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“Sometimes I’m Lesbian”: Young Women’s High School
Coming Out Experiences in the Post-Gay Era

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Sociology

by

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ABSTRACT

“Sometimes I’m Lesbian”: Young Women’s High School Coming Out Experiences in the Post-Gay Era

by

Lillian Taylor Jungleib

This study explores young women’s experiences “coming out” in high school. I find that across race and class backgrounds, young women in high school are increasingly coming to articulate their sexuality as fluid rather than with more conventional stable identity categories such as “lesbian.” Based on 79 ethnographic interviews with women who came to see themselves as non-heterosexual in high school, I find 46 (58%) identify themselves as fluid/pansexual/queer or without a label, 7 (9%) identify as bisexual, 15 (19%) identify as lesbian but also somewhat fluid, and 11 (14%) identify as strictly lesbian. I find the use of “fluid” (and related synonyms) as a label is more than a shift in language; women who come to see themselves as *fluid* have markedly different experiences coming out in high school than do women who identify as *lesbian*. Young women in high school who identify as fluid and those who identify as lesbian have a similar process in coming to recognize their romantic and sexual attractions, and yet those who identify as lesbian are far more likely to feel stigmatized from their peers because of their sexual orientation.

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“My feelings about attachment and partnership have always been that they are fluid and evolving,” writes celebrity actress Maria Bello under the headline *When None, and All, of the Categories Fit* in her December 2013 op-ed in the New York Times (Bello, 2013). In this public coming out announcement in which she announces her romantic relationship with her long-time friend, she states, “I have never defined myself by whom I slept with” and “I would like to consider myself a ‘whatever’”(Bello 2013). In November 2013, Michelle Rodriguez addressed rumors about her relationship with a female model in an interview with Entertainment Weekly, saying, “I’ve gone both ways. I do as I please. I am too f--king curious to sit here and not try when I can. Men are intriguing. So are chicks” (Vilkomerson, 2013). The year before, up and coming 20 year-old rapper Azelalia Banks, was quoted in the New York Times as saying “I’m not trying to be, like, the bisexual, lesbian rapper. I don’t live on other people’s terms” (Ortved 2012).

These three celebrity women, from markedly different age, race, and class backgrounds, all speak to a growing trend of women who describe their attractions to other women outside of conventional labels such as “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual.” Instead, women are increasingly using terms such as “fluid” or “pansexual,” or no term at all, to describe their sexual and romantic desires. Taylor and Rupp (2013) find the label “fluid” can take on a range of meanings including “rapid changes in attraction, shifts in identity, and inclusion of attraction to genders beyond male and female” (Rupp and Taylor 2013, 88). While sexual fluidity, especially in women, is nothing new (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Rust 1993. 2000a, 2000b; Peplau and

Garnets 2000; Hoburg *et al.* 2004; Golden 2006; Thomson and Morgan 2008, Rupp and Taylor 2013), what *is* new is women actively embracing fluidity as a way to articulate their own desires, and as an identity label, in place of conventional labels such as lesbian.

In this study, I explore young women's experiences "coming out" in high school. I find that across race and class backgrounds, young women in high school are coming to articulate their sexualities in the language of fluidity¹ rather than more conventional stable identity categories. Further, I find this shift is far more than simply a semantic one—rather, I find fluidity represents a move away from an essentialized understanding of sexual identity and women who come to see themselves as fluid have markedly different experiences coming out in high school than do women who identify as "lesbian." Young women in high school who identify as fluid and those who identify as lesbian have a similar process in coming to recognize their romantic and sexual attractions, and yet those who identify as lesbian are far more likely to feel stigmatized from their peers because of their sexual orientation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LINEAR IDENTITY FORMATION MODELS

The coming out process has been understood as a linear process in which the end result is someone who has acknowledged and disclosed their homosexual identity as an essential part of themselves. Linear developmental models of homosexual

¹ Including those who identify as "fluid" as well as those who express fluid sexuality with other language such as "queer," "unlabeled," "homoflexible," "attracted to women," "hates labels" etc.

identity formation (e.g., Hencken and O’Doed 1977; Lee 1977; Plummer 1975; Schafer 1976; Cass 1979; Coleman 1982; McDonald 1982; Cass 1984) explain the adaptation of homosexual identity, or “coming out,” as process comprised of approximately six steps in which the homosexual moves from a state of identity incongruence to identity synthesis. In these models, the final stage is implicitly understood as a stable and fixed identity category that is the ultimate “true” identity of the actor. These developmental processes are linear and unidirectional, with an implicit value placed on the final stage of the process as opposed to the beginning.

These linear models, which are primarily centered on the experiences of white homosexuals, presume “homosexual” as the foundational identity category, and negate a more intersectional approach to identity wherein sexuality is only one identity characteristic constantly being negotiated along with other aspects of identity (Kitzinger 1987; Rust 1993; Phelan 1993, Moore 2011).

In addition, these models reflect the coming out experience of adults in the era of the closet (Seidman 2002). It is clear that coming out for young women today, in what is debatably referred to as the post-gay era, is taking place in a markedly different context which may make these linear models considerably less accurate in reflecting the ways the young women in this study come to understand and express their romantic and sexual desires.

SEXUALITY AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Some lesbian feminist theorists (i.e. Kitzinger 1987; Rust 1993; Phelan 1993) have critiqued these linear identity formation models on the grounds that they assume

an essentialist understanding of sexuality, because they treat homosexuality (and heterosexuality for that matter) as fundamental static elements of a person which are lying dormant until recognized and subsequently revealed. These theorists argue instead for theories that recognize sexuality as a social construction. This social construction critique of linear coming out models also clearly represents a sociological response to the linear models which were primarily psychological accounts of identity development.

Theories emphasizing the importance of social construction over essentialist understandings of sexual orientation argue identity is constructed through “participating in particular historical communities and discourses” and “fashioning a self” which did not exist before the process began, rather than revealing some “true sexuality” ” (Phelan 1993, 774). Phelan emphasizes the way coming out is a process not of *discovering* but of *becoming*. Kitzinger (1987) argues that ‘the lesbian’ is not a type of being, but an identity actively constructed through social forces, particularly male domination and stringent restrictions on femininity. In their study on women who come to identify as lesbian after identifying as heterosexual for ten years or more, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) find further evidence for social constructionism in the varied discursive production of lesbian identity.

In addition to arguing for a social constructionist model, Rust (1993) critiques these linear identity formation models on multiple grounds, including that they do not account for bisexuality, and that individuals’ variations from these linear processes are not simply deviations but are actually the norm. Rust calls instead for a social

constructionist model of sexual identity formation that recognizes “coming out is the process of describing oneself in terms of social constructs rather than a process of discovering one’s essence” (Rust 1996, 68). She explains, “outdated developmental models can be replaced by an understanding of sexual identity formation as an ongoing dynamic process of describing one’s social location within a changing social context” (Rust 1993, 74). Rust’s theory proposes that the coming out process is less about discovering and revealing some essential part of oneself, and really about identifying one’s location in social context. The social constructionist perspectives argue the coming out process is not about discovering (and revealing) some essential part of oneself, but actually creating an identity situated in social constructs.

FLUID SEXUALITY

Contemporary research also supports a non-linear and more complex or fluid understanding of female sexuality and sexual identity. Women with non-normative sexual identities are more likely to understand their own sexual identities as fluid and outside of a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (Golden 1996, Stein 1999, Peplau and Garnets 2000, Diamond 2003, Peplau 2003, McPhail 2004, Diamond 2005, Rupp et. al. 2013).

