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Megan E. Ingraham

*Seton Hall University*, [megan.ingraham@student.shu.edu](mailto:megan.ingraham@student.shu.edu)

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“BEING BELIEVED, BEING SEEN, NOT BEING QUESTIONED”: BISEXUAL WOMEN’S  
EXPERIENCES OF VALIDITY WHILE PASSING AS HETEROSEXUAL

BY

MEGAN E. INGRAHAM

Dissertation Committee

Jason D. Reynolds (Taewon Choi), Ph.D., Mentor  
Thomas Massarelli, Ph.D., Committee Member  
Frank D. Golom, Ph.D., Committee Member

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
The Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy

Seton Hall University  
September 2021

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN SERVICES  
DEPARTMENT OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND FAMILY  
THERAPY

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### APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

**Megan E. Ingraham** has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ph.D.** during this **Fall** Semester.

#### DISSERTATION COMMITTEE (please sign and date)

Dr. Jason D. Reynolds (Taewon Choi)  
**Mentor** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Thomas Massarelli  
**Committee Member** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Frank D. Golom  
**Committee Member** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

The mentor and any other committee members who wish to review revisions will sign and date this document only when revisions have been completed. Please return this form to the Office of Graduate Studies, where it will be placed in the candidate's file and submit a copy with your final dissertation.

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### **Abstract**

The current study explored bisexual cisgender women's experiences regarding passing as heterosexual, which Dyar et al. (2014) defined as the perception that one's bisexual identity can be concealable and that bisexual individuals can choose to appear heterosexual with different-gender partners to avoid heterosexism. Utilizing intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989/1993) and Brown's (2002) bisexual identity development model as the theoretical framework, the present study related passing as heterosexual to bisexual individuals' identity validity while exploring factors that facilitate or hinder this process. This qualitative study explored the experiences of 12 bisexual cisgender adult women through semi-structured interviews in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). Interviews were conducted using Skype or phone and analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Emerging themes were discussed with support from participants' quotes regarding their experiences. Themes included factors related to passing as heterosexual as well as the impact of intersectionality on decision-making for coming out versus continuing to pass. Themes also captured validity-hindering factors (assumptions of heterosexuality, experiences of invalidation, and negative relationships with the LGBTQIA+ community) and validity-facilitating factors (specific experiences of external and internal validation, recommendations for others). Clinical implications informed by an intersectional focus and limitations of the study were also discussed.

**Keywords:** bisexual, passing as heterosexual, intersectionality, identity development

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Individuals who identify as a sexual minority (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual) experience a type of discrimination based on their sexual orientation called *heterosexism*. According to Espelage et al. (2008), heterosexism can take the form of negative beliefs, attitudes, stereotyping, and aggressive or stigmatizing behaviors towards sexual minorities. Therefore, heterosexism is a major stressor for sexual minorities that can affect mental health as well as interpersonal distress (Cunningham & Melton, 2013; Hsieh & Ruther, 2016).

Bisexual individuals as well as other plurisexual individuals (such as pansexual, fluid, and some individuals who identify as queer) may also experience an extra level of discrimination, described in the literature as *binegativity*. Dyar et al. (2014) captured this unique experience as a dual-sourced stigmatization of bisexual individuals from both heterosexual and lesbian or gay individuals, resulting in a sense of rejection and marginalization from both groups. As will be discussed, binegativity therefore places an added burden and strain on bisexual and other plurisexual individuals' sexual identity development and well-being.

Experiences of binegativity can take the form of internalized heterosexism and binegativity, which include the internalization of negative attitudes, messages, and beliefs about one's own sexual identity and about the LGBTQIA+ community in general. Several studies have associated internalized heterosexism with psychosocial distress, negative mental health outcomes, fear of rejection, and a lower likelihood of being out (McLean, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2013; Ryan et al., 2017; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Internalized binegativity specifically is also associated with psychological distress, as well as engagement with and endorsement of binegative stereotypes such as infidelity and chronic relationship distress

(Baumgartner, 2017; Hoang et al., 2011). Therefore, bisexual individuals may have to navigate heterosexism and binegativity as well as internalized heterosexism and binegativity as these experiences relate to psychosocial distress.

One way in which binegativity can emerge is in *passing as heterosexual*, which Dyar et al. (2014) described as the perception that one's bisexual identity can be concealable and the belief that bisexual individuals can choose to appear heterosexual by dating different-gender partners to avoid heterosexist consequences. This ability to pass as heterosexual can be misconstrued as having the same privileges as heterosexual individuals, and therefore bisexual individuals dating different-gender partners can experience exclusion and messages of illegitimacy as a sexual minority from the gay/lesbian community (Dyar et al., 2014). Therefore, this current work sought to contribute to the psychological literature on the concept of passing as heterosexual for bisexual individuals with different-gender partners, especially as a function of the double-pronged discrimination of binegativity.

The present study explored the experiences of passing as heterosexual in relation to *bisexual identity development*. Brown (2002) and Dodge et al. (2008) explained that seminal models of sexual identity development which conceptualize all sexual minorities' identity development as comparable misconstrue or misrepresent bisexual identity development. Therefore, distinct identity development models were developed to focus on specific experiences in bisexual identity and reference the experiences of bisexual erasure (i.e., denial that bisexuality is a real or valid identity; Flanders et al., 2016b) as well as the ways in which bisexual individuals navigate identity maintenance despite binegative messages (Brown, 2002; Weinberg et al., 1994). Brown's (2002) model was utilized as part of the current study's theoretical framework in order to understand factors in participants' bisexual identity development.

The present study focused solely on the experiences of cisgender bisexual women. In their 2014 study, Dyar et al. highlighted that although bisexual cisgender men as well as trans and nonbinary people also experience binegativity, one's own gender identity and expression may play as much of a role as one's partner's gender identity in the experience of passing as heterosexual. Therefore, there may be a wide range of experiences across both partners' gender identities that may not be fully explored in a qualitative study. Extant literature suggests that cisgender bisexual women experience binegativity differently than bisexual men because of their gender identity. Such examples that Dyar et al. (2014) discussed include that heterosexual men may eroticize female same-sex sexual encounters as well as ask bisexual women to have sex with them and another woman. Nonbinary bisexual individuals may also experience binegativity differently due to combined gender- and sexual orientation-based stereotypes of confusion and seeking attention (Anderson et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2016). Therefore, because bisexual women experience different and distinct forms of binegativity compared to other bisexual individuals based on gender, one may suspect that bisexual women would also experience passing as heterosexual differently.

Finally, the present study considered the *intersectionality* of social identities as an essential component of capturing bisexual women's experiences (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989/1993) and thus utilized this concept as part of the study's theoretical framework. Beyond the established focus on cisgender bisexual women, the current study explored how race and religion, as identities that may either hinder or facilitate identity development and decision-making, may play important roles in bisexual women's feelings of validity as well as specific experiences with passing as heterosexual. Protective factors as well as reasons for coming out versus not coming out may be different based partly on these social identities and their

intersections. Further, due to the general lack of representation for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) or religious individuals in LGBTQIA+ research, incorporating the intersections of race and religion may allow for a more holistic understanding of the larger community's experiences in passing as heterosexual.

### **Statement of Problem**

In general, research on the bisexual community is in relatively early stages of development, especially research that considers the experiences of bisexual individuals as unique and distinct from gay and lesbian individuals' experiences. The extant quantitative research explores minority stress and discrimination for bisexual women in relation to partner gender, but Dyar et al. (2014) warned that such research may not fully capture the narrative around these experiences of binegativity. To confront this lack of a narrative, qualitative research has been lauded as an especially important approach to research work with minorities in order to access the meaning and individual processes associated with their experiences. Specific to the concept of passing as heterosexual, extant qualitative research (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2019) explored the experiences of male-partnered plurisexual women during the first year of parenthood but therefore studied only a small, unique portion of the bisexual population who may be struggling with passing as heterosexual. Therefore, based on the gaps in the quantitative and qualitative literature regarding passing as heterosexual, the purpose of the present study as well as its contribution to the literature lie in the focus on accessing and understanding the rich narrative surrounding this experience in the general bisexual population.

### **Research Questions**

Because the experience of passing as heterosexual can relate to bisexual individuals' experiences of erasure or binegativity, this study focused on the following three questions: 1)

How does passing as heterosexual relate to one's bisexual identity validity? 2) What factors hinder bisexual identity validity in this experience? 3) What factors contribute to bisexual identity validity in this experience? As will be discussed, the semi-structured approach in the present study's interviews also allowed for other important questions and themes to emerge from the participants' experiences and from discussion with this researcher.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Binegativity* is prejudice against bisexual and other plurisexual individuals, which can be experienced from both heterosexual and lesbian or gay individuals (Dyar et al., 2014).

Binegativity places an added burden and strain on bisexual individuals' identity development and well-being.

*BIPOC* is an acronym (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) that acknowledges that all people of color do not face equal levels of injustice within our current systems and emphasizes how Black and Indigenous individuals are especially impacted by systemic racial oppression, White supremacy, and historic and contemporary acts of colonialism (The BIPOC Project, n.d.).

*Bisexual identity development* describes bisexual individuals' experiences as unique from other sexual minorities' identity development (Brown, 2002; Dodge et al., 2008). This process includes navigating bisexual erasure and identity maintenance despite binegative messages (Brown, 2002; Flanders et al., 2016b; Weinberg et al., 1994).

*Heterosexism* is prejudice against sexual minorities which can take the form of negative beliefs, attitudes, stereotyping, and aggressive or stigmatizing behaviors (Espelage et al., 2008). This experience of discrimination is a major stressor and can affect mental health and interpersonal relationships (Cunningham & Melton, 2013; Hsieh & Ruther, 2016).

*Internalized binegativity* is the internalization of negative attitudes or beliefs about oneself as a bisexual individual, and can manifest in negative evaluation of other bisexual individuals, self-hating attitudes and behaviors, and endorsement of negative stereotypes (Baumgartner, 2017). Similar to internalized heterosexism, internalized binegativity may be associated with minority stress and related psychological distress, as well as interpersonal distress and infidelity (Baumgartner, 2017; Hoang et al., 2011).

*Internalized heterosexism* is the internalization of negative attitudes, messages, and beliefs about oneself as a sexual minority or about the LGBTQIA+ community in general (Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). This experience is correlated with psychosocial distress including lower self-esteem, less social support, substance use, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and a greater likelihood of not disclosing one's sexual orientation (Ryan et al., 2017; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014).

*Intersectionality*, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is the concept regarding how social identities relate to each other and create unique experiences for the individual possessing the identities (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989/1993). Specific to the present study, the intersectionality of race, religion, and other social identities provide context for the experiences of passing as heterosexual and identity development.

*Passing as heterosexual* describes the perception that one's bisexual identity can be concealable, and the belief that bisexual individuals can choose to appear heterosexual by dating different-gender partners to avoid heterosexist consequences (Dyar et al., 2014). As a result, bisexual individuals can experience exclusion and messages of illegitimacy as a sexual minority (Dyar et al., 2014).

*QTBIPOC*, related to BIPOC, is an acronym for Queer and Trans Black, Indigenous, People of Color. It highlights the specific contributions and needs of BIPOC individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community, especially as BIPOC individuals simultaneously navigate racism (both in general society and often in LGBTQIA+ spaces) and anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination (Balsam et al., 2011; David, 2013; Seattle Pride, 2020). This acronym also points to the importance of intersectionality in clinical and advocacy work.

### **Significance of the Study**

The importance of the present study lies in its contribution to bisexual literature as well as in the opportunity for support and education regarding its place in larger queer liberation. First, it will contribute to the literature which explores how bisexual individuals' experiences may be unique and distinct from those of other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Specifically, these research questions may help to inform a deeper understanding of how passing as heterosexual relates to binegative messages and identity validity. The concept of passing as heterosexual is still an emerging concept in psychological literature, despite its prevalence in casual and formal conversations in the bisexual and larger LGBTQIA+ communities. This study seeks to contribute more information to bring the concept into a psychological framework.

