discussion of Findings**

The central question to this thesis is “how possible is it for young bisexual women to construct an intelligible identity?” Drawing on the discursive resources surrounding bisexuality, it is possible for young bisexual women to construct an intelligible identity – but only through claiming the spoiled identities that are permitted to exist within dominant discourse. Young bisexual women are positioned as hypersexual, greedy, confused, fraudulent, or going through a phase; and these positionings may be taken up to construct intelligible but troubled identities. Alternatively, young bisexual women can resist the discursive resources that trouble identity work and draw on discursive resources around gay and lesbian identities to fashion a more socially desirable identity. Discursive resources such as the coming out narrative, narrative of normalisation, and repertoire of gay/lesbian visual identities were available to young bisexual women and were taken up or negotiated in various ways by participants.

The most prominent effect of hetero- and monosexism in shaping the narratives of young bisexual women was that only spoiled identity positionings were available for the construction of bisexual identities. Negotiating spoiled identities was a central feature of the findings, as discussed in chapter four. In their identity narratives, participants drew on constructions of bisexuality as: (i) hypersexual, (ii) actually straight or gay, (iii) a temporary phase, and (iv) fraudulent. These constructions are primarily underpinned by monosexist discourse, the effects of which include silencing young bisexual women, creating an imperative for bisexuals to justify or prove their authenticity, and limiting the possibilities of identification to straight, gay, or spoiled (bisexual) identities. The participants demonstrated an awareness of the stigmatized positionings (e.g., as greedy, promiscuous, confused, immature, deceptive) that common constructions of bisexuality offer and engaged in rhetorical work to resist said positionings. Rhetorical work included participants’ justifying their sexual identity and related behaviours (including silence around their sexual identity, rejection of social norms related to sexuality, and engaging in particular sexual activities); as well as deflecting judgment and shifting the blame associated with the spoiled identity positions taken up by young bisexual women. However, the lack of intelligible alternative identities made the task of constructing a positive bisexual identity almost impossible.

Given the lack of possibilities for the construction of a positive sexual identity within discourses of bisexuality, young bisexual women turned to gay and lesbian discourses –

drawing on the coming out narrative, normalisation, and visual identities – which they modified in order to construct a bisexual identity. In chapter four, I incorporated Butler’s (1999) notion of “taking up the tools where they lie”, emphasising the difficulty that participants encountered constructing an intelligible sexual identity. Particularly salient in the narratives of the participants in this study was the canonical coming out narrative. This well-established narrative provided young bisexual women with a framework for storying their sexual identity, however, it also created an incitement to disclose (non-normative) sexual identities. Thus, although the discursive resources provided in gay and lesbian discourse allowed young bisexual women to narrate their identity construction in a recognisable way, a moral imperative was also attached to the telling (or not telling) of a coming out story: disclosure was positively valued while non-disclosure was socially undesirable.

While the discursive resources associated with gay and lesbian identities provided opportunity for repair to some degree, it is apparent that the invisibility and delegitimation of bisexual identities is pervasive and continues to limit the intelligibility of the identities that young bisexual women can claim. Centred on gay and lesbian identities, these narratives do not provide a catch-all for the construction of queer identities. It became apparent that the spoiled identities afforded to bisexual women limit the possibilities for the *types of identities* that can be narrated in this way. By this I mean that it is extremely difficult to claim and story an identity that is subject to dominant discourses that work to illegitimate and erase it. The participants in this study were caught in a double bind, where disclosure of non-normative sexual identities was necessary, but disclosure of *bisexual* identities was disallowed.

In sum, participants’ identity work was troubled by the idea that bisexuality “wasn’t an option” – an idea that was commonly thread throughout young bisexual women’s narratives. The majority of participants’ narratives demonstrated the identity trouble that arises from claiming a bisexual identity but not knowing what a bisexual identity “is” or “can be”. This finding speaks to previous research from Canada, the UK, South Africa, and the USA that highlights the perceived illegitimacy, invisibility and erasure of bisexual identities within Western conceptualisations of sexuality (Borver et al., 2001; Hayfield et al., 2014; Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017; Lynch, 2012; Wandrey et al., 2015).

Contributing an Aotearoa perspective to this field of research, my findings resonate with the work of scholars such as Borver et al. (2001) and Lynch (2012) who also conclude that although

bisexuality has the potential to disrupt the binary organisation of gender and sexuality, current discourses of heteronormativity and monosexism remain heavily influential. The present study identifies the discursive resources that continue to constrain young bisexual women's identity construction, and highlights the need to address these discursive resources and their effects – namely bisexual erasure and the marginalisation of young bisexual women – in order to dismantle binaries of gender and sexuality.