In their article on queer women in the college hookup scene, Rupp, Taylor, Regev-Messalem, Fogarty, and England (2013) argue for the “diminishing significance of the closet in shaping sexual identity” (Rupp et. al., 18). They find high rates of sexual fluidity among female college students including “the lack of fit between sexual behavior and identity and the instability of sexual identities” as well

as in the way women describe their sexual identity (Rupp et. al., 18). Rupp et. al. go on to explain, “the insights of queer theory allow us to understand the fluid and shifting identity labels women adopt to manage the lack of fit between their own sexual desires and practices and the mutually exclusive hierarchical sex and gender categories that are legitimated and enforced through heteronormativity (Rupp et. al., 19).

Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) particularly highlight the tendency towards sexual fluidity in many women’s experiences. They argue that because linear coming out models, which comprise the “master narrative” were originally based on the experiences of gay men, then merely extended to reflect the experiences of women, they do not adequately address the fluidity of female sexuality. These linear models emphasize the transformation from completely heterosexual to completely homosexual, and negate the experiences of those whose process does not end in complete adoption of a homosexual identity.

COMING INTO THE LIFE

In her research on black lesbian families, Moore (2011) critiques linear identity formation models on the grounds that women come into their gay identity in a wide range of ways, only one of which is possibly captured by linear models of identity formation. Furthermore, she argues these models fail to take into account other identities people are simultaneously occupying, such as race and gender.

Moore asserts that her study contradicts postmodern theories which render identity categories “to be so inconsistent, transient, and unstable that they are virtually

meaningless” (Moore 2011, 5). Instead, she seeks to “understand how people whose lives have historically been structured by categories make sense of them in different ways to explain who they are and how they fit in the world” (Moore 2011, 7). This aspect of Moore’s work is critically important to this study. Most importantly, Moore argues identity categories still hold importance for some communities, particularly queer women of color, even in the “post-gay” era. As she explains, for Black lesbians, lived experiences of “domination and subordination” make identity categories still relevant (Moore 2011, 5). While Moore’s work specifically addresses the experience of Black lesbians, most of whom are significantly older than the high school women in this study, her work clearly highlights the importance of understanding sexual identity categories as one aspect of individual identity that interacts with a range of other identities, but without necessarily rendering sexual identity categories outdated or irrelevant.

TEENAGE FEMALE SEXUALITY

Sexual desire in adolescent and teenage girls has been largely overlooked by scholars, especially the experiences of those with non-normative sexualities. While some recent scholarship addresses teenage girls’ experiences with sexual desire (Carpenter 2005, Tolman 2005, Pascoe 2011, Garcia 2012) none of these works focus specifically on the experiences of LGBTQ/Fluid² young women. Tolman’s (2005) groundbreaking study of teenage girls’ sexuality addresses how girls come to

² Throughout this study I use the term “LGBTQ/Fluid” in an attempt to capture the wide range of identities and behaviors expressed by the participants. I intend to include all those who identify as something other than heterosexual, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or with any language expressing sexual fluidity.

understand their own sexuality in a context which consistently denies they have one, and while they are under the control of institutions, such as school and family, which many times hinder this process even more. If teenage girls generally must explore their sexuality in a context that erases their sexual agency, this is even more true for the LGBTQ/Fluid young women in my study.

For these young women, the process of coming to understand one's sexual identity is of course intrinsically linked to one's other identities. Garcia's (2012) exploration of the ways in which second-generation Mexican and Puerto Rican girls "engage a politics of respectability in their formation of sexual identities, particularly their sexual subjectivities" highlights the significance of race and ethnic identity, and intersectional identities more broadly, in the process of coming to understand one's sexuality (Garcia 2012 Kindle 196-198).

Carpenter argues that LGBTQ/Fluid youth, more so than in previous eras, are "equipped earlier to identify their own desires as well as potential same-sex partners" and therefore are more likely to have their first sexual experiences with same-sex partners (Carpenter 2005, Kindle Locations 994-995). This is true for the women in this study, who come to understand their same sex attractions in high school.

While this recent scholarship begins to address young women's experience with sexual desire and coming to understand sexuality, these studies do not focus specifically on the experiences of women who identify as something other than straight. Still, this recent scholarship, all of which does include the experiences of

LGBQ/Fluid youth to some degree, makes important contributions to the understanding of young women's sexuality and sexual desire.

THE POST-GAY ERA

During the closeted and coming out eras of the gay and lesbian rights movement, gay and lesbian identity was constructed in opposition to mainstream or heterosexual values and practices (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988). As Stein (1997) explains, in the years following Stonewall, early gay liberationists "proclaimed that homosexuals were a radical vanguard that posed a challenge to the dominant heterosexist and masculinist sex/gender system" (Stein 1997, 32). However, as Ghaziani (2011) argues, in the "post-gay" era activists are shifting from an oppositional identity to a more inclusive understanding of LGBT identity which is "motivated less by drawing boundaries against members of the dominant group and more by building bridges toward them" (Ghaziani 2011; p. 99). Ghaziani is clear to explain that the recognition of the post-gay era does not deny "a persistent privileging of heterosexuality by the state, societal institutions, and popular culture" (Ghaziani 2011, 99). Rather, the post-gay era is characterized by a "heterosexualization of gay culture" (Ghaziani 2011, 100).

Ghaziani questions the process through which collective identity is created and maintained in this era where difference, the central tenet of collective identity, is "deemphasized" and "gay activists assert their similarities to, rather than difference from, heterosexuals" (Ghaziani 2011, 100). He finds that in the post-gay era LGBT activists have shifted from a strategy of "opposition (us 'versus' them) to inclusion

(us ‘and’ them)” and that “activists today are motivated less by drawing boundaries against members of the dominant group and more by building bridges toward them” (Ghaziani 2011, 101). While Ghaziani’s work specifically focuses on the experiences of presumably adult activists, the young women in my study are coming of age and forming their sexualities in this new queer context.

In addition to a rise in queer institutions and services such as LGBTQ/Fluid resource centers serving adolescents, public service campaigns, anti-bullying rhetoric, Gay Straight Alliance clubs, as well as an expansion of parades, bars and social clubs for the LGBT community, the rhetoric of the gay rights movement itself has created a markedly different context for coming out.

No longer is “coming out” necessarily a political statement, or an act of affiliation or allegiance to a clearly defined gay or lesbian community, as it was in the era of the closet. Rather, in the post-gay era, as the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality become increasingly amorphous, more and more young women are coming to see themselves as occupying the space somewhere in-between. If “post-gay” refers to *after* gay, then, for the young women in this study, what comes next is more fluid articulations of romantic and sexual desire and practice.

This is not to say, however, that linear coming out models have lost all relevance. Rather than disregard these models entirely, in this study I build off of these models taking in to account the ways they do not accurately account for the experiences of young women in the post-gay era. I also recognize the ways these

models themselves may frame women's understanding of their sexualities. At the same time, this project builds off of social-constructionist models of identity formation in understanding sexual identity as constructed and historically situated rather than an essential part of one's self. This project is also directly informed by the work of Moore (2011) who emphasizes the importance of accounting for intersecting identities in the study of coming out.

In this study I explore coming out in high school. I seek to understand (1) How high school-age women in the post gay era come to recognize and understand their own same-sex romantic and sexual desire (2) how they come to define their sexuality and identify based on these desires and (3) the impact of these new identities on their lived experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on ninety-two open-ended and semi-structured interviews with female college students who identify as queer, fluid, lesbian, bisexual, or in some other way other than heterosexual. The interviews were conducted with students at a large public university in Southern California between 2006 and 2012 by a team of graduate and undergraduate student researchers under the guidance of Dr. Leila Rupp. All interviewers followed the same interview guide, exploring a range of questions about the interviewee's coming out process, family relationships, romantic and sexual experiences, and relationship to the queer community. The interviewees were between 18 and 21 years old, almost half (44) identify as women of color, and

46 identify as white (*see Table 1*). Most of the participants grew up in California, and come from a range of class backgrounds.