Secondly, this qualitative research may operate as a form of validation for bisexual women as well as a mode of education for the different-gender partners involved or for clinicians working with bisexual clients. Although bisexual individuals may speak informally regarding frustrations or negative messaging around passing as heterosexual, research which supports the prevalence and validity of these processes may help to better support individuals' experiences. Also, different-gender partners (especially monosexual partners) involved in bisexual individuals' navigation of passing as heterosexual may benefit from this research, as it can serve

as a mode of education for the larger themes within the experiences. Finally, this research may encourage clinicians to directly explore binegativity and the associated messages and narratives with their bisexual clients, as clinicians of all sexual orientations may not be aware of the prevalence or specific impact of binegativity on mental health and interpersonal relationships, or how binegativity uniquely compounds upon the already difficult experiences of navigating heterosexism. The present study may also help to illuminate potential biases that clinicians may hold regarding bisexual individuals who pass as heterosexual. Because external support and messages of acceptance are important protective factors for bisexual individuals' identity development and psychological well-being, clinicians' ability to speak openly about clients' experiences of binegativity and explore their own competency with this client population may be especially helpful in the therapeutic process (Brownfield et al., 2018; Ebersole et al., 2018; Hequembourg et al., 2013).

Thirdly, the present study honors the importance of representing BIPOC women as the main agents of queer liberation. The sociopolitical movement for LGBTQIA+ rights exists primarily due to the activism of BIPOC women in the community, including Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Alice Walker, alongside an ever-expanding roster of contemporary leaders (Riemer & Brown, 2019). Therefore, research such as the present study which seeks to confront the underrepresentation of BIPOC women in extant LGBTQIA+ research not only fills gaps in academic literature but also serves as a reminder for the history of queer liberation.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### **Bisexuality and Plurisexuality**

Galupo et al. (2015) described bisexual individuals as falling under the umbrella term of plurisexuality, which encompasses individuals who experience sexual or romantic attraction to multiple genders. This term can be used to differentiate from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals, who traditionally fall under the umbrella term of monosexuality, or attraction to one gender (either same gender or different gender). Other plurisexual individuals may also identify as pansexual, queer, fluid, another term, or a combination; these individuals are also especially likely to perceive static or oversimplified definitions and labels of sexual orientation as inadequate (Galupo et al., 2015). Despite differences in definitions and identification with these differing labels, Flanders et al. (2017a, 2017b) endorsed that current studies of plurisexuality that are inclusive of pansexual, queer, and other non-monosexual identities use “bisexual” as an umbrella term in recruitment, as it is more recognizable and well-known than the term “plurisexual.”

According to Flanders et al. (2016a), bisexuality as a term also represents a wide range of varying sexual and romantic, but not necessarily equal, attractions to multiple genders that may extend beyond male and female. Flanders et al.’s (2016a) study also emphasized that it is important to consider bisexuality as a separate identity rather than a combination, most notably described as “half heterosexual and half gay.” Research has attempted to define bisexuality as sexual or relationship behaviors with more than one gender as a criterion for participants, but experience- or behavior-based definitions may erase the experiences of many bisexual people as well as contribute to ideas that a lack of sexual or romantic relationship behaviors may

“invalidate” one’s identification as bisexual, especially for young adults who identify as bisexual before their first sexual activities (Flanders et al., 2016a) or bisexual individuals in committed monogamous relationships (Hayfield et al., 2018; McLean, 2007).

### **Heterosexism and Binegativity**

Individuals who identify as a sexual minority (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual) experience a type of discrimination based on their sexual orientation called heterosexism, also referred to as homophobia. Espelage et al. (2008) described how heterosexism can take the form of negative beliefs, attitudes, stereotyping, and aggressive or stigmatizing behaviors towards sexual minorities. Examples of heterosexism include universal recognition of heterosexual marriage but denial of equivalent recognition to same-sex couples, sexual minorities’ inability to display affection in public without fear of violence or harassment, challenges with adoption and subsequent discrimination in school and pediatric healthcare systems, struggles navigating health insurance coverage and financial burdens of medical costs for same-gender relationships, and many sexual minorities’ experiences of being fired because of their sexual orientation (Chapman et al., 2012; Cunningham & Melton, 2013; Espelage et al., 2008; Gavulic & Gonzales, 2021; Hsieh & Ruther, 2016). Therefore, heterosexism is a major stressor for sexual minorities and can affect mental health as well as interpersonal relationships (Cunningham & Melton, 2013; Hsieh & Ruther, 2016).

Heterosexism, like most if not all forms of discrimination, exists at a systemic and historical level (Eldridge & Johnson, 2011; Jun, 2018). This appears in political and institutional actions (e.g., governments, healthcare systems, educational systems) that promote heterosexual lifestyle as superior, exclude or discriminate against the LGBTQIA+ community, grant privileges and benefits to heterosexual individuals, and dismiss accusations of heterosexism or

the need for further change (Eldridge & Johnson, 2011; Jun, 2018; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011). Systemic heterosexism is also supported by heteronormativity, the idea that heterosexuality is the ideal norm, the assumed sexuality of all individuals until proven otherwise, and the only favorable and visible sexuality from which all other sexualities diverge (Ingraham, 2006; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011; Sue et al., 2019). Systemic heterosexism is further supported by the more severe ideology of compulsory heterosexuality, a term coined by Rich (1980), which actively punishes, pathologizes, or penalizes non-heterosexual attraction through financial, legal, medical, educational, and other institutional means (Fraser, 2018; Hidalgo & Royce, 2017). For bisexual individuals specifically, heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, especially if internalized, can impact bisexual identity development and validity by dismissing same-gender attraction as illegitimate or lesser or by mislabeling all non-heterosexual individuals as gay/lesbian (McLean, 2018).

As sexual minorities, bisexual individuals experience heterosexism; however, research suggests that bisexual individuals' experiences are also unique and distinct from those of lesbian and gay individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Dyar et al., 2014; Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009). Beyond the uniqueness of the experience, several studies have endorsed bisexual individuals can also experience an additional burden of discrimination and stigma from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals called binegativity or biphobia (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Brownfield et al., 2018; Dyar et al., 2014; Flanders et al., 2016b; Flanders et al., 2017a; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Matsick & Rubin, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2013). This binegativity can result in bisexual invisibility/erasure as well as stigma and discrimination.

Bisexual erasure or invisibility is the denial that bisexuality is a real or valid sexuality (Flanders et al., 2016b). This can include minimization of coming out as bisexual by receiving mislabeling messages that one is in fact “still heterosexual” or “not completely out” as gay or lesbian (Flanders et al., 2016b; Gonzalez et al., 2017). With this in mind, multiple studies explored how identifying as bisexual as a natural stage or protective measure before eventually coming out as gay or lesbian can be a common experience: 40% of lesbian women in Rust’s (1993) sample, 48% of the gay men in Semon et al.’s (2017) sample, and 55% of the gay men and lesbian women in Mohr and Rochlen’s (1999) sample identified first as bisexual before identifying later as gay or lesbian. Semon et al. (2017) identified several possible reasons for this use of “transitional bisexuality,” including individuals compromising same-gender attractions with societally expected different-gender attractions early in the coming out process, attempting to reduce ostracism from family and friends, and recognizing that a strong identification with girls in their youth was believed to be attraction. However, this phenomenon for gay and lesbian individuals is possibly becoming less prevalent as acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community becomes more widespread (Slettevold et al., 2019).

In terms of this transitional lens and while analyzing the impact of binegative messages on bisexual individuals, McLean (2008) warned that the assumption that all bisexual individuals will treat bisexuality as a “stepping stone” to another identity also contributes to bisexual erasure by positing the idea that it is only a phasic or temporary identity that will eventually settle into a permanent monosexual identity. Hayfield et al. (2014) similarly identified how bisexual individuals are seen as emotionally immature, psychologically disturbed, or confused because they have not yet realized their “true” identity or “made up their minds” regarding with which

monosexual identity they would eventually identify, further outlining the negative impacts of identifying bisexuality as phasic.

Bisexual erasure also appears in the ways in which bisexual individuals are excluded from LGBTQIA+ spaces and media representation, despite making up the largest percentage of the LGBTQIA+ community (approximately 40% together, with 29% being bisexual women and 11% bisexual men), for being “not gay enough” (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Matsick & Rubin, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2013). Bisexual erasure can also emerge through assumptions about an individual’s sexual orientation based on their current partner’s perceived gender, such as women being perceived or labeled as lesbian when dating other women or as heterosexual when dating men (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Brownfield et al., 2018; Dyar et al., 2014; Flanders et al., 2017a).

With this binegativity, bisexual individuals also experience specific stigmas and stereotypes. Extant research explored several of these stereotypes, including that bisexual individuals are confused or in a phase that is not legitimate, sex-crazed or hypersexual, less capable of commitment or monogamy than monosexual individuals, attention-seeking, or not brave enough to fully come out as a monosexual sexual minority (Anderson et al., 2016; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Brownfield et al., 2018; Dyar et al., 2014). These stereotypes can be particularly harmful to bisexual individuals. For example, Bostwick and Hequembourg (2014) and Matsick and Rubin (2018) emphasized that stereotypes of bisexual individuals being noncommittal or more likely to cheat on their partners have led monosexual individuals, especially gay and lesbian individuals, to refuse to date bisexual individuals. Stereotypes of hypersexuality, promiscuity, and sexual identity confusion are also related to higher provocation of sexual assailants and result in much higher rates of sexual assault: 46% of bisexual women are

survivors of rape versus 17% of heterosexual women and 13% of lesbian women (CDC, 2010; Flanders et al., 2017b, Hequembourg et al., 2013; Johnson & Grove, 2017). Anderson et al. (2019) and Nadal et al. (2016) also highlighted an often-forgotten population: bisexual trans and nonbinary individuals are even more likely than bisexual cisgender individuals to experience sexual assault.

Bisexual individuals, especially bisexual women, often experience their sexual identity as conflated with polyamory, the practice of maintaining consensual, openly conducted, multiple-partner relationships in which all partners have access to additional partners. An estimated 4-5% of the U.S. population identifies as polyamorous, with approximately 21-22% of Americans having engaged in a consensual, non-monogamous relationship at some point in their lives (Hauptert et al., 2017). In Balzarini et al.'s (2018) study on the demographics associated with polyamory, participants in polyamorous relationships were more likely than participants in monogamous relationships to identify as bisexual (32.5% versus 13.5%) or pansexual (18.0% versus 3.5%), whereas heterosexual participants were much more likely to be in monogamous relationships than polyamorous relationships (74.0% versus 36.4%) and gay or lesbian participants were equally likely to be in either (3.9% polyamorous versus 5.8% monogamous). Although bisexuality may be common among polyamorous individuals, the perception that all bisexual individuals must therefore be polyamorous in nature, paired with a misunderstanding of healthy and ethical polyamorous practices, casts them as untrustworthy and likely to be unfaithful in monogamous relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014). In another example, Brownfield et al. (2018) connected the assumption that all bisexual individuals are polyamorous to the reception of unsolicited invitations to have sex with couples, especially as a fetish for one partner.

Bisexual individuals experience heterosexism in unique ways and navigate binegativity as an additional burden, and bisexual women experience this discrimination differently from other bisexual individuals, as will be discussed. Such examples from Dyar et al. (2014) include that bisexual women must also navigate the experience of heterosexual men eroticizing female same-sex sexual encounters or asking bisexual women to have sex with them and another woman, as discussed. Therefore, the unique challenges for bisexual individuals differentiate them from lesbian and gay individuals' experiences, as well as differentiate bisexual women from bisexual men.

### **Binegativity in the LGBTQIA+ Community**

When considering bisexual individuals' experiences with binegativity, it is imperative to note the discrimination and messages of exclusion that bisexual individuals receive directly from other members of the LGBTQIA+ community, usually identified as gay and lesbian individuals. Negative perceptions of bisexual individuals within the community are no secret: multiple studies identify how gay men and lesbian women display frequent and strong binegative views (Dyar & Feinstein, 2018; Fader, 2018; Friedman et al., 2014; Morrison et al., 2016; Sarno et al., 2020). These can take the form of beliefs about the instability of bisexuality (i.e., its phasic nature or bisexual individuals' cowardice in not coming out as gay/lesbian), sexual irresponsibility (e.g., untrustworthiness, promiscuity, inability to be monogamous, higher likelihood of having an STD), and interpersonal hostility (e.g., increased negative affect, aversion to dating bisexual individuals, verbal harassment, and implications of not belonging in queer spaces; Sarno et al., 2020). Not only is the LGBTQIA+ community sustaining the same binegative stereotypes as heterosexual individuals, but the added exclusion from queer spaces

and delegitimization of bisexual individuals as sexual minorities compounds onto the negative impacts of binegativity.