## **2. Methodological Considerations and Directions for Future Research**

Given the nature of both qualitative research and postgraduate study, the sample size of this study was small, thus the findings from this research cannot be said to represent the stories of all young bisexual women in Aotearoa. Rather, this study should be viewed as a contribution to the small amount of existing literature that explores bisexual identities in depth. Adopting a narrative-discursive approach to analysis allowed for an in-depth focus that considered the nuances of young bisexual women's accounts, and the conditions in which participants' identity work was troubled or constrained. Further, conducting an in-depth study of young bisexual women's accounts in Aotearoa allowed for cultural specificity, offering a glimpse into the everyday lives of young bisexual women in this particular sociocultural context. This is the only study in Aotearoa to have analysed bisexual women's stories from a narrative-discursive perspective, therefore, further research of this kind in Aotearoa is strongly recommended.

In this research, I used the term bisexual to refer to a broad range of sexual identity categories under the "bisexual umbrella". Research about bisexual identities is an emerging area of research and defining bisexuality in terms of the bisexual umbrella enabled this study to identify the challenges associated with the construction of non-monosexual identities more broadly. Although my analysis of bisexual and pansexual participants' narratives highlighted many commonalities, there were also key distinctions between the construction of bisexual, pansexual, and queer identities that were beyond the scope of this research. It would be beneficial for future research to consider the specificities of distinct non-monosexual identities (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, queer) and experiences (Flanders et al., 2017; Galupo et al., 2017).

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, my role as the researcher cannot be separated from the outcomes of this research. Research does not occur in a vacuum and, as a young queer



woman, I am also subject to the various prevailing discourses that shape the way we can and cannot talk about sexual identity (Finlay & Gough, 2003; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Further, because I shared various similarities with the participants in this study, my own identity, as well as my experiences and understandings of sexual identity, undoubtedly influenced the way that I conceptualised and designed the study, engaged with the participants during data collection, and analysed the data. Throughout data collection and analysis, I became increasingly aware of some of my own biases and expectations related to constructing and disclosing (non-hetero)sexual identities, such as taking for granted participants' silences around relationships with men, and the assumption that disclosure is positive and/or desired. However, I would argue that my familiarity with participants' experiences and commitment to reflexivity about my pre-existing biases opened avenues for richer discussion during the research interviews and heightened by awareness of important themes in the data.

A strength of this study was the diversity of the sample, as various cultural, religious, and rural/urban backgrounds were represented, and participants had a wide range of experiences related to their sexual identity. However, the sample for this study does disproportionately represent a well-educated population. All participants in this study have completed secondary education and most have been engaged in tertiary education in some capacity. In addition, a large proportion of my participants are currently living in Aotearoa's major cities. These characteristics likely shaped my data, as more liberal social discourses around gender and sexuality are often embedded in university cultures in Aotearoa and larger cities (e.g., Auckland, Wellington) are perceived to be more "queer-friendly" than smaller towns or rural areas (Power et al., 2014). Access to more progressive social locations, such as universities, often allows for easier recognition of marginalised identities such as bisexuality (Khuzwayo & Morison, 2017).

It is probable that the way in which participants in this study articulated their understandings of sexual identity and resisted pervasive discourses of bisexuality is a product of their educated status and membership to this social location. Purposive recruitment to provide a sample that is representative of varying social class, education level, and geographic location is recommended for future research in this area. Further, analysing the data using an intersectional lens was beyond the scope of this study, however, given the diversity of the sample – and the bisexual population in general – this is recommended. As I have mentioned, because of the dominance of Western understandings of sexuality in Aotearoa, homophobia

and bi-negativity must also be considered as a process of colonisation. Applying an intersectional lens to future research of this kind would aid in developing an understanding of the complex interplay of factors shaping bisexual identity construction in Aotearoa.