TABLE 1: Ethnicity of Interviewees

Ethnicity	% Of Total (approx.)
White (n= 46)	50%
Black (n=4)	4%
Latina (n=18)	20%
Asian American (n=14)	15%
Bi/Multiracial (n =10)	11%
Middle Eastern (n=1)	1%
Total women of color (n= 46)	50%
N=92	

I coded these ninety-two interviews with particular attention to participants’ retrospective discussion of their high school experiences coming out. I selected only those seventy-nine interviewees who had some conception of their own sexuality as LGBTQ/Fluid during high school (*see Table 2*). Criteria for making this selection was anyone who, during any part of high school: (1) identified sexually as something other than heterosexual; (2) had a sexual or romantic relationship with another woman; or (3) knew or questioned they might be attracted romantically or sexually to women. Not included in this sample are women who did not consider themselves to be anything other than heterosexual until after high school. Women who may have questioned their sexuality in high school and yet now identify as heterosexual are also not included in this study.

TABLE 2: Ethnicity of Interviewees After Selection for High School

Ethnicity	% Of Total (approx.)
White (n= 42)	53%
Black (n=4)	5%
Latina (n= 14)	18%
Asian American (n=10)	13%
Bi/Multiracial (n =8)	10%
Middle Eastern (n=1)	2%
Total women of color (n= 37)	50%
N=79	

Interviewing college women about their experiences in high school allows for consent and access in the research process. Still, some methodological concerns arise as a result of this approach. The women in this study speak about their experiences in high school retrospectively, and therefore through an interpretation influenced by their current identity and circumstance. However, the women in this study reflect on their experiences in high school after a short amount of time, in most cases only several years. Furthermore, by reflecting on their sexualities in high school the women in this study are often able to analyze and make sense of their own experiences in important ways not available to people still in the middle of their experience.

FINDINGS

Just as Ghaziani (2011) demonstrates the effect of the emergence of the post-gay era on collective identity formation, the post-gay era also creates a markedly different context for coming out. As evidenced by young women’s experiences with

coming to understand their own non-normative sexual identities in high school, the heterosexualization of gay culture and increasing “us *and* them” strategy has created a context in which young women are identifying more with fluid sexualities as opposed to more traditional stable sexual identity labels such as “lesbian.” This study finds that same-sex attracted young women in high school use the language of fluid identities much more frequently than traditional labels such as “homosexual,” “lesbian,” or even “bisexual.”

I explore the process of young women coming to understand their own sexual identities. Many young women, whether fluid, bisexual, or lesbian-identified, describe having always known they were attracted to women, or coming to understand their sexuality through romantic or sexual relationships with other women.

Additionally, I find that while lesbian-identified women generally describe feeling different from their female peers because of their sexualities, fluid and bisexual young women tend to report feeling different much less frequently, or feeling different because of something other than their sexual identity, if they feel different at all. Many fluid-identified young women, even those who engaged in romantic or sexual relationships with women and were “out” about their sexual identities do not report feeling different from their peers because of their sexual identity. While sexual identity is, of course, linked to other identities including race, class, age, and region, in complex and varying ways, these differences between

women who identify as lesbian and those who identify with more fluid sexual identity labels appear consistently across other identity categories.

IDENTITY

While women used a wide range of language and identity labels to describe themselves, I divided these identities into four basic categories: (1) women who identify strictly as lesbian, gay, or homosexual; (2) women who identify as lesbian, gay, or homosexual but with some qualifications or complication of that identity; (3) women who identify as bisexual strictly (and not also fluid or queer); and (4) women who identify as fluid, pansexual, queer, or with no labels (*see Table 3*).

Less than half, or 42 percent, of the women in this study use traditional and implicitly stable sexual identity labels such as “lesbian,” “homosexual,” “gay,” or “bisexual” to describe their sexual identities when they were in high school. Instead, more than half, 58 percent, describe their sexuality as fluid, or beyond a label. Many of these women use the term “fluid” as their identity label, while others express their fluid identity through labels such as “queer” or “pansexual,” or through other terms such as “I hate labels” (P42), “something other than straight” (P4), “just romantic” (P76), “sexual” (P69), and others simply do not identify or label themselves sexually³.

³ Throughout this paper I will use the term “fluid” to describe women who identify with the sexual identity label “fluid” as well as women who use other terms to describe a fluid identity.

TABLE 3: Sexual Identities of Interviewees (%)

Ethnicity	Lesbian/Gay (strictly)	Lesbian/Gay (with qualifiers)	Bisexual (strictly)	Queer/Fluid/Pansexual/No label
White (n=42)	4	9	4	25
Black/Afri. Amer.	0	0	0	4
Latina	4	0	1	9
Asian American	3	1	1	5
Bi/Multiracial	0	5	0	3
Middle Eastern	0	0	1	0
Women of color (n=37)	7	6	3	21
Total (n=79)	11	15	7	46

In the *fluid* category, some women initially used more stable identity labels in high school before coming to label their sexuality as fluid, while others always identified as fluid and never labeled themselves with these more traditional terms. For instance, April’s first experience with same-sex attraction was her junior year of high school when she became interested in a classmate she first perceived to be male, but who identifies as female. This transgender woman was her first serious crush, and then later Sally went on to have a series of relationships with other women. April began to identify as bisexual because in high school she did not have other language with which to describe her attractions. She explains,

“Yeah, I like that term [queer] just because I used to identify as bisexual, but then, this is when I didn’t know the terms like ‘pansexuality’ and you know, ‘omnisexuality,’ [...] but now I like the term ‘queer’ because it’s very ambiguous and I think it describes me a lot more than bisexual” (P59, bisexual/queer, Asian American).

April identified as bisexual until she got to college when she began to identify as queer or fluid. April's change of terminology does not necessarily represent a change in her understanding of her attractions and sexualities; rather, she has found language to more accurately describe her desires, which she retrospectively attributes to her high school experience.

Latoya, who only shared her same-sex desires with her two closest friends in high school, felt uncomfortable with labels all along. She explains,

“I don't know what I identified as at first. I think I don't have a word to identify myself. Like I knew that I just was too open as a person to identify as [lesbian], because I knew that I had had real feelings for men before too. [...] I just didn't understand a lot of the language that there was to identify myself with at all. So it was kind of difficult” (P51, fluid/ no label, Black).

Latoya still does not describe her identity as anything other than fluid.

Joelle, who was out in high school as “queer,” has not ever identified as anything other than “queer” or “fluid” and yet she occasionally uses the term “bisexual” because it is “easier” for people outside of the LGBTQ/Fluid community to understand. She recognizes that “the term fluid is not as well known unless you're a part of the queer community” (P56, Fluid, Biracial). Despite slight differences in language, all of these women understand their sexualities as fluid, queer, shifting, or unable to be represented by stable labels.

Clearly, a notable number of young women coming out in high school feel stable identity labels do not accurately represent their fluid sexual and romantic experiences and identities. Of the 33 women who *do* identify with more traditional labels, about 21 percent identify as “bisexual” (and not also “queer” or “fluid”), and

about 79 percent identify as “lesbian” or “gay.” However, even for the women who identify as “lesbian” and “gay,” over half (58 percent) do so with some complication of that label.