Binegativity may have different motivations for gay and lesbian individuals than for heterosexual individuals. In terms of the supposed instability of bisexual identities, Mohr and Rochlen (1999) found inverse experiences: lesbian women found male bisexuality to be more stable and less phasic than female bisexuality, while gay men found female bisexuality to be more stable. This trend suggests that individuals are more likely to hold binegative opinions specifically for the bisexual individuals whom they would be dating. As will be discussed, this close intimate contact with bisexual individuals may actually provide fodder to sustain extant binegative attitudes (Cox et al., 2013).

Tensions between bisexual and gay or lesbian individuals and communities can also be connected to the ability to pass as heterosexual. Bostwick and Hequembourg (2014) discussed how gay and lesbian individuals may view bisexual individuals in heterosexual-passing relationships as illegitimate sexual minorities attempting not only to avoid heterosexism but also to reap the benefits of heterosexual privilege. This ability to pass can also connect to lesbian and gay individuals' identification of bisexual individuals as politically untrustworthy as well. Specifically, several studies endorsed that lesbian and gay individuals may be concerned about being able to trust bisexual individuals as personal and political partners in fighting for LGBTQIA+ rights, partly due to bisexual individuals' seemingly weaker commitment to the rights movement due to their personal capacity to pass as heterosexual (Israel & Mohr, 2004; McLean, 2008; Morrison et al., 2010; Weiss, 2003). Bisexual women who were dating men were seen as reinforcing the patriarchy; at an extreme, lesbian women's distrust of bisexual women

was connected to their ability to “consort with the enemy” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1974, p. 217).

Consequences of binegativity, beyond gay and lesbian individuals’ aversion to dating bisexual individuals, include overt and covert messages of exclusion from or lack of belonging in LGBTQIA+ spaces. This experience has been present throughout the history of the rights movement. Inclusive spaces for gay and lesbian individuals were created through fierce identity politics and highly policed platforms of visibility which sought to exclude individuals deemed too marginal or challenging for the cause of acceptance within heteronormative society (e.g., bisexual and transgender individuals, historically; Barker et al., 2012; Belmonte & Holmes, 2016). Both historically and currently, bisexual individuals struggle to find safe and accepting communities where they can openly celebrate their sexual identities, and thus are more likely to report lower levels of community connection and the resultant mental health impacts of this isolation (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Frost & Meyer, 2012).

Research has aimed to identify ways to reduce binegativity within the community. In connection with Allport’s (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory, which posits that bias can be reduced through positive interpersonal contact between groups, Lytle et al. (2017) found that an increase in both quantity and quality of friendships with bisexual individuals related to more positive attitudes and decreased intergroup anxiety toward bisexual individuals. At a minimum, knowing just one bisexual person may help to reduce hostility and beliefs in the instability of bisexuality (Feinstein et al., 2016). This suggests that binegative attitudes are sustained more by negative stereotypes than by actual negative interactions with bisexual individuals. However, Cox et al. (2013) found that for four different types of social contact between gay or lesbian individuals and bisexual individuals (socialization, dating, friendship, sex), dating and having

sex with bisexual individuals were significantly with associated binegativity, whereas socializing with or being friends with bisexual individuals were not significantly associated. This opposing set of results suggests that more sustained and intimate contact, which allowed for more opportunities to be personally affected by binegative stereotypical behaviors, was associated with more negative attitudes. Therefore, more research is needed, especially in testing reduction of bias through personal education rather than intergroup contact, in order to understand ways to effectively reduce binegativity (Dyar & Feinstein, 2018).

### **Internalized Heterosexism and Binegativity**

With heterosexism as a common experience for sexual minorities, Szymanski and Henrichs-Beck (2014) found in their study that internalized heterosexism, the internalization of negative attitudes, messages, and beliefs about oneself as a sexual minority or about the LGBTQIA+ community in general, is also common. Internalized heterosexism is correlated with psychosocial distress including lower self-esteem, less social support, substance use, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Sexual minorities with higher internalized heterosexism may also be especially prone to fear of rejection based on sexual orientation and are therefore less likely to disclose and discuss their sexual orientation with others, often losing the opportunity to experience support and acceptance from others (Ryan et al., 2017).

In terms of internalized binegativity, the internalization of negative attitudes or beliefs about bisexuality, the literature is scarce. However, Baumgartner's (2017) study as one example suggests that internalized binegativity, similar to internalized heterosexism, may be associated with minority stress and related psychological distress. This internalized binegativity can manifest in the negative evaluation of other binegative individuals, self-hating attitudes and

behaviors, and the endorsement of negative stereotypes. Specifically, internalized binegativity is also positively correlated with infidelity and bisexual individuals' reports of struggling to maintain relationships (Baumgartner, 2017; Hoang et al., 2011). These experiences are linked to common binegative stereotypes that bisexual individuals are not satisfied in monogamous relationships and are more likely to be unfaithful to their partners. Therefore, Baumgartner (2017) discussed how bisexual individuals navigate their experiences of heterosexism and binegativity as well as navigating internalized heterosexism and binegativity, which may be invisibly affecting their self-concept and psychological health.

### **Passing as Heterosexual**

Passing as heterosexual is the perception that one's bisexual identity can be concealed and that bisexual individuals can avoid heterosexist consequences, intentionally or unintentionally, especially while dating a different-gender partner (Dyar et al., 2014). This is also a form of bisexual erasure, as it manifests in others' assumptions that an individual is heterosexual and has an exclusively heterosexual sexual history when the individual is dating a different-gender partner (Dyar et al., 2014; Goldberg et al., 2019). Bisexual individuals may also receive messages that their ability to pass as heterosexual is a direct choice in order to avoid heterosexist consequences or to utilize heterosexual privilege. As a result of this perceived choice to avoid heterosexism by passing as heterosexual, studies found that many bisexual individuals with different-gender partners may receive messages of exclusion and illegitimacy as a "true" sexual minority (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Dyar et al., 2014; Matsick & Rubin, 2018). Additionally, heterosexist ideas about marriage and parenthood raised in Goldberg et al.'s (2018, 2019) studies can relate to increased feelings of illegitimacy as a bisexual individual and shifts in how individuals describe and label their sexuality, including the need to "settle down"

and focus on their roles as parents and spouses. Therefore, passing as heterosexual is another way in which bisexual individuals must navigate binegativity, especially in relation to life transitions.

However, passing as heterosexual is not unique to bisexual individuals. In their 1995 study, D'Augelli and Patterson emphasized that all sexual minorities may attempt to pass as heterosexual as a protective factor against heterosexism, including with family and in the workplace. Despite these similar self-protective motivations, bisexual individuals are perceived to be more successful in passing than lesbian or gay individuals, due in part to an ability to openly date and endorse dating different-gender partners (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). Additionally, for individuals in the LGBTQIA+ community with more visible minority identities such as race or ethnicity, D'Augelli and Patterson (1995) highlighted the concept that attempting to pass as heterosexual is an added protective factor against facing more discrimination.

Passing as heterosexual can also be unintentional, as one may be observed to be heterosexual based on heterosexist assumptions that all individuals are heterosexual unless proven otherwise (Chekola & McHugh, 2012). However, passing as heterosexual, both intentionally and unintentionally, can also limit one's ability to be identified as a member of the community and likewise to identify other members of the LGBTQIA+ community who may also be attempting to pass, thereby increasing feelings of isolation (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). As discussed, regardless of intentions, passing as heterosexual can also relate to tensions between bisexual and lesbian or gay individuals, resulting in a lowered interest in dating bisexual individuals. Bisexual women have also identified binegative messages related to feminism as a movement in the past, due to accusations that they were "acculturated" into liking men or "selling out the world of women" through their attraction to men and ability to pass as

heterosexual, therefore being perceived as abandoning lesbian women to do the majority of queer feminist work (Weinberg et al., 1994, p. 35).

In relation to passing as heterosexual, the Pew Research Center (2019) also reported that only 19% of bisexual individuals are out to “all or most” of the important people in their lives (down from a quote of 28% in their 2013 study) versus 77% of gay men and 71% of lesbian women. Twenty-four percent of bisexual individuals reported they were out to “some” of the most important people, and 31% reported they were out to “only a few” (Pew Research Center, 2019). Part of this difference may be because bisexual individuals are more likely than gay or lesbian individuals to have strong negative feelings about their sexual identities or confusion about how to define them, thus inhibiting the coming out process, as well as more likely to experience negative reactions from family members when coming out (Baiocco et al., 2020; Belmonte & Holmes, 2016; Scherrer et al., 2015). The Pew Research Center’s (2019) study also found that 88% of bisexual individuals who are married or in a committed relationship have a different-gender partner, which may contribute to the lower number of bisexual individuals being out. Bostwick and Hequembourg (2014) discussed how this prevalence of bisexual individuals who are passing as heterosexual may also relate to the increased prevalence of binegativity from gay and lesbian communities, who may view these bisexual individuals as illegitimate and overly focused on enjoying the benefits of heterosexual privilege.

Regarding the lower percentage of bisexual individuals being out, McLean (2007) explored the narratives around bisexual individuals’ unique concerns about coming out. Themes included navigating the reception of external messages that bisexuality is not a “credible” or “concrete” identity, navigating misunderstanding around the many meanings of bisexuality, and navigating concerns of validity with regard to relationship history. Of note, passing as

heterosexual was also identified in McLean's (2007) study as part of individuals' decision-making when coming out, often as a way of avoiding others' misunderstanding of what bisexuality means or to avoid conflict or loss of support from loved ones. Internalized binegativity also relates to the lower likelihood of bisexual individuals being out, as individuals may have also internalized messages of identity confusion that hinder their ability to come out, a desire to avoid associating with negative stereotypes (e.g., promiscuity, infidelity), or feelings of invalidity due to a monosexual dating history or current commitment to a partner (Fader, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2018; MacDowall, 2009). The decision to come out, not only for bisexual individuals but also for gay and lesbian individuals, may also relate to a desire to maintain a sense of safety and to avoid discrimination whenever possible (Evans & Barker, 2010; McLean, 2007; Warren et al., 2014).

Being out can also be understood as existing on a spectrum alongside identity concealment (Feinstein et al., 2020). This concept describes the avoidance of disclosing one's sexual orientation, such as through techniques including social isolation, omission of identity-related details, and lying, in order to avoid rejection, stigmatization, and violence (Quinn et al., 2017). For bisexual individuals specifically, unique factors can motivate identity concealment, including not only concerns about violence or negative judgment but also a relative lack of comfort with identifying as bisexual or not seeing it as a central part of one's identity (Feinstein et al., 2020).

## **Bisexual Identity Development**

### ***Models of Identity Development***

The emergence of bisexual research has emphasized how the experiences of bisexual individuals are unique and distinct from gay and lesbian individuals' experiences. This also

connects to the process and models of bisexual identity development. Pioneering models of identity development for sexual minorities (e.g., Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994) focus on the development and acceptance of one's sexual identity, or the development of one's social sexual identity in connection to family, intimacy with others, and involvement in the LGBTQIA+ community. Of note, hierarchical stage models tend to both misrepresent and struggle to capture the diversity of identity development through the assumption that individuals move along linear and straightforward paths throughout this process (Pinto, 2018). Moreover, as Bregman et al. (2013) found, some individuals specifically do not follow these models, for example, as an act to maintain their safety or resources in heterosexist settings or because of some conflict with another social identity. Dodge et al. (2008) discussed further how the Kinsey Scale (1948, 1953), even as the classic example of sexual identity on a spectrum, conceptualized bisexuality as an incidental balance between heterosexuality and homosexuality based primarily on sexual history, rather than its own unique sexual identity.

These formative models, Brown (2002) argued, did not accurately capture or acknowledge the unique challenges of bisexual identity development, or the concept that bisexual women and bisexual men may experience their identity development process differently based on gender, just as gay and lesbian individuals have their own identity development processes. Based on the way in which bisexual identity is misconstrued or misrepresented in seminal models, bisexual identity models focus on experiences such as discovering a bisexual label despite bisexual erasure, gender differences between bisexual men and women, as well as identity maintenance and continued uncertainty for bisexual individuals in monogamous relationships or when navigating negative messages or interpersonal dynamics related to bisexuality (Brown, 2002; Weinberg et al., 1994).