### **3. Conclusion**

In the current study, I explored how young bisexual women in Aotearoa construct their sexual identities. As has become increasingly apparent throughout the course of this research, young bisexual women are subject to a number of stigmatising constructions of bisexuality and must navigate the rocky terrain of both heteronormative and monosexist discourses that prevail in the predominantly Westernised context of Aotearoa. Common constructions of bisexuality and gender and sexual identity more broadly, as well as the identity positions afforded to young bisexual women, restricted participants' ability to construct an intelligible sexual identity. The young bisexual women in this study commonly resisted monosexist discourses that degraded or erased bisexuality, and modified discourses of gay/lesbian identities in order to construct a more socially desirable sexual identity. However, the pervasiveness of bi-negativity and bisexual erasure located within hetero- and monosexist discourse meant that even when bisexual women narrated their sexual identity in widely recognisable ways (e.g., the coming out story), it remained difficult to articulate a *bisexual* identity in these ways. Rather, drawing on the available discourses of bisexuality or gay/lesbian identities, young bisexual women were caught in a double bind in which they had to choose between claiming a spoiled identity or a false one.

This double bind signifies the absence of alternative discourses available to young bisexual women for identity construction. The taking up of spoiled or false identity positions was troubling for participants' identity work and many participants resisted the discourses that constrained their identity construction. Despite this resistance discursive resources that enable the construction of a positive and intelligible bisexual identity are lacking. In order to dismantle the double binds that restrict young bisexual women's identity construction, we must attend to the taken-for-granted discourses of gender and sexuality that currently render bisexuality invisible and unintelligible. This thesis demonstrates the extent to which overarching discourse shapes the everyday narratives, identities, and lives of young bisexual women and emphasises the need for alternative discourses of gender and sexuality that allow space for the construction of intelligible bisexual identities.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Flyer Advertising Study

**TELL  
YOUR  
STORY.**



### **Kia Ora**

**Do you self-identify as bisexual or as  
attracted to more than one gender?**

**Are you a cisgender woman aged  
between 18-24 years old?**

This research project is interested in young bisexual\* women's identities. The project involves face-to-face interviews that are focused on your thoughts and experiences related to your sexual identity across different aspects of your life. The purpose of the interviews is to learn about your experiences and perspectives related to bisexuality - we want to hear your story!

If you are interested in taking part in the study or have any questions, please feel free to contact **Cassie Andersen** at **bisexualidentitystudy@gmail.com**

The interview is expected to last 60-90 minutes and you will receive a koha of a \$20 voucher as a token of appreciation for your time and sharing your experiences.

\*although 'bisexual' is the main term used throughout the project, all cisgender women who identify as attracted to more than one gender are invited to participate. This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers (Committee Chair), Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, [humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz)

## Appendix B

### Study Information for Potential Participants



#### Participant Information Sheet

**Project Title:** A qualitative study of young bisexual women's identity construction and management.

Thank you for your interest in this project on young bisexual women's identity. This sheet outlines relevant information about the research and what is involved if you choose to participate.

##### About the Researcher

Kia ora, my name is Cassie Andersen and this research project is a part of my Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University. I grew up in Taniwaka (Dannevirke) and have lived in Te Papa-i-Oea (Palmerston North) for the past 5 years while studying at Massey University. I identify as a New Zealand Pākehā and a queer woman. My research is focused on young bisexual women's experiences related to sexual identity.

##### Eligibility Criteria

You are eligible to take part in this research if you:

- Are aged between 18 and 24
- Are a cisgender female (i.e. assigned female at birth and identify as such)
- Identify as bisexual or as attracted to more than one gender (e.g. pansexual, takatāpui, polysexual, omnisekual, ambisekual, queer, fluid)
- Are currently situated in the lower North Island area

##### Project Details

This research project looks into young bisexual women's experiences of developing a bisexual identity and negotiating this across different social contexts. I am interested in hearing your own experiences, perceptions and ideas about your sexual identity. The aim of this research is to find out about young bisexual women's understandings of their sexual identity, and how different contexts influence young bisexual women's experiences. Although 'bisexual' is the main term used throughout the project, all cisgender women who identify as attracted to more than one gender are invited to participate.

##### What's Involved?

If you choose to participate in the research, you will be invited to take part in a face-to-face interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. In this interview, I will ask you questions about your sexual identity, so that we can have a conversation about your experiences in relation to this. We can meet at a time and place that is private and convenient for both of us. Afterwards, we will go over what we have discussed, and any questions/concerns. After I have transcribed and analysed the interview data, I will contact you to ensure that you agree and are happy with the way I have interpreted what you have told me.

##### What Happens to the Information?

With your consent, I will record our discussion so that I can transcribe it (type it up) for data analysis. After I have transcribed our discussion, the audio recording will be deleted. All identifying information, including your name, others' names, places and other identifying features, will be changed to protect your anonymity. The information will be stored on a password protected computer, and hard copies will be stored in a locked cabinet. Only myself and my supervisor, Tracy Morison, will have access to the information. In accordance with Massey University policy, after the completion of the research your information will be held for five years by the research supervisor and then it will be destroyed.