Some women, such as Kelsey, do identify clearly with the label “lesbian.” Kelsey began identifying as a lesbian in high school, and still does. When asked why she uses that term, Kelsey explains, “because I like girls, and I’m attracted to women and I’m not attracted to men, not sexually at least. [...] With girls, that’s when I think about sex, I don’t think about sex with guys” (P27, Lesbian, White). Kelsey does not identify as fluid at all, though she goes on to explain that she appreciates and respects that many girls do. Jasmine, who identified as bisexual in high school and now identifies as lesbian, realizes she has always been lesbian, but she initially used the term bisexual as a tactic to manage her family’s discomfort with her sexuality. She explains calling herself bisexual was a result of “internalized homophobia” because she “wanted to give my mom some hope that I would end up with a guy, even though deep down I knew I wouldn’t. I just didn’t want to be a lesbian at that point” (P88, Bisexual, White). Jasmine’s identity as lesbian is so clear that she believes denying this and identifying as bisexual in early high school actually represented internalized homophobia.

While Kelsey and Jasmine both understand themselves to be lesbians fairly unequivocally, the majority of the women interviewed who identify as lesbian expressed a much more nuanced understanding of this identity. Some women who identify as lesbian still do see their sexuality as fluid or more complicated. Ashley

explains, “I use term the lesbian or gay woman interchangeably but I don’t think that I’m exclusively a lesbian even though I use that term. I think my sexuality is more fluid but I guess that’s the easiest way to say it for people to understand” (P36, Lesbian/Fluid, Biracial). Similarly, Paige describes, “I still find men sexually attractive at times which makes it hard for me to call myself a lesbian. [...] But, I do think that I can only truly be happy with a woman, which makes me define myself as gay more often than not” (P86, Lesbian/Fluid, White). These women use the term lesbian, but still understand their sexuality as open, complicated, and fluid.

Anna first came out as a lesbian in high school, though now she uses the term queer. She explains, “I was actually a ‘lesbian’ first. Although my idea of what lesbian meant was kind of complicated. I knew that I was still attracted to men but I wanted to have relationships with woman, have sex with women. My identity of feminist and lesbian always went hand in hand. I was a feminist and it seemed natural to be a lesbian” (P87B, Lesbian/Queer, Biracial). Although Anna first claimed the identity lesbian for political reasons in high school, now she uses the term “queer,” which she also understands as a political identity. She is primarily interested in women but she enjoys the way the term “queer embraces a sexually fluid identity and a political stance of non-normativity and progressive ideals” (P87B). While the majority of the young women in this study identify as fluid and reject more traditional sexual orientation labels, even the women who do choose to use labels such as “lesbian” often do so with a complex and fluid understanding of their sexualities as well as the political and cultural implications of their identity labels. Furthermore,

many women describe using this understanding to deploy different identity labels strategically at different times depending on the context.

RECOGNIZING DESIRE

I Have Always Known I am Queer

“I never blatantly came out, and like, ‘Hey, hey everyone!’ But it was just kind of always known that I was just not very straight.” –Josie, No Labels, Latina

Many women throughout the sample, whether they identify as fluid, lesbian, or somewhere in between, describe coming to understand their non-normative sexuality during puberty as they were first coming to understand their own sexuality. Some young women in this study did describe coming out to themselves, or coming to realize their own sexualities, as a process. Sometimes this process involved shedding one’s sexual identity as straight, and realizing one liked girls instead of, or in addition to, boys. However, many young women ‘coming out’ in high school explored same-sex desire as they explored sexuality more generally—around puberty, or even before. These women often did not transform their understandings of their sexuality from heterosexual to homosexual at all. Rather, they have a sense retrospectively that they have always known they were LGBTQ/Fluid.

Implicit in the concept of coming out is the idea that the emerging LGBTQ/Fluid identified person used to be heterosexual, or at least was assumed by others to be heterosexual. While certainly the LGBTQ/Fluid women in this study still operate under and experience heteronormative cultural assumptions, many of them have understood themselves to be LGBTQ/Fluid for as long as they have understood

their own sexuality. Often these women express that looking back they realize they were LGBTQ/Fluid even much before puberty. When asked when she first started to realize she was interested in women, Marina, who uses the label bisexual because she feels it's the easiest for people outside of the LGBTQ/Fluid community to understand, explains, "[...] it's just like who I am. You know, I've always felt comfortable being so. [...] Liking girls has always been natural and liking boys not so much" (P34, Bisexual, Latina). She remembers, even from a young age, always being attracted to girls even more so than boys, although she currently identifies as bisexual. Lauren, who has identified as lesbian consistently since high school explains,

"Freshman year [of high school] was the year that I even learned what bisexuality was. 'Cuz I didn't know what that was, and one of my friends was like, 'Oh I'm bisexual,' and I was like, 'oh, what's that?' And she's like, 'that's when you kiss girls and guys' and I was like, 'Wait, I've been doing that since I was a little kid!'... since I was like ten, like kissing my friends" (P27, Lesbian, White).

Acting on same-sex attraction through kissing seemed natural for Lauren, even before having the language to describe this behavior as LGBTQ/Fluid or different.

Lizette, who identified as bisexual in high school and now identifies as lesbian, explains, "I had my first girlfriend when um when I was in kindergarten. And um, you know, but at that time I didn't really know. We would play house and kiss and stuff and we'd both be the—well actually, I'd be the mom and she'd be the dad, but like called each other 'girlfriends,' you know what I mean?" (P5, Bisexual, Latina). Lizette understands this childhood role-play, even well before puberty, as evidence that she was already LGBTQ/Fluid.

For some women, such as Lizette, this idea of “always knowing” is only clear in retrospect. In most cases women would not have identified as queer from such an early age. However, the fact that women now make sense of their early childhood friendships as markers of LGBTQ/Fluid sexuality even before they may have had a real language or understanding around sexual attraction more generally, or queerness specifically, speaks against the notion that they see themselves as having been heterosexual until they realized they were not. Through this language, these women instead explain that they understand themselves and their relationships to be queer all along. In which case, coming out (at least as an internal identity process) takes on entirely new meaning. What is coming out, if not coming out as not heterosexual? Without an assumed heterosexuality to come out against, or in contrast to, for these young women coming to understand oneself as same-sex attracted is inherently linked to the original process of coming to see oneself as sexual.

First Romantic or Sexual Same-Sex Experience

While many women express having always believed themselves to be sexually or romantically attracted to women, many young women come to this solidify this understanding through their first experience with another woman. For others, a same-sex experience, whether romantic or sexual, might lead a young woman to start recognizing her same-sex desire. Many young women describe their first relationships as being critical to the process of defining themselves as having a non-normative sexual identity. This is true for women who come to identify as lesbians, bisexuals, and those who come to see their sexuality as fluid. For some women,

participating in their first same-sex romantic or sexual relationship came out of a sense of questioning their sexuality or sensing an attraction towards women.

However, others came to question their sexuality or see themselves as LGBTQ/Fluid only during or after having a same-sex relationship. These first relationships take a variety of forms for participants—most involved either an experience with a woman who was already LGBTQ/Fluid-identified and often older and more experienced, who served as a guide to LGBTQ/Fluid life, or through a friendship that became ambiguous and often romantic or sexual.

Through a Queer Guide

“The first girl I experimented with was older than me and much more experienced than I was and it kind of scared me, not like scared me away but like kind of made me back off a little bit cause I just like, I was so overwhelmed and then freshmen year I kind of like found a girl that I really liked and when that happened, I did define myself as bisexual.” –Chloe, Bisexual, White

For many young women, their first sexual or romantic relationship with a woman is with someone who already identifies as queer. Diamond, Savin-Williams, and Dubé (1999) find young women, especially those without other resources, sometimes enter into a dating relationship with a more experienced LGBTQ/Fluid person in part to gain access to the larger community. In keeping with these findings, the young women in this study often describe these relationships as a significant turning point in learning about themselves and introducing them to their own LGBTQ/Fluid identities as well as the broader community. Lizette describes the first girl she ever dated, Maria, who was a freshman in high school when she was a

sophomore. Maria presented as masculine of center, she “dressed like a boy” and played on the high school’s football team (P5, Bisexual, Latina). Lizette explains, “she was younger than me, but I guess she was a little more comfortable with her sexuality than me, I guess at this point” (P5). In fact, Maria already had a girlfriend, which she did not disclose to Lizette when they started dating. “It just became a hot mess,” she explains (P5). This relationship devastated Lizette, although the next year she entered into another meaningful relationship with a woman that lasted almost three years, throughout the rest of high school.