Brown's (2002) model functioned as part of the theoretical framework for the present study. This model proposed four stages of bisexual identity development, the first three being carried and the fourth being adapted from Weinberg et al.'s (1994) model: Initial Confusion, Finding and Applying the Label, Settling into the Identity, and Identity Maintenance.

Initial Confusion can last for years and is defined by strong and possibly anxiety-provoking confusion regarding one's bisexual rather than monosexual (either heterosexual or gay/lesbian) attractions (Brown, 2002). Heteronormativity can play a powerful role in this phase, particularly through socialization to presume that all individuals are heterosexual unless otherwise stated or proven (Ingraham, 2006; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011; Sue et al., 2019). As discussed, due to the widespread impact of this socialization, internalized heterosexism can also stunt individuals' identity development through their desire to avoid being associated with negative attitudes, messages, and beliefs about sexual minorities and bisexual individuals, specifically those that were learned in heterosexist systems (Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Among other concerns such as lower self-esteem and higher likelihood of self-hating attitudes, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, internalized heterosexism and binegativity are also associated with being less likely to come out, thus prolonging one's own bisexual identity development (Baumgartner, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). In this stage and within the experience of internalized binegativity, same-gender attraction for bisexual individuals may be dismissed as illegitimate or lesser (McLean, 2018).

Finding and Applying the Label can originate through personal acknowledgement of their bisexual attractions, enjoying sexual activities with individuals of multiple genders, receiving encouragement from others to identify as bisexual, or learning about bisexuality through exposure to literature, social events, therapy, or organizational involvement (Brown, 2002).

Learning about bisexuality, however, can be a double-edged sword. Personal identification with a bisexual identity label can be accompanied by experiences of binegativity, usually through the stereotypes and negative messages about bisexual individuals already discussed, especially in the experience of passing as heterosexual (Anderson et al., 2016; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Brownfield et al., 2018; Dyar et al., 2014). The difficulties of finding a sexual identity label that fits can also be exacerbated by negative experiences in the larger LGBTQIA+ community. As discussed, not feeling welcome within the queer social spaces that are identified as especially helpful in this stage of identity development is a common experience, accompanied by overt negative messaging from gay and lesbian individuals (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Dyar et al., 2014; Matsick & Rubin, 2018). However, protective factors to be discussed, such as positive and supportive messages from others, an ability to navigate internal and external conflicts, and access to affirmative resources and communities, can help to buffer this experience (Brownfield et al., 2018).

Settling into the Identity involves the experiences of becoming comfortable with and accepting one's sexuality, often through social support; however, this stage could still involve questioning if an individual's bisexual attractions are phasic or transitional (Brown, 2002). Of note, this stage is associated more with personal acceptance than with sexual or romantic involvement with others. This stage may also be where bisexual individuals start to consider factors in deciding whether to come out versus pass as heterosexual. Coming out can lead to several positive outcomes, including feelings of living authentically, improved mental health and self-image, increased life and work satisfaction, better access to coping resources, relational growth, and an increased understanding of the importance of advocacy and understanding privilege and oppression (Brownfield et al., 2018; Henry, 2013; Monroe, 2000; Pistella et al.,

2016). However, coming out may also be associated with increased rejection, discrimination, victimization, and harassment (Frost et al., 2013; Guzzo et al., 2014; Pistella et al., 2016).

Therefore, safety and avoidance of discrimination are important factors to consider in coming out, even while settling into a bisexual identity (Evans & Barker, 2010; McLean, 2007; Warren et al., 2014).

Finally, Identity Maintenance is a process-oriented stage in which individuals maintain their identification as bisexual in the intrapersonal or interpersonal ways that work most effectively for them. However, individuals may not stay in the Identity Maintenance stage, as factors may arise that contribute to uncertainty in this identification, and thus this model allows for nonlinear and recursive movement between stages (Brown, 2002). Such identity maintenance may involve working actively against internalized heterosexism and binegativity which may reappear long after the stage of Initial Confusion. Since these systems of power are related not only to interpersonal distress but also to intrapersonal concerns, as discussed, bisexual identity maintenance may require working through these negative messages.

This model was specifically developed to outline bisexual men and women's experiential differences in identity development, as Brown (2002) recognized the impact of gender roles in sexual identity development (e.g., sexual exploration patterns, differing personal and societal concerns regarding same-sex attraction and non-normative sexual behaviors, societal messages regarding emotional patterns in relationships). Thus, the intersectionality of bisexuality with gender was integral to this model and to understanding the complex experiences of identity development.

### *Identity Socialization*

Beyond linear and static models, identity development can also be understood as the way in which bisexual individuals are raised, learn about their sexual identities, and are prepared for the world as sexual minorities. Mendez (2020) proposed the term “queer socialization” to describe the ways in which parents communicate messages of heteronormativity, queer culture, and tensions between the two concepts to their children. This proposed term specifically mirrors racial socialization in its four components of education: a) cultural socialization, or learning about history, promoting cultural practices, and promoting identity pride; b) preparation for bias, or promoting awareness as well as coping strategies for discrimination; c) promotion of mistrust, or emphasizing wariness for biased structures and interactions; and d) mainstream socialization, or parenting practices that avoid these discussions or encourage other values more than specific identity group membership (Hughes et al., 2006; Mendez, 2020). Socialization about queer culture would aim to disrupt heteronormativity as well as challenge popular assumptions about sexuality, gender, family, and the creation of accepting communities (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Mendez, 2020).

However, current literature regarding queer socialization almost exclusively involves sexual minority parents, typically in same-gender relationships, teaching their children about the tensions between heteronormativity and queer culture, partly in order to prepare them for experiences of heterosexism in association with their parents (Mendez, 2020; Oakley et al., 2017; Wyman Battalen et al., 2019). There is very little research regarding how parents prepare their bisexual children to be sexual minorities in the world. This may be partly due to age of coming out: the Pew Research Center’s (2013) study identified that bisexual individuals, on average, may first start thinking they are not heterosexual at age 13, know for sure that they are bisexual

around age 17, and first share this information with a friend or family member at age 20.

Therefore, much of bisexual individuals' queer socialization in their youth is being done alone, privately with peers, or through the use of online resources (Madison, 2017; Maliepaard, 2016; Morgan, 2020).

In research where parents were aware and accepting of their children's sexual minority status, barriers to socialization regarding their sexual identities included parents' struggles in a transition period after the child's coming out, a lack of education or comfort about how to teach safe same-gender dating and sexual practices, and a lack of support or community for parents raising queer children (Macapagal et al., 2016; Newcomb et al., 2018). Considering the four components of queer socialization, parents' typical uncomfortable avoidance of discussing sexual identity development and safe relationship practices falls into mainstream socialization (Mendez, 2020). With this component being the most prevalent, many bisexual individuals are not experiencing queer socialization in their youth in order to foster positive identity development.

### **Protective Factors**

With bisexual individuals' perceived isolation from the LGBTQIA+ community and higher risk for mental health concerns, sexual victimization, and substance abuse, Hequembourg et al. (2013) endorsed that protective factors are essential for maintaining bisexual individuals' good health and psychological well-being. Protective factors that have been identified for positive identity development include supportive responses to coming out from partners, family, and friends; being able to navigate the intersectionality and conflicts with other personal identities; having access to bisexual role models; and the current sociopolitical movement towards a more affirmative and accepting climate for the LGBTQIA+ community (Brownfield et

al., 2018). Access to resources, including mental health resources, connection with bisexual-affirmative LGBTQIA+ communities and conversations, and higher education, were also connected to better experiences in coming out (Brownfield et al., 2018).

There are also several positive outcomes associated with bisexual individuals' coming out process, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and larger improvements. Brownfield et al.'s (2018) study of positive outcomes included the feelings of living authentically, improved mental health and alleviation of negative self-image, advocacy for self and others, relational growth and authenticity, and the development of critical consciousness and increased understanding of the intersectionality of one's own privileges and oppressions. Extant studies have also already begun to explore the unique factors within identity development, positive coming out experiences, and the ways in which bisexual individuals navigate the extra burden of binegativity. Bisexual individuals have also endorsed larger themes within LGBTQIA+ coming out as well, including higher self-esteem, less anxiety, increased life and work satisfaction, and better access to coping resources and support (Henry, 2013; Monroe, 2000; Pistella et al., 2016).

When exploring protective factors for bisexual individuals, positive and negative outcomes of not coming out can also be considered. Past studies listed several negative outcomes of coming out, including exposure to rejection from friends and family, discrimination, and increased victimization and harassment (Frost et al., 2013; Guzzo et al., 2014; Pistella et al., 2016). This decision-making can also be related to familial identity factors, as parents' right-wing conservative political ideology, religiosity, and lower educational levels are all related to negative responses to LGBTQIA+ individuals coming out (Baiocco et al., 2013; Conley, 2011; Pistella et al., 2016). Therefore, when considering both general community as well as bisexual-specific risks and benefits of coming out, balancing positive and negative outcomes to coming

out versus continuing to pass as heterosexual plays an important role in understanding bisexual individuals' experiences.

Another protective factor could help provide bisexual women with feelings of validity while otherwise feeling erased and invisible: disrupting assumptions of heterosexuality through experimentation and expression in dress and appearance. Historically, the LGBTQIA+ community developed appearance norms so that members could recognize each other and create safe spaces without necessarily being recognized by heterosexual individuals (Clarke & Smith, 2015; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Hayfield, 2020; Hutson, 2010; Huxley et al., 2014). Although appearance norms and styles are actually more diverse, subtle, and nuanced across the community, such as in the different styles across the femme-butcht spectrum, lesbian styles have been predominantly associated with more masculine appearances through masculine-styled clothing and shorter haircuts (Hayfield, 2013; Hayfield, 2020; Huxley et al., 2014). Because no established bisexual appearance norms exist yet in the larger community, bisexual women may interact with these appearance norms by "borrowing" aspects of lesbian dress and appearance or adopting looks that are more androgynous and blend elements of masculinity and femininity (Hayfield, 2020). Moreover, several studies have captured bisexual women's awareness of societal pressures, specifically that more feminine dress and appearance is expected in different-gender relationships; however, bisexual women find ways to subvert these expectations rather than conform (Hayfield, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2013; Huxley et al., 2014). Daly et al. (2018) found that bisexual women in different-gender partnerships may dress in lesbian-classified ways, and women in same-gender relationships may dress in more feminine ways in order to combat bisexual erasure in both cases and disrupt assumptions about their sexuality. These findings

suggest that partner gender may play a role in bisexual women's decision-making about utilizing this protective factor.

### **Intersectionality with Other Identities**

Intersectionality is the concept regarding how multiple social identities relate to each other and create unique experiences for the individuals possessing these social identities (Cole, 2009). Crenshaw (1989/1993), a leading scholar and co-founder of Critical Race Theory, first coined the term as she confronted the societal tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories in discussions of identity and discrimination, thereby erasing the narratives of BIPOC women who develop their racial and gender identities in tandem as well as experience both racism and sexism (Crenshaw et al., 1996). Crenshaw's work with intersectionality has its roots in many social justice theories, including feminist and critical race theories. With these roots in mind, Cole (2009) and Shields (2008) explained that intersectionality entered psychological research since as a critical reconceptualization of the interplay of social identities. Therefore, in research that involves understanding individuals' unique experiences with identity development, considering and exploring individuals' intersectionality of social identities plays an important role in understanding the experience. As will be discussed, different identities can even provide parallel experiences that can facilitate navigation of negative messages and resilience (e.g., biracial and bisexual navigation of "othering"), and these connections between identities should not be overlooked.

Beyond the intersectionality of social identities themselves, it is imperative to frame this concept also as the interplay of larger social systems that create and sustain complex inequalities as well as the importance of coalitions to confront such injustice (Grzanka et al., 2017). Social identities do not develop nor exist in vacuums and thus intersectional research must be sure to

include discussion of these institutional and historic systems of inequality that inform identity development, group membership and engagement, and decision-making (Warner & Shields, 2018). The present study utilized intersectionality within its theoretical framework both through the analysis of the intersections of social identities as well as through discussions around how social systems inform such decision-making and identity development and different actions that can be taken to confront such systems.