### **Participant Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question
- Withdraw from the study (at any time up until your interview transcript has been finalized or analysis of the transcript has commenced).
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview

### **Risks/Discomfort**

There is no expected harm/risk associated with taking part in this study, but you will be required to discuss issues that you may find personal and sensitive in nature. If any question/topic of conversation makes you feel uncomfortable or distressed, you do not have to answer or talk about it. Contact details for myself, my supervisor, and information about relevant support services will be made available to you below, so that you can further discuss any concerns that may arise during the interview.

### **Benefits**

You may find it beneficial to talk about your experiences relating to bisexuality in a non-judgmental and safe space. The findings may also be of interest to you, and you may benefit from seeing what other young bisexual women said about their own experiences. As a token of appreciation for taking part in the study, you will receive a koha of a \$20 voucher.

### **Support Services**

OUTLine NZ: Free call 0800 688 5463 (0800 OUTLINE)

Lifeline: Free call 0800 543 354

Youthline: Free call 0800 37 66 33 or text 234

1737 (Need to Talk?): Free call or text 1737

Suicide Crisis Helpline: Free call 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

Depression Helpline: Free call 0800 111 757 or text 4202

The Low Down: Text 5626 or visit [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://www.thelowdown.co.nz)

### **Sign Up**

If you would like to take part in this study, please contact Cassie using the contact details below.

Thank you for your time!

Ngā mihi.

### **Contact Details**

#### **Researcher**

Cassie Andersen

Email: [bisexualidentitystudy@gmail.com](mailto:bisexualidentitystudy@gmail.com)

Phone: [REDACTED]

#### **Supervisor**

Dr Tracy Morison

School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North

Email: [T.Morison@massey.ac.nz](mailto:T.Morison@massey.ac.nz)

Phone: (06) 356 9099 ext. 86216

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 19/13. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Telephone: 06 356 9099 ext. 83657 | Email: [humanethicssouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicssouthb@massey.ac.nz)

## Appendix C

### Online Questionnaire for Potential Participants

# Bisexual Identity Study

Please fill in these background questions, which will help us determine if you're a good fit for this study. A researcher will get back to you soon! (That's why we're asking for your first name and contact details.)

\* Required

Email address \*

Your email

First name: \*

Your answer

Cellphone number:

Your answer

Age: \*

☐ 18

☐ 19



☐ 19

☐ 20

☐ 21

☐ 22

☐ 23

☐ 24

How do you describe your gender identity? \*

Your answer

How do you describe your sexual identity? \*

Your answer

Have you told anyone about your sexual identity? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

Relationship status:

Your answer

Where do you currently live? \*

Your answer

What ethnicity do you identify with? \*

Your answer

What country were you born in? \*

Your answer

What religion are you affiliated with (if any)? \*

Your answer

What is your current occupation? \*

Your answer

What is the highest level of education you have completed? \*

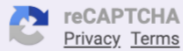
Your answer

Thanks! We will be in contact soon!

☐ Send me a copy of my responses.

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.



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Google Forms

## Appendix D

### Transcription Codes

[ ] for editing/insertions	
short pause	(.)
long pause	[pause]
Interruption/ overlapping talk:	line= [interjection] =line
Additional info:	((whispering)), ((points))
Laughing:	[laugh]/[laughter]
Emphasis/shouting:	CAPS
Omission:	[...]
Trails off:	...

## Appendix E

### Consent Form



COLLEGE OF  
HUMANITIES AND  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

### Consent Form

Thank you for your interest in this study. The data you provide today will be used only for research purposes. As a participant in this research you will never be individually identified in any outputs (e.g., reports, research articles) that arise from this project and your data will never be identifiable to anyone outside the research team.

For each of the following statements, please tick either *agree* or *disagree*:

<i>agree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for this study.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I have had the details of the study explained to me.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I have had opportunities to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without providing any reason.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I have received enough information about the study.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree to having the interview audio recorded.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree that the de-identified transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree to take part in this study under the conditions set out in the information sheet.

_____ Printed Name	_____ Date	_____ Signature
-----------------------	---------------	--------------------

I have explained the study to the above participant and she has agreed to take part.

_____ Researcher	_____ Date	_____ Signature
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