During her relationship with this second girlfriend, Jenna, who was twenty years old when Lizette started dating her at sixteen, Lizette came to more fully adopt her queer identity. As she explains, “I guess I didn’t really come out of the closet, I was dragged out by her [Jenna]” (P5). Externally, Jenna pushed her to reveal their relationship to her family and friends, partly because she was already living her life as an out queer adult. Internally, Lizette came to understand and define her own sexuality in relation to Jenna.

When Lizette’s parents found out she was in a relationship with a woman, her relationship with her family deteriorated. Her parents threatened to call the police because of her age, her brothers went to Jenna’s house and threatened her, and Lizette temporarily moved out of her parent’s home to live with her aunt. During one of these fights with her parents she called Jenna to pick her up, and they went together to a friend’s house that served as a hangout because both of the friend’s parents were in

prison. It was here that Bella had her first sexual experience with another woman. She relays,

“I was really sad about it [the fight with her parents]. And we were just lying in the bed and, we were, like I was crying or whatever, and she was just comforting me, and then um... you know... one thing led to another and my clothes came off and we ended up having sex. But at that point I didn't touch her at all. You know, this wasn't, this wasn't my first time kissing a girl but it was my time going beyond kissing with a girl. And so I was nervous. I was so nervous, and so, like I was the receiver at that point. That was my first experience” (P5).

Lizette explains these two first relationships with women as introducing her to her own queer identity. It was through these two relationships that Lizette came to view herself as attracted to women; first, through her involvement with Maria, who was younger than Bella but already identified and presented as queer, and then next through her long-term relationship with Jenna, who was older, already out of high school, and already out as queer.

Marisol, who identified as a stud in high school, had a similar experience. During her Freshman year of high school, her best friend told Marisol about another girl, Chelsea, whom she disliked because “she is bisexual and she's trying to steal my boyfriend” (P40, Queer, Latina). Her friend's rumor about Chelsea being bisexual, and therefore looking to steal her boyfriend, draws on a stigma about bisexual people being promiscuous and untrustworthy. But for Marisol, this piqued an interest because she did not know any other LGBTQ/Fluid people and was interested in making that connection. Marisol explains that because she knew Chelsea was bisexual she was “curious to meet her” and when they were introduced,

“we exchanged emails or those little IMs [...] I was just asking her questions like how do you know you are gay and stuff. And that’s how it started. And I just asked her questions like ‘have you kissed a girl?’ or whatever. She would tell, and I was like, ‘how do you know you like girls?’ and she was like, check them out and you feel a certain way towards them and stuff. And so I started analyzing myself and I was kind of like, I have this feelings [*sic*] towards girls” (P40).

Because Marisol didn’t know any other LGBTQ/Fluid women, the relationship quickly evolved into something romantic and sexual. She explains, “I guess she was the first gay person at the time, and I started hanging out with [Chelsea], and then we like liked each other, and that was my first girlfriend” (P40). As a Freshman in high school, Marisol was drawn to Chelsea’s confidence in her own sexuality. Chelsea already identified as bisexual, and Marisol heard rumors that she had hooked up with several other girls already. Chelsea served as a sort of guide for Marisol into her own queer sexuality. Marisol turned to her to answer questions about being queer, how she knew she was attracted to women, etc., and then eventually introduced her to other queer young women. Through Chelsea’s social connections, Marisol started to develop a network of other queer young women who provided support and friendship. Marisol’s romantic relationship with Chelsea progressed and when she was fifteen years old she had sex with Chelsea for the first time. She describes, “we ditched school and we went to my house. My friends already have been doing it with girls and they were coaching me on it and I decided to try what they told me to do” (P40). Marisol describes the sexual experience as “horrible” because “I didn’t even know what to do I didn’t even know my own body parts” (P40). She expected Chelsea to guide her sexually as well, but during sex Marisol found out Chelsea was not as

sexually experienced as she had believed her to be. Because of what Chelsea's friend had told her about Marisol being "a ho" and "bisexual," Marisol explains, "I was intimidated by her, she has already been with a few people" (P40). When Marisol discovered it was also Chelsea's first sexual experience with a woman she explains that this made it awkward as neither of them "knew what to do" (P40). Marisol was looking to Chelsea to initiate her through answering questions about sexual identity, engaging in sexual experiences, and providing social connections into the LGBTQ/Fluid community. Many of the participants tell similar stories of coming in to their LGBTQ/Fluid identities through relationships with women who are more experienced. These women are often older, and typically already identify as LGBTQ/Fluid.

Through an Ambiguous Friendship

"We spent so much time together and like, we never officially dated, but we always cuddled... just like very, very intimate. Like physically also very intimate like... she would bite my ear" –Mai, Bisexual, Asian American

Many women describe coming in to their LGBTQ/Fluid sexuality through an ambiguous friendship which becomes romantic and also sometimes sexual. Diamond, Savin-Williams, and Dubé (1999) use the term *passionate friendships* to describe close emotional relationships between women which are not sexual. Building off of this I use the term *ambiguous friendship* to describe these types of close passionate friendships which also may, or may not, involve an explicitly sexual component.

Close emotional attachments between women are nothing new. Scholars have documented the long history of close emotional primary relationships between women, which are not necessarily explicitly sexual (Smith-Rosenberg 1975; Faderman 1981, 1991; Diamond et. al. 1999). Faderman (1981) argues these passionate relationships were largely culturally accepted in the 19th and early 20th centuries and it was not until the 1920s that these relationships became stigmatized and viewed as “lesbian”.

Scholars also document the continued significance of these intimate friendships to women, both heterosexual and LGBG/Fluid (Hall Carpenter Archives 1989; Butler 1990; Crumpacker & Vander Haegen 1993; Esterberg 1997; Diamond et. al. 1999; Diamond 2000; Morgan & Thompson 2006). While these intense emotional relationships may often take place between women who both identify as nothing other than straight, for those who do come to see themselves as LGBTQ/Fluid, these relationships take on a different meaning and significance (Diamond et. al. 1999). LGBTQ/Fluid youth are sometimes able to have their emotional needs met in these intimate friendships without exposing themselves to the possible consequences of openly seeking a same-sex romantic relationship. Of course, in some instances these intimate friendships may also become sexual.

As Mai explains, “I’d had obviously attraction and curiosity, but never anything until high school, and then I fell in love.... with a girl” (P30, Bisexual, Asian American). She explains that realizing she was bisexual “didn’t really hit me as hard as falling in love with my best friend” (P30). Mai and her best friend grew to

have a deeply intimate relationship emotionally and physically, which they did not define romantically. Mai explains, “The whole relationship was really complicated. She was not out. We never officially dated. But, like the stuff that we went through, we just connected right away” (P30). While they did not have explicit sexual contact, they would cuddle and touch intimately. She describes, “we’d say like ‘I love you’ like really intensely and we’d stare into each other’s eyes for years” (P30). Mai recalls, “she made me finally feel totally complete” (P30). As a result of this friendship Mai began to identify as bisexual. Though it was not explicitly sexual, or even romantic, she is clear that the level of intimacy she experienced went beyond that of a strictly platonic friendship.