Intersectionality is also important to consider with this subject matter because of the way in which the interaction of different identities can relate to decision-making about passing as heterosexual. The concept of stigma management, first coined by Goffman (1963), suggests that individuals engage in different strategies to avoid or cope with stigma; Meisenbach (2010) expanded this theory to organize strategies into two criteria: how individuals accept or reject the stigma's application to themselves and how they accept or reject the stigma's public understanding. Therefore, the way individuals navigate stigma management for multiple different identities (which may even conflict with each other) may inform the experience of passing as heterosexual as both a personal and interpersonal process. Further, the ability to pass as heterosexual can be considered both a deeply personal as well as privileged (though complex) experience, and thus is inextricable not only from the intersectionality of an individual's multiple identities but also from their associated systems of power and injustice.

Considering social identities such as race, gender, educational and socioeconomic status, immigration status, and ability status can help to inform an understanding of bisexual individuals' varied experiences. Even more transient identities such as geographic location or age can still relate deeply to individuals' experiences with heterosexism, binegativity, and decision-making about passing as heterosexual.

## *Gender*

The current study focused on the experiences of cisgender bisexual women in order to understand specific experiences regarding binegativity in different-gender relationships; however, Dyar et al. (2014) discussed how bisexual cisgender men as well as trans and nonbinary individuals also experience unique expressions of binegativity. For example, although bisexual individuals in general are stereotyped as hypersexual, bisexual men are more likely than bisexual women to be stereotyped as high-risk for sexually transmitted infections and diseases and therefore may experience a specific, associated discrimination (Dyar, 2016; Yost & Thomas, 2012). Bisexual men are also less likely to be out; in the Pew Research Center's (2013) study, although 28% of all bisexual individuals were out, the actual distribution when broken down by gender showed 33% of bisexual women and only 12% of bisexual men were out to most or all of the most important people in their lives.

Although all bisexual individuals are at a more pronounced risk for sexual assault than monosexual individuals, bisexual trans and nonbinary individuals are even more likely than bisexual cisgender individuals to experience sexual assault; this may be due to stereotypes of being confused or attention-seeking that are attributed to both bisexuality and nonbinary gender identities (Anderson et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2016). There is still a general lack of research exploring trans and nonbinary bisexual individuals' experiences of gender- and sexual orientation-based discrimination. Despite this gap in the literature, research still supports the concept that gender plays a role in bisexual individuals' specific experiences of binegativity.

Notably, bisexual women may experience discrimination based on their gender and sexual orientation and their experiences of binegativity may be connected to gender-based stereotypes, emphasizing the intersectionality of these identities and discrimination. For

example, bisexual women (similarly to women with other sexual orientations) may be eroticized by heterosexual men, with the added stereotypes that bisexual women are more willing to respond positively to sexual objectification, harassment, overt eroticization of women's same-sex sexual encounters, and invitations for threesomes due to stereotypes of hypersexuality (Dyar et al., 2014; Dyar, 2016).

Although bisexual women and men's experiences may be similar in some ways, in other ways they mirror each other: for example, Dyar (2016) highlighted that although all bisexual individuals may experience binegative messages that they "truly" have a different, more "legitimate" sexual orientation, bisexual men are typically assigned the label of "actually gay" and bisexual women are typically assigned the label of "actually heterosexual." These mirrored experiences of binegativity may spring from a patriarchal hyperfocus on male-centered sex, called a "one-drop rule": men who have sex with men at least once are gay, and women who have sex with men at least once are heterosexual (Callis, 2013; Morrison et al., 2016). Morrison et al. (2016) hypothesized that these differing labels may also be due to more severe heterosexist stigma associated with male same-gender sexual activity, whereas female same-gender sexual activity may be more acceptable as a phase due to opportunities for fetishization. This is further supported by studies in which heterosexual men consistently reported more negative views of bisexual men, motivated by heterosexist concerns around being labeled as gay/bisexual themselves or misconceptions that romantic attention from bisexual men would make them gay/bisexual, or binegative perceptions that bisexual men are only masking their gay identities (Dyar & Feinstein, 2018; Friedman et al., 2014; Morrison et al., 2016). In these same studies, heterosexual men still endorsed negative views of bisexual women, though not as severe as their views of bisexual men.

Although these experiences are equally important and relate to each other as well as to larger themes of binegativity, these differences can also warrant studying different genders separately. Because bisexual women experience different and distinct forms of binegativity than other bisexual individuals, one may suspect that bisexual women would also experience passing as heterosexual differently than other bisexual individuals.

### ***Race***

In general, BIPOC people are not represented in LGBTQIA+ research, leading to misconceptions that QTBIPOC people do not exist or represent too small a percentage to require representation (Meyer, 2010). This lack of representation is a distinct form of erasure for the QTBIPOC communities that were integral and present since the beginning of LGBTQIA+ rights and liberation movements and earlier (Meyer, 2010; Moradi et al., 2010). Pachankis and Goldfried (2004) also highlighted how the lack of representation in literature has allowed for the development of other misconceptions that affect QTBIPOC people's ability to come out; for example, bisexual BIPOC individuals may face pressure to choose between affiliation with the bisexual community or with their own ethnic community. Meyer (2010) emphasized, however, that it is still possible for QTBIPOC people to maintain positive racial and sexual identities as well as strong affiliations with both communities. In Meyer's (2010) comparative study regarding resilience, although Black and Latino bisexual individuals were less likely than White bisexual individuals to be out, the groups did not differ significantly in how they managed their sexual identities, including engaging in similar patterns of social support with friends and family or the LGBTQIA+ community. When considering how different BIPOC communities conceptualize the intersectionality of racial and sexual identities, however, it is essential to not create the monolith of "all BIPOC people"; different communities' conceptualizations and value

systems regarding sexuality (e.g., machismo in some Latino communities or “low down men” in some Black communities) as well as White supremacist systems and history of sexual oppression affect the communities in unique and distinct ways (Boykin, 2005; Meyer, 2010).

There may also be more specific parallels regarding minority experiences in the intersections of race and bisexuality. Biracial people who identify as bisexual may have unique experiences by having two identities that are seen as “in-between” (heterosexual and lesbian/gay; two or more racial groups) and may feel marginalized and excluded as a result (Paz Galupo et al., 2019; Rostosky et al., 2010). However, these individuals may be better equipped to code-switch across different social spaces and opportunities for connection and may develop unique coping strategies for navigating multiple groups’ rejections (Dworkin, 2002; Ghabrial, 2019). Moreover, the ability to pass as White and pass as heterosexual can similarly exacerbate feelings of invisibility and discontent, even while recognized as a source of privilege and safety (Ghabrial, 2019). As a difference between the two identities, although passing as heterosexual could be seen alternatively as a choice by the individual or a label assigned by others, passing as White is often based on more “uncontrollable” characteristics such as skin color (Lingel, 2009). In relation to the current study, bisexual BIPOC people’s decision-making about coming out versus passing as heterosexual also relates to messages of acceptance within the LGBTQIA+ community; Balsam et al. (2011) highlighted how QTBIPOC individuals experience racism within the community, for example through restricted access to LGBTQIA+ safe spaces, racial microaggressions, and messages of restrictions in dating and relationships. David (2013) also theorized that White members of the LGBTQIA+ community may discriminate against QTBIPOC people in order to offset discomfort about experiencing external and internalized heterosexism by utilizing Whiteness as an available advantage. Therefore, extant racism within

the LGBTQIA+ community may also prevent BIPOC individuals from coming out as bisexual and experiencing binegativity as an additional form of discrimination.

### ***Religion***

Past studies have already acknowledged that due to bisexual individuals' underrepresentation in academic literature, research regarding the intersectionality of bisexual and religious identities is still in development (Jefferies et al., 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2013; Toft, 2009). However, several key themes in these identities' interactions have emerged. Brownfield et al.'s (2018) study discussed that bisexual individuals navigate coming out while balancing religious identities that may communicate disapproving messages regarding sexual minorities (e.g., being LGBTQIA+ is "against God's will," p. 225) or experiencing pressure to choose one identity over the other. These negative messages can appear on societal, parochial, and interpersonal levels, as bisexual individuals have reported receiving overt binegative messages almost exclusively from individuals with strong religious beliefs or from gay or lesbian individuals (Anderson et al., 2016). These same messages can further appear in the experience of internalized binegativity when individuals are rationalizing the suppression of their sexual identities; for example, Goldberg et al.'s (2018) study participants endorsed that same-gender attraction is not allowed according to faith teachings. Religion can also play a role in bisexual individuals' coming out and identity development due to familial religious beliefs, regardless of the individual's own religious identity: familial identification with a religious community that supports the LGBTQIA+ community is related to stronger acceptance of individuals when they come out (Israel & Mohr, 2004). In contrast, a participant in Brownfield et al.'s (2018) study described how rejecting heterosexist religious beliefs can feel like an extension of rejecting one's family.

Religiosity can also play a positive role in some bisexual individuals' identity development. Within the larger LGBTQIA+ community, several studies (Foster et al., 2015; Kubicek et al., 2009; Levy, 2012; Levy & Reeves, 2011) found that religious faith can be a protective factor in building resilience and providing a framework for processing and making meaning out of difficult experiences. LGBTQIA+ affirmative faith traditions and religious messages have also been found to relate to stronger psychological health, especially in combatting depression as well as increasing resilience to discrimination and individuals' access to social support (Gattis et al., 2014; Lease et al., 2005; Page et al., 2013). Some LGBTQIA+ individuals who maintain a religious faith endorse resilience and empowerment in their ability to prioritize a loving relationship with God as separate from churches' heterosexist messages, thus navigating a way to maintain both a faith identity and a sexual minority identity together (Foster et al., 2015; Kubicek et al., 2009; Levy, 2012; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Sherry et al., 2010). Finally, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2014) discussed how religious faith can even function as a protective factor for the health risk behaviors for which the LGBTQIA+ community is most at risk; LGBTQIA+ youth in more affirming religious climates may be less likely to engage in excessive alcohol use or risky sexual behaviors.

Passing as heterosexual may also play a role in the intersection of bisexual and faith identities. Rodriguez et al. (2013) highlighted that bisexual Christians in different-gender relationships may experience more privilege than bisexual Christians in same-gender relationships; although both individuals may experience heterosexism and binegativity alongside Christian privilege as the dominant faith tradition in the United States, the individual in the different-gender relationship may not receive messages of disapproval within their faith community because they pass as heterosexual. Therefore, balances of privilege and

discrimination may play a role in the intersections of identities and the decision-making about coming out.

### *Socioeconomic and Education Statuses*

Based on the National Health Interview Study, a nationally representative survey of households conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), bisexual individuals are significantly more likely to experience poverty than heterosexual or gay and lesbian individuals, even after controlling for education, demographic, and health measures (Lee Badgett, 2018; NCHS, 2014). Comparatively, bisexual women had a poverty rate almost twice as high as lesbian and heterosexual women (27.3% of bisexual women versus 13.8% of lesbian women and 14.3% of heterosexual women). In a set of conflicting results, bisexual women have lower educational attainment than heterosexual women alongside a higher likelihood to be unpartnered and never married, all of which would increase the likelihood of experiencing poverty, but they are also more likely to be working and less likely to have children, which should decrease the relative risk of poverty (Lee Badgett, 2018). The Pew Research Center's (2013) study found similar results: bisexual individuals have lower family incomes and are less likely to be college graduates than gay men and lesbian women, but attributed this partly to the relatively younger age of bisexual respondents. However, Ross et al. (2016) reported that the higher likelihood for mental health concerns that bisexual individuals experience (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD), experiences of discrimination within the workplace, and financial consequences of coming out to heterosexist family members while still a dependent affected bisexual individuals' socioeconomic status, educational attainment, employment experiences, and earning potential. Therefore, special consideration should be given to bisexual individuals experiencing poverty due to these compounding and unique factors.

### ***Geographic Location***

Identity concealment, such as passing as heterosexual, is more prevalent in geographic areas with largely negative public attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community, including areas in the South and Midwest (Knight et al., 2016). However, geographic location also relates to individuals' experiences through the continuum of rural and urban settings across the United States, with individuals being more likely to disclose their sexual identity in a large city (Knight et al., 2016). On the other hand, research such as Woodell's (2018) study regarding the experiences of LGBTQIA+ community members in rural settings suggests conflicting results. In some studies, individuals in rural settings have worse health outcomes due to avoidance of stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings (Dahlhamer et al., 2016) or may experience stigma due to heterosexism in fundamentalist religious or politically conservative views (Warren et al., 2014). However, other studies such as Swank et al. (2012) directly compared individuals in rural and urban settings and reported no differences in rates of well-being, despite stronger feelings of isolation from LGBTQIA+ communities. This difference suggests that individuals in rural settings may have unique conceptualizations or access to resources that may not be captured in the literature, and underlines the importance of capturing such narratives (Woodell, 2018).

### ***Age***

This identity is an important factor to consider in LGBTQIA+ research, not only because age connects to witnessing historical developments in societal acceptance but also because the population of individuals in the community surviving to older adulthood is steadily increasing (Hayslip & Fruhauf, 2019). Older adults in the LGBTQIA+ community have also been traditionally understudied and underserved in healthcare services, leading to the emergence of

community organizations in order to provide quality care and support (Lee & Quam, 2013). However, geographic location also plays a role in supporting the LGBTQIA+ community across the lifespan: Lee and Quam (2013) discussed how community organizations for older adults are more likely to live in urban rather than rural settings, and how older adults in rural LGBTQIA+ communities tend to be overlooked when considering service distribution. With the conceptualization of identity development as a process occurring across the lifespan, capturing a wide range of ages and geographic locations in research provides a better understanding of how different priorities, decisions, and access to resources relate to one's bisexual identity development and validity.

### **The Role of Therapy**

With the many unique concerns for bisexual individuals discussed thus far, therapy can either facilitate or hinder feelings of validity and resilience against binegative experiences. A large portion of literature regarding competency in practice typically groups gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients together and therefore may minimize or completely erase the latter's specific needs. However, the literature also consistently encourages not only general competencies working with the community but also an understanding of bisexual clients' specific concerns and experiences.

### ***Common Experiences Within the LGBTQIA+ Community***

Despite the emphasis on the uniqueness of their experiences, bisexual individuals may still experience the same concerns and challenges as the larger community, including the consequences of coming out, experiences of prejudice and discrimination – especially in the therapeutic space – and navigating family construction and aging concerns in a heterosexist society (Eleuteri et al., 2019; Sue et al., 2019).

Heterosexist bias in therapy can appear in many ways: through assumptions of heterosexuality unless otherwise discussed, a belief that sexual minorities are sinful or mentally ill, a failure to recognize the impact of discrimination and internalized heterosexism on clients' emotional state, a belief that being a sexual minority is only based on sexual activity and therefore is not family-friendly, or underestimating the consequences of coming out and pushing for disclosure without assessing the risks (Eleuteri et al., 2019; Sue et al., 2019). Even well-meaning therapists can disconnect with LGBTQIA+ clients through over-identification, such as by discussing their own connections to the community through friends or family, or through changes in behaviors and demeanor meant to communicate comfort and acceptance while actually communicating the “different” or “other” status of their clients (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011).

Heterosexist bias can also connect to therapists pathologizing or overly focusing on clients' sexuality as the cause of their concerns. Extant literature frequently notes that therapists who do not manage their own biases are more likely to misidentify presenting problems as connected to clients' sexual orientation, and thus may provide unhelpful or incorrect therapeutic interventions (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011; Sue et al., 2019). As an extreme but not uncommon example, therapist bias and belief in the pathology of a sexual minority identity can result in a focus on conversion therapy, an unethical and ineffective practice which attempts to force a client to renounce their sexual or gender identity (APA, 2013; Flores et al., 2020). As of August 2021, only 20 states have completely outlawed conversion therapy for minors, which can also speak to LGBTQIA+ individuals' apprehensions and hesitation regarding therapy (Weir, 2020). These considerations lay the groundwork for understanding bisexual clients' experiences in therapy alongside other members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

### *Bisexual Individuals' Presenting Concerns in Therapy*

Beyond the general concerns for sexual minority clients already discussed, bisexual individuals have unique concerns based on their own experiences as double-marginalized sexual minorities. However, issues and therapeutic interventions concerning bisexual clients specifically are underrepresented in extant literature, despite the higher likelihood to experience mental health concerns compared to heterosexual or gay/lesbian clients due to the doubled experiences of heterosexism and binegativity (Brooks & Inman, 2013; Ebersole et al., 2018; Kerr et al., 2013; Smalley et al., 2015; Worthington & Strathausen, 2017).

As expected, bisexual clients report that their experiences with binegativity are a common presenting problem in therapy. Beyond the stereotypes, negative messages, and impact on social support and feelings of belonging already discussed in association with binegativity, clients also experience binegativity directly from their therapists, including through therapists' lack of belief in the legitimacy or existence of bisexuality or belief that clients are confused, hypersexual, or incapable of monogamy (MacKay et al., 2017; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). These stereotypes about bisexuality can also affect therapists' perceptions about clients' overall functioning, likelihood of viewing clients' problems as related to these stereotypes, and assessment of the seriousness of presenting problem (Mohr et al., 2009; Scherrer, 2013). McNamara and Wilson's (2020) meta-analysis found that therapists' lack of knowledge regarding both heterosexism and binegativity within society and their own language and interventions also consistently created a negative environment for clients and disrupted the therapeutic relationship.

Understandably, bisexual clients generally report negative experiences receiving mental health services, frequently identifying their assumed role as educator as a common point of

frustration. Studies have found that bisexual clients frequently had to educate their therapists while attempting to receive therapeutic support, often feeling as though they had to do so in order to receive effective therapy or that they were being pumped for information about sexual identity in general (Eady et al., 2011; Kidd et al., 2011; MacKay et al., 2017). Therefore, bisexual clients' negative experiences in therapy are directly associated with professionals' lack of understanding or knowledge regarding their identities or lived experiences.

## CHAPTER 3

### Method

The general lack of literature that explores passing as heterosexual for bisexual individuals emphasizes the importance of conducting a qualitative study to access its narratives. Further, because the literature also emphasizes key differences within the bisexual community with regard to binegativity (such as through the intersections with race or gender) the structure of this study focused on emphasizing the simultaneous uniqueness and validity of the participants' narratives and the meaning associated with their experiences.

### Paradigm and Research Design

The present study functioned within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm in order to engage in what Ponterotto (2005) described as the hermeneutical discovery, or uncovering of hidden insight, around bisexual individuals' experiences with the erasure and binegativity associated with passing as heterosexual. Moreover, this paradigm emphasizes the fact that the variety and diversity in how bisexual individuals navigate identity development and validity are equally real and important, as well as highlights the importance of how the researcher and participant interact regarding the topic (Hansen, 2004; Schwandt, 1994). The present study also utilized the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research design in order to understand the ways in which the participants make sense of their experiences with passing as heterosexual and its connection to bisexual identity development (Amos, 2016; Gill, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Specifically, the current study utilized Smith and Osborn's (2008) steps: notes and comments from transcripts were developed into themes which were then connected across transcripts and clustered into larger themes, with the participants' quotes used to support the interpretation.

Brown's (2002) bisexual identity development model and intersectionality theory functioned as the present study's theoretical framework. Although the original interview protocol did not assess for participants' positionality in specific stages of identity development, the themes discovered in the coding process helped to exemplify the main messages and goals of each stage. Further, a focus on intersectionality not only allows for the analysis of participants' individual social identities but also fosters discussion of how social systems and historical inequalities inform decision-making, identity development, and actions that clinicians can take in order to confront such systems.

### **Participants**

Based on recommendations from its paradigm and research design, this study involved 12 participants. Inclusion criteria included that participants identify as cisgender women; identify as bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise plurisexual; and report that they are currently dating or have previously dated a different-gender partner. Participants should be out as bisexual to their partners but did not have to be out to family or in other major parts of their life. The partner did not have to identify as plurisexual or cisgender, but the participant should be able to report that their relationship has been perceived to be heterosexual. Participants were all over 18 years old and received a high school diploma or GED. Participants endorsed their ability to read, write, and speak English. All participants also received compensation (\$20 gift card or online payment) for their participation.

Data were obtained from these 12 participants, whose ages ranged from 21 to 63 ( $M=32.25$ ,  $SD=10.4$ ). All participant names were changed in order to protect their confidentiality and privacy. All 12 participants identified as cisgender women. Seven participants endorsed bisexual as their only sexual identity label, while three participants described themselves as

bisexual/pansexual and two participants described themselves as bisexual/queer. Nine participants were United States residents (four currently in the Northeast, one in the Midwest, two in the West, two in the South) and the three remaining participants were from the United Kingdom, the Bahamas, and the Netherlands. Regarding race, four participants identified as White, three participants identified as biracial, two participants identified as Black, two participants identified as Hispanic or Latina, and one participant identified as Asian American. In order to center the importance of language in participants' identities, descriptions of participants alongside their quotes utilized their own identity descriptors.

Ten of 12 participants were currently in committed relationships or married, with one participant being single and one participant being widowed. Eight participants reported currently dating a heterosexual man, one participant reported currently dating a lesbian woman, and one participant reported currently dating a lesbian nonbinary individual. All participants currently in relationships were out to their partners. In terms of academic status, two participants had associate degrees, four participants had bachelor's degrees, four participants had master's degrees, and two participants had obtained their doctorates. More information regarding participants' demographics can be found in Appendix C.

## **Procedure**

Participants were recruited via LGBTQIA+ subreddits on Reddit that allowed study participation requests (e.g., r/Bisexual, r/BisexualWomen r/QueerWomenOfColor), as well as through the APA Division 44 (Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity) listserv. Interested individuals were directed to an online demographic form in order to assess eligibility. Eligible participants were contacted to answer any questions as well as schedule an interview.

Participants were recruited via stratified sampling based on self-reported racial/ethnic identity on the demographic form. Stratified purposeful sampling is a form of random sampling that allows for the more intentional inclusion of specific subsets of the population relative to the research questions (Marshall, 1996; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). Rather than relying on statistically representative data (e.g., the U. S. Census) for stratification purposes, which would assign approximately 9 to 12 slots to White participants, this research functioned within the theoretical approach of contributing to gaps in literature by more significantly capturing the experiences of bisexual BIPOC women. Therefore, the 12 to 15 initial participant slots would ideally be divided amongst Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black and African American, Latina and Hispanic, Native American, multiracial, and White, with preferably at least 1 and no more than 3 participants for each stratum. If a stratified sample would not be possible despite extended recruitment efforts, the present study aimed to interview approximately 8 to 11 BIPOC women and no more than 4 White women. In actuality, the study was not able to achieve a stratified sample (with 4 White participants, 3 biracial participants, 2 Black participants, 2 Hispanic/Latina participants, 1 Asian American participant) but maintained its secondary approach of focusing primarily on BIPOC narratives. This study also attempted to provide representation regarding age and geographic location, although these identities were not stratified.

Interviews took place via Skype or over the phone. Interviews were semi-structured and were advertised as lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, though the actual range was between 25 and 95 minutes ( $M=44.58$ ,  $SD=19.09$ ). Semi-structured interviews can increase researcher-participant engagement, an important factor in this paradigm and research design, by allowing adjustments in interview questions and order based on participant responses (Pietkiewicz &

Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008). As this was a voluntary study, participants were allowed to discontinue participation without incurring penalty if they felt uncomfortable. In line with Morrow's (2005) suggestions, the researcher also provided a copy of the transcript to participants in order to practice good member checking. After receiving the transcript, participants were encouraged to follow up with the researcher if they wanted to add any additional reflections after the interview, and two participants used this opportunity to expand upon their answers.

The use of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the research method of this study called for in-depth immersion in the transcripts. In this process described by Smith and Osborn (2008), transcripts are read individually with the researcher's comments, including summaries, paraphrasing, associations, and preliminary interpretations, in the margin. The researcher returns to the transcript upon completion of this preliminary read-through in order to identify common themes which emerged from the initial notes. These themes are written down and compared with other transcripts' emerging themes in order to identify clusters of themes. This comparison of themes across transcripts can develop via the use of a spreadsheet, in which transcripts' themes are side-by-side in columns for easy identification of repeating themes. The use of the spreadsheet also helps to reveal how themes that emerged later may still be captured in earlier transcripts upon second review. The researcher then returns to each transcript to confirm that the themes capture the primary source material in the participants' descriptions of their experiences and interpretations. The current study utilized a co-coder as well as an auditor to ensure that the researcher's own potential biases had minimal impact on the analysis process. Due to IPA's iterative nature, as initial themes emerged in early transcripts the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for inclusion of questions regarding these themes in later interviews to more intentionally approach saturation (Amos, 2016; Gill, 2014; Smith & Osborn,

2008). Beyond these initial steps in identifying themes, the researcher met with the research mentor in order to rename themes in a more interpretive rather than descriptive manner and to discuss two themes that sounded too alike. After this step, the researcher met with the co-coder and auditor again to assess the quotes' application to a newly refocused and renamed theme; at this time, the co-coder was able to identify a stronger focus in order to distinguish the themes.