For Jimena, who identifies as bisexual and fluid, her relationship with her best friend seemed strictly platonic until they experimented sexually together rather impulsively. When she was a sophomore in high school she explains that she and her best friend,

“we would sleep over at each other's houses and it just never got like, I guess, sexual between us. And then just one night just randomly we were sleeping together, [...] we ended up waking up in the middle of the night and we were just talking all of a sudden and like, [...] she had a boyfriend and I had a boyfriend and I remember I things were going well with him, so I don't know why, or what triggered us. But then we ended up making out” (P31, Bisexual/Fluid, Latina).

The next day they had a brief conversation where they told each other “we shouldn’t have done that” but then several weeks later they had sex under similar circumstances. “We never really took it [...] past just us being together, like behind closed doors,” she explains “we never said it out loud or said it to anyone. We never

really considered each other girlfriend and girlfriend” (P31). When Jimena reflects on this first experience, she explains she was still “not sure about being with a girl” but “I feel like, I learned to respect it throughout my high school experience [with her best friend]” (P31). It was through this sexual experience in her friendship that Jimena came to understand and “respect” her sexual attraction to women, even though they did not define their relationship as anything other than best friends.

Mai and Jimena explain these complex and ambiguously defined friendships as important to their high school coming out process. For Ella, while she understood the relationship as friendship, her friend interpreted their connection as romantic and implicitly monogamous. She explains she was questioning her sexuality when she was sixteen years old and had a female friend with whom she experimented sexually, “we’d like make out and like have sleep overs and like do all that and like I’d leave and we’d like hang out at school” (P38, No Labels, White). They had not defined their relationship as more than a friendship, although they were sexually involved. However,

“I had a tennis tournament and the guy I played asked for my number and we actually went out on a date. So I went out on a date with this guy and he wanted to like kiss me and I was really nervous and uncomfortable with that. She found out about it and she started spewing out all this stuff about how she loved me and that I cheated on her and like I was completely lost. [...]. It was just kind of like, making out and being friends and she totally flipped out on me. And I was like, all of a sudden it hit me like, woah, because that was my first relationship, period” (P38).

Through her friend’s reaction to her going on a date with a man, Ella came to view their relationship as romantic, and in turn, she came to identify herself as “no labels.”

For the women in this category, it was through ambiguously defined relationships, many of which involved sexual experimentation, but also some of which were romantic and not explicitly sexual, that the participants came to see their behavior or identity as LGBT/Fluid. Many of the women who first had these ambiguous friendships went on to have defined romantic relationships with women later in high school or once they got to college.

Young women who come to identify across the LGBQ/Fluid spectrum clearly have similar experiences with coming to understand their own sexualities. In explaining their process of coming to understand and label their sexualities as something other than heterosexual, women describe themselves as having always understood themselves to be LGBQ/Fluid, or realizing their sexualities through a queer guide or ambiguous friendship.

DIFFERENCE

Young women in high school who identify as fluid and those who identify as lesbian have a similar process in coming to recognize their romantic and sexual attractions, and yet those who identify as lesbian are far more likely to feel stigmatized from their peers because of their sexual orientation. Many young women address feeling different because of their developing sexual identity. All women who came to identify as strictly lesbian in high school report they felt “different” in high school because they were lesbian, whether or not they disclosed this identity. However, feelings of difference were much more rare for women who identify as bisexual or queer/fluid. For those who are bisexual or queer/fluid and did feel

different from their female peers, this difference was often related more closely to gender expression and fulfillment of traditional gender expectations than to same-sex attraction. Others identified the source of this difference in other stigmatized identities such as their race or class. At the same time, many other young women reported not feeling different at all.

Feeling Different

“I thought [...] I was straight like everybody else. But, you know, I had, I knew I kind of had like, weird feelings towards girls. But I had absolutely no idea how to think about them” (Stephanie, No Label, White).

All of the young women who identify strictly as lesbian (as opposed to those who may use the term lesbian but also see their identity as fluid) report feeling different from their female peers in high school because of their lesbian identity. For example, Hannah, who identifies as a lesbian, describes “It’d be weird because I hung out with girls and they’d be talking about boys and then I’d catch myself staring at them” (P23, Lesbian, White). Chloe, who is bisexual, explains,

“I definitely saw myself getting more attracted towards my friends that were girls and you know... I would find myself more affectionate than they were and things like that. And more sensitive you know, regarding our friendships and things like that so... I mean it’s definitely a struggle when I, it’s not that I didn’t wanna come out, it was just like I didn’t really know what was going on with me at the time so. It was just, it was confusing” (P21, Bisexual, White).

Even before articulating her sexuality or coming to identify with a label, Chloe recalls feeling different from her female friends. It is only later that she comes to understand this difference is rooted in her non-normative sexuality.

Su, who is the only woman in the study to use the term “homosexual” as well as “lesbian” to describe her identity, recalls, “I was definitely different. [...] none of the other girls would let me braid their hair and I didn’t know why. And it was because they all thought I was a lesbian. And they thought it was contagious. So everybody knew I was gay before I did I guess” (P58, Lesbian/Homosexual, Asian American). When Taylor who identifies as a lesbian, first started to have a crush on another girl when she was thirteen, she started to feel different from her peers. She started to “be pretty sure that I liked that girl” and describes that she, “started to question why am I different from other people, because all my friends are talking about boys and I’m not thinking about any boys. So yes, I started to realize that, oh, maybe there’s something different” (P61, Lesbian, Asian American). Valeria, a lesbian, also started to feel different when she first developed feelings for another woman. She recalls, “I realized that it didn’t really fit with where I was right then and there. I couldn’t really talk to anyone in this conservative like upper-middle class high school, like no one identified [as LGBTQ/Fluid] and I was ridiculed intensely” (P67, Lesbian, Latina). These experiences show that while some young women may have markedly better coming out experience than many did in decades past, some still experience challenges that seem far from “post-gay.” It is particularly notable that the women who identify as lesbian are the most likely to have these experiences of feeling different, and stigmatized, because of their sexual orientation. This feeling of difference is further proof that in high school women who identify as lesbian have a characteristically different experience from their peers who use fluid language to

describe their attractions. This data suggests that those women who adopt conventional labels such as lesbian and gay are likely to have a more traditional coming out experience more in line with the linear coming out models.

While these feelings of difference seem to be most common among lesbians, a few women who understand their sexuality as fluid feel this way as well. For instance, in the course of coming to terms with her own sexuality, Jimena, who identifies as both “bisexual” and “fluid,” understood she was different from her peers and struggled with feelings of loneliness and isolation.

“I felt like I was just different, I was like an outcast, and I didn't come out in high school at all, because I felt like it was more of a problem I had to deal with, and at that point I considered it a problem. So I considered myself more of a, you know I'm going through a problem or like a, confusion, within myself, so I felt not less than my friends, but just in a problem, where I needed to fix” (P31, Bisexual/Fluid, Latina).

Clearly, some of the young women in this study do understand and identify their emerging non-normative sexual identities as a major contributing factor to their feelings of difference from their female peers. While all of the strictly lesbian women in this study describe feeling different in high school because of their sexual identity, only about 11 percent of those who identify as fluid describe feeling different as a result of their sexual orientation.

For women who identify outside of these stable categories, if they felt different in high school at all these feelings were usually not related directly to their sexual orientation, but instead to gender expression and identity as well as race and

class. However, most women who identify as fluid do not report feeling different from their high school peers at all.