### **Quality and Trustworthiness**

Bisexual-specific research is still in its infancy, with binegativity from both heterosexual and lesbian and gay communities as an even newer concept in the literature. However, extant literature emphasizes the negative relations between binegativity and bisexual identity validity and development. Because passing as heterosexual is a very common experience for bisexual individuals and the related erasure is an aspect of binegativity and negative outcomes, the present study focused on an important and prevalent factor for many bisexual individuals which has not been studied qualitatively. Therefore, because of the importance of this concept in understanding and supporting bisexual individuals' experiences, it was essential that this study be able to provide a certain level of quality in the collection of data and analysis of participant themes.

Morrow (2005) discussed how the departure from quantitative language of "validity" and "reliability" emphasizes the fact that qualitative approaches are diverse in their paradigmatic standards and therefore have different standards for achieving high quality in their analyses. In line with Creswell's (2007) and Ponterotto's (2005) guidelines, the current study achieved quality and trustworthiness through several checks including saturation of themes, member checking, bracketing, writing memos about the writers' assumptions and biases, and the use of an external auditor. Saturation, or redundancy, of themes emphasizes that enough participant engagement as well as variety in engagement begins to reveal common themes discussed by

most participants. In this research design and paradigm, Creswell (2007) would call for about 12 to 15 participants, and more if saturation is not adequately reached. In order to achieve credibility in capturing the participants' unique experiences, the researcher also engaged in member checking through sharing transcripts with the participant and allowing for elaboration. As part of recognizing my own positionality, I also engaged in bracketing in order to both analyze the sensitivity of the questions and to understand my own responses in relation to the topic and to the participants' questions (Creswell, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). Based on this process, I adjusted questions for clarity and sensitivity. Also, as part of the analysis plan and as a form of reflexivity and quality, I partnered with a co-coder alongside an auditor in order to extract and explore themes. Although researcher-participant interaction is an important aspect of the interview process, it is still important that the researcher understands her own biases and experiences in relation to the topic, interview process, and analysis.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Below, the rhetorical structure shifts into first person when discussing reflexivity and positionality in relation to this topic. This study utilized several methods for reflexivity, including bracketing as part of question development, writing memos to increase awareness of assumptions and biases, exploring positionality, and utilizing a co-coder and auditor in coding and analysis.

I am a 27-year-old, White, bisexual, agnostic, upper class, able-bodied, cisgender woman who was dating a cisgender man when I came out as bisexual in the autumn of 2015. Therefore, the first four years of my bisexual identity development after coming out were framed within the context of a relationship in which I passed as heterosexual. With this experience, I am personally aware of the ways in which being in a heterosexual-passing relationship can negatively affect

feelings of validity and may hinder bisexual identity development and the ability to engage in LGBTQIA+ spaces with a heterosexual partner. Although I am aware of the diversity of experiences regarding passing as heterosexual, I also seriously considered the ways in which my own experiences may have fostered a negative outlook on passing as heterosexual in relation to bisexual identity development.

In terms of competency for this project, I have conducted LGBTQIA+ research in my master's thesis, "Discrimination as a Mediator between Women's Number of Target Identities and Relational Authenticity with Male Friends" in which the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexual orientation was a main focus of the study, and in my doctoral research competency project, "'I'm still just as Christian as you': Resilience Factors for Lesbian and Bisexual Women with Christian Faith." However, as a White woman in the LGBTQIA+ community, although I am aware of and working against racism within the community, I will continue to work to ensure that I am not making assumptions about the experiences of QTBIPOC women in the LGBTQIA+ community, especially regarding protective factors for bisexual BIPOC women who are in heterosexual-passing relationships.

In terms of religion, because I was raised Catholic but now identify as Agnostic, I can understand how both my background rooted in Catholic values as well as my current concerns with the church affect my assumptions regarding other LGBTQIA+ individuals' intersectionality of faith and sexual identities. In attending Catholic, predominantly White colleges for my undergraduate and graduate studies, I also recognize that I have been immersed in this specific religious and racial environment for the duration of my education in counseling psychology and research and my own bisexual identity development. These experiences based mostly within one

religious tradition can also limit my understanding of how other religious identities relate to bisexual identity development and coming out.

Overall, my identities and past experiences play a role in my motivation to study bisexual identity development and passing as heterosexual. I personally received negative messages that my coming out was less important or valid because I was in a heterosexual-passing relationship; my bisexual friends navigating these same concerns endorsed the same negative messages from both heterosexual and lesbian and gay individuals. In this research, I hoped to hear about other individuals' experiences in passing as heterosexual and the ways in which different factors are either protective of or barriers to identity validity, amongst other themes. I also hoped to contribute these narratives to psychological literature because there exists a gap between LGBTQIA+ community conversations and academic research. If these gaps are not confronted, we lose LGBTQIA+ individuals through premature termination in therapy, loss of confidence in psychological support, and loss of trust in clinicians who are unaware of the concepts or their own biases.

My perspective regarding the study of passing as heterosexual evolved throughout my doctoral experience: at first, I was apprehensive of research that was so personal to my own bisexual identity development. However, through discussions with my research mentor, my interest in exploring an important and interesting concept in depth for a long-term project as well as my participation in online bisexual communities in which we lamented the isolation and erasure of the passing experience motivated me to take on this important concept.

Throughout the process, there were times in which I needed to take breaks for self-care, such as during literature reviews regarding bisexual stereotypes or binegativity from both heterosexual and lesbian or gay individuals, due to my own experiences of stereotype threat or negative

interpersonal experiences. I also processed my own concerns around discussing inter-community struggles between gay or lesbian individuals and bisexual individuals, as if sharing these conflicts would weaken the united front of sexual minorities confronting heterosexism. However, I found it was more important to share participants' unanimous experiences than to be concerned about any possible social implications of such personal disclosure in the community. During these times, I found that I utilized the same validation strategies as my participants: seeking support from others and engaging in internal validation of my own process. A renewed focus on the importance of capturing these narratives around passing as heterosexual in an academic light also helped my process during times of apprehension about the work.

My biases and positionality were expected to play a role in the analytic process, such as in the creation of themes. Firstly, writing about conflicts within the LGBTQIA+ community for an academic audience that will include heterosexual readers requires difficult and intentional decision-making, as I felt motivated to present a united front against heterosexism despite my own experiences with binegativity within the community. Therefore, although participants consistently reported negative experiences with the LGBTQIA+ community, I found myself very carefully and intentionally analyzing this theme due to concerns about how to best present inter-group conflict. Moreover, as a White woman, although I was prepared and informed via the literature review and personal relationships to hear about the BIPOC experiences and decision-making about passing as a protective process, I cannot fully understand their experiences as I have not experienced the doubled experiences of "othering" that QTBIPOC individuals do. My co-coder did not identify any additional themes beyond those discussed in relation to intersectionality, but the opportunities for these narratives may have been lost within the interviewing process rather than overlooked during analysis.

As discussed in my own memoing, I also believe that this research personally facilitated participants' as well as my own feelings about bisexual identity validity. As will be discussed, feeling heard and understood by other bisexual individuals and hearing similar stories helps facilitate feelings of identity validity, and participants and I frequently discussed this in our debriefing after the interview. At the same time, there were times in which I found myself wanting to engage therapeutically with participants, hoping to normalize their experiences as not only common (e.g., by sharing the statistic that 84% of bisexual individuals in serious relationships are with a different-gender partner) but also legitimate and valid. To the best of my ability, I avoided this desire to comfort rather than explore with participants, but this desire to comfort them may still have come through in nonverbal communication and my responses. Finally, this deep resonance with participants' experiences may have negatively impacted the depth at which participants explained their processes. When communicating your understanding, it is a balance to strike between participants' relief at not having to defend or overly dissect their decision-making and the loss of going deeper due to an understood common ground. Diving deeper into some participants' internal processes and decision-making, while presumed to be understood by me, would have aided my co-coder's work in understanding the participants' experiences, as well as serving to further illuminate experiences within the Results through the expansion of quotes. As a qualitative researcher working with a team for coding purposes, this is an important note to recognize about my own development.

The co-coder for the present study was a 30-year-old, heterosexual, cisgender woman of Nicaraguan and African American descent. Her interests include examining the experiences of individuals in the African diaspora. She is currently facilitating a qualitative study on socialization messages that young Black women received from family while growing up. The

auditor for the present study was a 30-year-old, heterosexual, cisgender woman of Indian descent. Her interests include bicultural identity development, psychological trauma, and other long-term impacts of experiencing and witnessing domestic violence. She is currently facilitating a study regarding South Asian Americans' experiences witnessing domestic violence in their childhood. Both the co-coder and auditor have several years of experience working in qualitative research at the doctoral level.

I worked closely with the co-coder in the creation of the themes represented in the current study, coming together in one meeting and through several emails to discuss the coding process. The co-coder and I found consensus easily, having emerged from the process with similar themes. The co-coder contributed in especially important ways through advocating for unique narratives within certain themes: although participants' particular experiences were not always represented in other transcripts, she lent a hand in understanding the nuance and diversity of experiences under certain themes. As mentioned, I also worked with the co-coder to refocus wording in order to distinguish between two similar themes; the newly distinct themes were due largely to her immersion in the data and strong understanding of the concepts.

The auditor's role was to review the quotes pulled from transcripts in order to analyze and discuss with me whether the quotes properly matched the themes in which they were categorized, as well as which quotes best described the themes. The auditor also identified quotes that better represented themes other than those under which they were categorized, and encouraged the expansion of certain themes into subthemes in order to utilize the diversity of experiences captured in the quotes. I took the auditor's advice about recategorizing quotes, and almost exclusively used the quotes that the auditor deemed most representative for the themes. These processes, while not able to eliminate bias entirely, helped to reduce it within the work.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

Through multiple rounds of coding and discussions following Smith and Osborn's (2008) structure, the principal researcher and co-coder, with the guidance of the auditor, identified eight themes that were consistent throughout the transcripts. All participant names were changed in order to protect their confidentiality. These themes were organized under the three initial research questions. "How does passing as heterosexual relate to one's bisexual identity validity?" relates to the themes *To Pass or Not to Pass?*, *Two Sides of the Passing Coin*, and *Understanding Intersections of Identity Is Essential*. "What factors hinder bisexual identity validity in this experience?" relates to *Consistent but Incorrect Assumptions of Heterosexuality*, *Experiences of Invalidation Are Universal*, and *Rules of Engagement with the LGBTQIA+ Community*. Finally, "What factors contribute to bisexual identity validity in this experience?" relates to *Validation as a Survival Toolkit* and *Words of Wisdom*. A table of these themes along with their subthemes can be found in Appendix D.

Across the interviews, participants' affective experiences also spoke to the importance of utilizing qualitative work to capture underrepresented experiences. Participants met the interviewer with curiosity and interest in the exploratory process; despite the difficult topics discussed (such as experiences of invalidation and erasure within passing), participants approached interview questions with a sense of relief and self-discovery, having made connections between their identity development, feelings of validity, intersectionality of different identities, and other concepts.

## **Themes Related to Passing as Heterosexual and Identity Validity**

Passing as heterosexual is a common experience in the bisexual community, but participants found that navigating this experience and the associated decision-making processes was often not discussed enough. Several factors inform the decision to pass as heterosexual and provide a foundation for understanding the benefits and drawbacks.

### ***To Pass or Not to Pass?***

Due to their ability to pass as heterosexual, nine participants considered their decision-making about coming out versus continuing to pass. Several factors were considered as important in this decision-making process, including the process of setting boundaries with others and the emotional energy necessary to do so, the relevance of the situation or relationship, and a desire to disrupt assumptions of heterosexuality.

**Coming Out and Passing Both Involve Boundary Setting.** For four participants, decision-making about when to come out versus pass as heterosexual was based in trust and a desire or lack thereof to be vulnerable based on the type of relationship. Anne, a 41-year-old White woman, discussed how this decision-making was based in an inability to predict or trust others' responses to her coming out:

I think it's more of a safety, feeling safe within my community, my person. There are some people that if I know they're not accepting—and it's not like I don't need anyone's approval, but if they don't approve of it, I'm not going to walk up to them and say I'm bisexual knowing that's going to put me in harm ... Whether it's verbal, physical, mental, it's somehow going to cause harm to me and my family. So yeah, there's walls up, there always is, there has to be. And I tell my son the same thing: you have to put those walls

up, you need to set your boundaries, number one, for people who do know, and you need to set boundaries for people who don't need to know.