Gender Expression and Identity

*“My best friends were guy friends, so I felt different... more like a tomboy”
-Marina, Bisexual, Latina*

While some respondents did feel different in High School as a result of what they now realize was same-sex desire, for many others this difference was located in other sources. To begin with, many of the participants who described feeling different explained this difference through language relating to gender identity rather than sexual attraction. These women describe themselves as feeling different because they were “tomboys,” had more male than female friends, or were more interested in stereotypically masculine interests or forms of play. Emma, who identified as bisexual in high school and now identifies as queer, started her high school’s Gay Straight Alliance club. She explains:

“I always felt different. I think even remembering in kindergarten everyone’s favorite color was pink, and I was distinctive about like, ‘no mine’s yellow,’ or like, ‘I’m the yellow ranger’, or that kind of stuff, and, whenever we’d play boys versus girls I was always on the boy’s team. I hated girls. So I felt different. I think I felt better for some reason, like ‘Oh, I’m more like a boy’ or something” (P17, Bisexual/Queer, Multiracial).

For Emma, her sense of difference rested not in her same-sex attraction or emerging bisexual identity precisely; rather, she explains feeling different from other girls because she related more to boys than to girls and rejected gendered female

expectations, such as liking the color pink. Similarly, Margaret, who came out as bisexual her senior year of high school although she did not have any romantic or sexual experiences until college, explains her feelings of difference in a similar way:

“I definitely was different from other girls. I was more of a tomboy except I really hated sports. So it’s like in a way I didn’t really fit in with the boys either. I was just kind of in between. Uh, I didn’t like fashion, didn’t like shopping. [...] I just kind of wore these buttoned down plaid shirts like every day and put my hair in a ponytail. I did not care much what I looked like. I liked plants and animals and nature and I really liked science at the time, especially more the hard sciences. [...] So I did definitely feel different because I was not a girly-girl. I did not like Barbies at all” (P22, Bisexual, White).

Again, Margaret describes feeling different from other girls because she did not fit gendered expectations and enjoyed more typically male interests. She describes enjoying nature and science, and not being a ‘girly-girl.’ Here again, difference is described through gender rather than sexual orientation. While Emma described feeling like a boy, Margaret felt like she did not fit in well with either boys or girls. Clara, who is a lesbian and describes feeling different because of her sexual orientation, also describes herself as feeling different because of her gender. She was a tomboy, and she expresses this difference in her description of her gender presentation as well as through an explanation of her more masculine interests, her friendships with boys, and through her perceived gendered dominance in relationships with her peers. She explains:

“When I was younger I was a huge tomboy actually. I liked to play army a lot and play in the woods and make forts. And I was like the dominant, definitely the dominant leader within my group of friends, but I didn’t really hang out with girls I hung out with all like neighborhood boys. Umm and, you know, always trying to be dominant over them” (P39, Lesbian, Latina).

Today, Clara identifies as genderqueer or gender questioning and uses female pronouns. Her reflections on her feelings of difference are clearly related to her gender, and not necessarily only linked to her romantic and sexual attraction to women.

When asked if she felt different from other girls growing up, Jessica states “I thought of myself as normal. I thought that I was straight” (P16, Bisexual, Asian American). Jessica, who began to identify as bisexual in high school, did not experience feeling different because of her sexual orientation, and yet she goes on to explain that “there was definitely a difference that I noticed” (P16). Like many of the other participants, she describes being interested in activities that were different from her female peers:

“I related to other girls, but there was ways that I did a lot of activities that girls didn’t do and I don’t know if it’s because they weren’t exposed to it or they didn’t care. I just have this general enthusiasm about life and like, I’ve done stuff like, like I went paint balling during summer with like, my guy friends and like, did like, a lot of sports. I did martial arts for seven years like, I don’t like falling into stereotypes, but I did like a lot of things that other like, girls weren’t interested in. I did rugby, I guess that’s another one you can throw out there. I just like to try new things and it really doesn’t matter like, what gender should be doing it and like, I just wanna do everything. So, I think that type of attitude I’ve had about like kind of is different than the way that, in society, most women learn that it’s okay to be like, a certain type of passivity or something” (P16).

Jessica explicitly states that this feeling of difference was not related to her sexual identity. Rather, she understands that she was willing to break feminine gender roles more than other girls in her peer group. Jessica is fully female-identified and does not

present as particularly butch or masculine. For some women in this study, such as Clara, feelings of difference surrounding conventional gender norms may have been indicative of early understandings of not fitting in to the gender binary. However, here for Jessica this difference was rooted in an early desire or interest in breaking traditional gender norms without necessarily identifying outside of the gender system.

Clearly, for many of the women in this study, feeling “different” when they were younger was related to gender identity and expression rather than specifically to burgeoning sexual or romantic desires. These women felt different because they did not conform to traditional gender expectations for women. Women in this category typically described themselves as different because they were “tomboys,” preferred more stereotypically male interests and forms of play, and had more or primarily male friends. Some of these young people went on to identify outside of “female” or the gender binary, while for others, who still identify as female, this difference marked a desire to operate outside of traditional gender norms.

Race and Class

“It’s hard being black period. I am a minority and there are already barriers set up for us to not succeed and its like, oh yeah, and I’m gay too!” – Kacy (P35, No Label, Black)

Many young women described feeling different not because of their sexual orientation, but as a result of other stigmatized or intersectional identities. Gabriella, who is Black and grew up working class, explains feeling different from her peers for a range of reasons, and sexual identity is only a small part of that difference. To begin

with, she explains, “our family was always broke. And so we were different in those regards too, I was always broke” (P13, Fluid, Black). In addition to growing up working class, Gabriella goes on to explain the ways her identities as a “person of color” and as a “revolutionary,” in addition to being queer, were all sources of difference for her when she was growing up. For example, she explains “Christianity has a heavy influence within the Black community but I’m not Christian, and so I deviate from that, and plus I’m not heterosexual, and I deviate from being, like Black in like- you know, there’s pressures there to be heterosexual” (P13). Gabriella feels different in the Black community because Christianity is so important and yet she is nonreligious, partly because of her queer identity. At the same time, she feels different in the LGBTQ/Fluid community because she does not see other Black people or people of color represented in the LGBTQ/Fluid community. She explains, “I’m queer, but I know that, I see—the majority of the queer community I see is white” (P13). Although she describes feeling different, she ends her answer by stating “And so all these intersections, I think it makes me- I don’t know, it’s like- Ugh, it’s just weird. [...] But it’s still a pleasant kind of not normal” (P13). For Gabriella, sexual attraction is only one of many identities that make her feel different, and not the primary source of these feelings of difference.

Ashley called herself a “lesbian” in high school, but is quick to explain she is still attracted to men, and is “considering” starting to use the term “bisexual.” Ashley explains that part of her decision to identify as lesbian in high school was “because I’m already biracial. And that has been a source of contention in my life. And so it’s

like, I've always been asked, you know, so which one do you feel closer to? You know...do you feel more white? Do you feel more black? It's like, you can't really answer that question. That's complicated" (P50, Lesbian, Biracial). She goes on to explain, "I kind of clung to the lesbian identity because it was solid" (P50). For Ashley, claiming a "solid" or fixed identity label made sense in light of the ways her biracial identity was constantly being questioned and understood as unfixed.

When she came out in high school, Ashley's parents were accepting, though Ashley struggled with feeling a part of her black community. She explains that identifying as a lesbian made her feel further stigmatized, "being black and identifying as a lesbian is interesting because there's the whole politics of black respectability. You're already black. You're already a woman. Do you really want to add in that complication?" (P50). It is further "complicated" for Ashley, by the importance of her Christian community. She explains, "with the intersection with my religion, it's still something I like almost daily think about. Like I think like me and God are good, but I don't know if me and like the Christian community are good" (P50).

As a result, Ashley explains she identifies more with the black community than with the LGBTQ/Fluid community.

I identify more with the black community because [...] it's very complicated being of color in the queer community. There's a lot of Chicana/Latina representation, a lot of Asian representation, and not a lot of Black representation. And we have our club that's black queer, you know queer black students together and everything. But, but a lot of the organizations don't understand why we have our group [...] It's easier for me to explain my queer identity to my black friends than it is to explain my black identity to my queer friends (P50).

Ashley uses the fixed identity label “lesbian” as a tactic to manage her intersecting identities because she so frequently faces “contention” surrounding her biracial identity. Further, because she does not feel represented as a Black/biracial lesbian in the LGBT community, Ashley feels more connected to the Black community.

Of course, the presumption that women felt different because of sexual orientation in some ways presumes they did not feel different already—this is particularly true for queer women of color and women who grew up working class. For women with intersecting stigmatized identities, queer identity, or same-sex attraction, may have different consequences than for women who come from more privileged backgrounds and therefore do not feel different until they acknowledge their same-sex attraction.

Not Different

While some young women describe feeling different because of identity characteristics not directly linked to same-sex attraction, 89% of the non-lesbian young women in this study reported not feeling different at all because of their sexual orientation. Felicia explains that while she experimented sexually with other girls throughout high school, it seemed normal to her, and she did not realize until her senior year that she was sexually interested in women beyond this socially acceptable behavior. Felicia identified as straight in high school although she was sexually active with other girls. Now she sometimes uses the term bisexual to describe herself, but she explains that she does not like the label and prefers to say, “I love people” (P29, Fluid, Latina). She explains,

“I had made out with girls all throughout high school, but you’re drunk and it’s considered... everyone does it, it’s normal like, that’s fine. Or when you check out a girl like, a lot of my other girlfriends would check out other girls. And because I was a cheerleader we were really affectionate with each other. Girls would like, pull each other’s thongs, undo their bras, sleepovers like, people would end up making out with everyone when they started drinking” (P29).

While Felicia did participate in sexual play, and making out with other young women, this behavior seemed normal in her peer group, and did not mark her as anything other than straight. She goes on to explain:

“So, it was like, I didn’t think of anything of it. Like, people would joke, I remember my senior year like, ‘Oh, you’re a lesbian, don’t lie.’ I was like, ‘No’ I was like, ‘It’s just fun. I enjoy making out with girls.’ ‘Cause I didn’t know that made me gay. And I thought it was fun, but I didn’t know that, I didn’t know what the standards or the rules were at all. So I’d say I really didn’t think I was like, into girls, but maybe senior year I had a couple of like, desires to be with women” (P29).

Amelia, who prefers to describe herself as “something other than straight” speaks at great length about her challenges as a woman of color in high school, and yet explains “but identifying as queer, I didn’t really see myself as different in high school” (P6, No Label/Queer, White). Colleen, who identified as bisexual in high school, knew she was attracted to women but states “I didn’t really acknowledge that it was different or anything. It didn’t really occur to me” (P9, Bisexual/Lesbian, White). Clearly, the vast majority of women report not having felt different at all—sometimes even women who were involved in same-sex sexual behavior, or out to their peer groups.

It is particularly significant that many young women are having romantic feelings and sexual relationships with other women, or even identifying with a range of labels representing fluid sexual identity, without feeling different from their (presumably mostly heterosexual) peers. However, it is notable that women who identify strictly as lesbians do experience marked feelings of difference ranging from slight distance from their peers to complete alienation. Still, identifying as fluid, young women can have socially sanctioned same-sex interactions without feeling that this makes them lesbian, or even “different,” as in the case of the cheerleader who describes making out and other sexual experimentation with friends at parties. Overall, while clearly some women’s experiences of difference mirror the way difference is discussed as one of the first stages in linear coming out models, for many young women in this study, difference took on new forms, if same-sex identity even felt different at all.

DISCUSSION

As I have shown, whether young women in high school feel they have always known they are LGBTQ/Fluid, or come to recognize their same-sex desire through a guide or an ambiguous friendship, more often than not this identity construction process results in a fluid rather than a binary or stable sexual identity. Young women who come to see themselves as fluid or beyond labels often do not experience the same feelings of difference and isolation from peers as do women who come to see themselves as lesbian. The sense of the normalcy of same-sex desire experienced by

women speaks to the prevalence and perceived acceptance of female fluid sexuality in the post-gay era.

This is not to say fluid and queer women do not face challenges, internally and externally, in coming out to themselves, their families, and their communities. In fact, many who claim fluid and queer identity labels do so as an explicit political interruption to the sex/gender binary and as an intentional move to create community across all representations of queer identities.

To discuss coming out and fluid identity in the post-gay era is not to suggest these young women, whether lesbian, fluid, or somewhere in-between, do not face stigmatization, feelings of isolation, and discrimination either interpersonally or structurally. Rather, I argue the sense of feeling different, as described in linear coming out models, is much more common for those who come to identify with a stable identity category than for women who come to identify with fluidity.

As such, it is clear that the linear coming out models of the era of the closet do not accurately capture the experiences of all non-heterosexual young women in the post-gay era in two main ways. First, these models do not account for the experiences of those women who describe having always known they were queer. In the post-gay era, with increasing availability of information and access to communities, young women may be aware of possibilities other than heterosexuality from earlier ages and therefore form their identities even younger than in previous eras. For young women in the study, across sexual identity as well as race and class identities, often the very notion of “coming out” was irrelevant—they never understood themselves to be

heterosexual, and thus there was nothing to come out *against*. For these young women, who recall having known, and often disclosed, their romantic and sexual attractions for as long as they were conscious of their own sexuality, coming out cannot be understood as a linear process.

Second, linear goal-oriented models, which promote a fixed identity category as the ultimate goal, are not applicable for women who identify as fluid and thereby reject fixed identity categories. For these women, coming out is far from a shedding of one label, heterosexual, and coming to adopt a new label as a lesbian. Rather, fluid sexuality is about abandoning these fixed categories entirely, and adopting a truly fluid perspective of sexuality.

It is significant that women who identify as fluid report having felt “different” in high school far less than do their lesbian peers. This is the clearest evidence of the influence of the post-gay era on the experiences of LGBTQ/Fluid women in high school. In keeping with Ghaziani’s argument surrounding collective identity in the post-gay era, “difference” is “deemphasized” and instead activists assert their “similarities to, rather than difference from, heterosexuals” (Ghaziani 2011, 100). I argue that for the young women in this study, individual identity in the post-gay era functions in much the same way. Lesbian identity is perceived as an oppositional identity by the women themselves, as well as their heterosexual peers, and in turn lesbian-identified women are treated as different. Yet the women in this study do not experience these same responses to their sexual fluidity, which is less constructed in opposition to heterosexuality.

Implicit in the idea of “coming out” is the idea that one comes out against something. In the era of the closet, to come out as a lesbian was to come out against the presumption of heterosexuality. In that way the very idea of coming out assumes an oppositional identity. Stable identity categories, such as lesbian, inherently make someone “different” because their very meaning is constructed in opposition to heterosexuality. This is not the case for women who identify as sexually fluid.

The particular experience of women who identify as fluid has important practical implications. Youth in the post-gay era benefit from the significant civil rights gains of the modern LGBT rights movement. This is especially evidenced by those young women in this study who report only positive experiences with their friends, families, and communities in supporting them in discovering their own sexualities. Yet more progress must be made. Others describe experiences of isolation, oppression, and discrimination. In order to continue to make progress it is imperative that resources for sexual minority youth are geared in part towards the unique experiences of those who identify outside of traditional fixed labels. Organizations that cater to “lesbians” and “bisexuals” run the risk of appearing out of touch at best, and at worst, further alienating those they are trying to serve. The fact that some of the fluid-identified young women in this study report sometimes relying on more traditional labels in order to navigate interactions suggests an orientation to fluidity as still something outside of what LGBQ and heterosexual people alike might currently understand.

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