Similarly, five participants discussed how deciding whether or not to come out was based on an assessment of the situation or the level of the relationship: Would there be time to process with this person? What are the benefits of coming out to this person? Could this person be trusted to be supportive? Ruby, a 28-year-old Black woman, discussed how this decision to pass as heterosexual versus come out relates to the length of the interaction and the emotional energy often required for coming out:

If it's a short-term interaction, I can pass for a short-term interaction. Granted, it's still something that you have to think about but it's less cognitive effort, I don't really have to interact with this person or care what their thoughts are or how inclusive they're going to be. Short-term interaction, I'm seeing someone one time, safety is way less of a concern.

For these individuals, decision-making about coming out versus passing often involved setting boundaries based on their relationships with others, trust in their responses, and a consideration for their own emotional energy in the coming out process.

**Purposefully Coming Out to Disrupt Assumptions of Heterosexuality.** Despite this focus on safety and avoiding discrimination, Melanie, a 28-year-old Latinx woman, described her decision-making as an active attempt to preemptively disrupt assumptions of heterosexuality, prompted by disclosure of partner gender; for example:

Whenever I meet someone new I don't say that I'm married right away because that's the biggest signaler. So then I just kind of talk naturally, or if dating comes up, then I'll just casually mention it. I mean, it has to come up organically in the conversation but I definitely don't introduce myself as being married because I know I'm immediately seen

as straight ... If I can slip it in somehow before they can ask “Are you in a relationship?” or “Do you have a husband?” then it’s alright. But once that question comes out, then it’s like all right, there’s no point in trying to ... I don’t know, portray myself as something else.

These decision-making narratives exemplify setting boundaries and the associated protection of one’s own emotional energy, the type of relationship, and attempts against misidentification as some of the many factors and considerations that bisexual individuals experience when deciding to pass or come out.

### *Two Sides of the Passing Coin*

Despite assumptions that passing as heterosexual affords the same privileges as being heterosexual, nine participants discussed that there are both benefits and drawbacks to the experience of passing. Moreover, some participants connected these benefits and drawbacks of passing as heterosexual as intrinsically connected and therefore distinct from heterosexual privilege.

**To Pass Is to Be Safe.** Four participants identified the ability to avoid discrimination at both interpersonal and systemic levels and maintain feelings of safety as a major benefit of passing as heterosexual. Ruby, a 28-year-old Black woman, identified that this ability to avoid the consequences of discrimination—social, professional, financial—was especially important in her experiences living in the rural South and in her workplace:

I feel like it depends on the setting ... In the rural America world, I’m like “oh, cool, you assume that I’m in a heterosexual relationship. For safety purposes, that’s fine and I’m fine with that.” Especially if it’s a stranger, it’s like you don’t really need to know these details about me, that’s fine ... I feel like being able to pass is conversations you didn’t

have to have. I feel like I did phenomenally with my first job with salary negotiation with the CEO of my company. I don't know that he was homophobic, he just gave me some vibes, you know? So I feel like not disclosing that was probably helpful, I feel like my salary negotiation wouldn't have gone so well.

In other forms of discrimination, such as social judgment, participants who have had experience dating both different- and same-gender partners have especially noticed the benefit of safety in the lack of concern for public displays of affection (PDAs). Ophelia, a 21-year-old biracial woman, described her process during this realization:

I think it's been definitely in the way that people react to us. Like if we're holding hands or other PDAs, there's just no reaction, no nothing, because it's fine, whereas I know in the past, when I've had girlfriends, usually it's fine but sometimes the odd stare or whisper or mutter—I think one time, someone took her kid away from us? And it was like “okay” ... Just sometimes I catch myself thinking that's going to happen or we'll have to break apart or just something to protect, and then I realize “oh, I don't have to do that right now, and isn't that strange?” ... And I know that gives me certain privileges over people, and I always want to keep that in mind that while I do have all these queer experiences, you know, there are things that I can do that other people may find uncomfortable or may inspire violence against them.

Similar to an avoidance of discrimination, three participants also identified the ability to engage in otherwise restrictive heteronormative practices as a benefit of passing. Melanie, a 28-year-old Latinx woman, described the lack of societal obstacles for different-gender relationships:

I don't know if this is an experience for a lot of bisexual women is they find it easier to date and have relationships with men than it is to have relationships with women because

society accepts it more. So it's just easier to be in a relationship with men and pass than be in a relationship with women because then you have to explain it to a bunch of people. So I wonder if that's coming out right ... When I met my husband and we fell in love and got married, I was like okay, everything's working out, plus there's that extra pro of being able to have that option to pass as heterosexual if I ever needed to. Like for example, us moving to a different part of the country, it would be a whole different conversation if I was in a relationship with a woman so I recognize my privilege in that and I see that ... When I dated my husband, I was actively dating both men and women, but for some reason and I can't really explain what happened, but society made it easier, made everything so much easier. Us getting engaged was easy, us being out in public was easy, us renting an apartment was easy. All those things were so easy so it flowed naturally, whereas if I had that experience when I was dating a woman, society throws all these curve balls at you, all these obstacles.

Beyond participants' attempted avoidance of direct and personal experiences of discrimination, systemic heterosexism creates societal structures in which different-gender partnerships are rewarded and preferred across multiple systems, in which participants identified themselves as able to participate as a benefit of passing.

**To Pass Is to Be Invisible.** Four participants reported that drawbacks to passing as heterosexual included feelings of contributing to bisexual erasure or messages of illegitimacy as a bisexual individual. Elizabeth, a 35-year-old White woman, identified that passing as heterosexual made her experiences as a bisexual woman feel illegitimate or less important:

I think the drawbacks are a sense of invisibility, questioning your own legitimacy ... Also feeling like it's really easy for people to dismiss you because any obstacles you face

really are objectively so minor, well, for me as a straight-passing person. So then I start throwing away my feelings and being like, it's fine, it's not valid, it's not real, it doesn't matter, I'm being overly sensitive, so that invalidation.

Similarly, Margaret, a 27-year-old Black-identified biracial woman, discussed how heterosexual-passing bisexual individuals' experiences are discounted, and her internalization of such delegitimizing messages:

But I feel like for the most part, it feels like I'm living a lie, like oh, I am straight-passing. There's a lot of people who discount bisexual experiences and sometimes I see why, maybe it's my own internal thing, but I sometimes see, yeah, I can live my life as straight and it doesn't feel right but it's what happens ... sometimes I feel like I'm hiding or being a coward for not being more open. Because I don't think I would ever be in physical danger. For once, being a woman and sort of a stoic feminine-looking woman who's more protected in that sense, I probably wouldn't be physically hurt but there are other comments or things where I feel like I'm not ready to open myself up to or hear.

As shown in these participants' language, the drawbacks to passing as heterosexual involve a painful internalization of the negative messages and feelings of contributing to bisexual erasure, impacting how they perceived their own experiences and concerns as a result. As exemplified in these quotations, strong emotional language in how participants spoke negatively of themselves (e.g., "overly sensitive," "hiding," "coward") emerged several times as a result of the impact of binegativity specifically in relation to passing. Even when these decisions were made in efforts to maintain a sense of safety, participants found it difficult to avoid internalizing binegative messages that minimize their experiences and the legitimacy of their decisions.

**Rejection of Identity, Safety in Costume.** With these pros and cons in mind, four participants drew a clear connection: these benefits and drawbacks appear simultaneously through the lack of perception as a sexual minority, or as a bisexual individual more specifically. Lucy, a 30-year-old biracial woman, captured this connection as highly impactful on her general well-being:

I feel like the drawbacks are emotional, spiritual, mental, but those are also some of the benefits. There's that denial, the rejection of identity, but also a safety in that costume, in that passing as heterosexual. There's a safety but there's also that deep rejection and betrayal that I feel by not being recognized and not being seen as who I am.

Similarly, Margaret, a 27-year-old Black-identified biracial woman, described the unique experience that bisexual individuals have when passing as heterosexual, regarding this balance of benefits and drawbacks:

I always thought bi people were more privileged in the sense we can hide, but in other ways that's less privileged because hiding isn't helping.... In some ways I'm like, cool, I don't have to explain myself, people can just assume what they want, and then other times, I feel like I'm very left out. If I'm with all other bisexual people or even people more on a spectrum, then it's easier to fit in or feel more connected ... If I'm with most people who are broader LGBT community, I feel like an impostor in those places. I feel like I'm just a really great ally and even forget myself. I'm fighting for myself too!

Sometimes there's a disconnect there.

These benefits and drawbacks help to depict the experience regarding passing as a balance between safety and erasure, causing individuals to feel alone in their invisibility. As shown, the impact of these factors can weigh heavily on participants' self-perceptions and general well-

being. As discussed before, the balance required in this decision-making can still sometimes result in negative and minimizing self-talk (e.g., feeling like “an impostor” or “just a really great ally”) and speaks to the high emotional impact of such experiences.

***Understanding Intersections of Identity Is Essential***

Nine participants identified experiences in which they connected their bisexual identities and experiences of passing as heterosexual to other salient social identities, including racial (especially biracial) identities, religious affiliation, and motherhood. Importantly, the intersectionality of these identities informed participants’ decision-making about coming out, feelings of safety and validity, and considerations of cultural perceptions of the community.

For some participants, their cultural experiences as racial minorities partly instilled hesitation to come out and informed the decision to pass as heterosexual. Margaret, a 27-year-old Black-identified biracial woman, described this decision as protective:

When I’m with other Black people who are all straight or are very traditional, then it’s another kind of protective thing. I have a man by me, I can talk about things in that setting, but I also just feel very uncomfortable with traditional gender roles. Everyone adopts them but I think to some extent they’re more prevalent in Black communities ... Seeing [a family member] be so uncomfortable with even being labeled as gay ... that makes me think, oh yeah, I guess this really is still an issue in the larger Black community, and maybe that’s why I do feel safer living a more normal life on the outside.

Similarly, Julie, a 29-year-old Asian American woman, described the intersectionality of her identities as her racial identity being perceived as the most salient, and how being bisexual is more concealable in order to control experiences of discrimination, especially with family:

I do notice that if I'm around my Asian friends, I think I will act a little bit differently and do a little bit of code-switching. Being bi is the one that is most controllable in terms of how visible it is ... I do think that it is a little bit more taboo in Taiwanese culture ... So when I'm around my family, I will definitely hide it more. I think also in settings where I'm not close with people, people usually see my Asianness and assume that that's the biggest part of my identity.... I think in those situations where people see me as an Asian woman and all the stereotypes associated with that, then I am less likely to share about my bisexuality because I already feel kind of othered, so I'm feeling more pressured to show that I'm more than this thing that you think I am.

Related to the "othered" experience, all three biracial participants drew parallels between experiences of being bisexual and biracial as "in-between" identities and being misperceived as only part of one's identity or having experiences erased. Ophelia, a 21-year-old biracial woman, explored this concept further:

I'm mixed race, my dad is from Trinidad, so I've always grown up in a mixed-race household ... my parents have been very encouraging with me understanding all parts of my identity in that way. But then as soon as I step outside of my house or my family, I just get perceived as White or perceived that I don't have certain experiences, and that can feel quite uncomfortable and quite invalidating ... I think although I acknowledge my proximity to Whiteness, I know it gives me so many privileges, also there are experiences that I know not a lot of White people have had ... So I think that does mesh into straight-passing, because it's also White-passing and they kind of go hand in hand there.

Concerns about judgment can also connect to other identities and cause both interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. Three participants identified religious affiliation and avoidance of

religious judgment as major points in their decision-making about coming out versus passing as heterosexual. Ruby, a 28-year-old Black woman, acknowledged how her religious upbringing affected her coming out process with her family, out of concern for religious judgment:

I'm Christian-ish now, vaguely Christian, whatever that journey is, but grew up Christian. So most things that are enjoyable in life is a sin. It was so dramatic, I was so bitter. So homosexuality was presented as a sin and that's one of those things that never made sense to me ... I would say that it definitely relates to how long it took me to come out to family.

Others' religious affiliations also play a part in this process. Melanie, a 28-year-old Latinx woman, described an experience of coming out to a religious friend:

When I told a friend of mine in high school that I was bisexual, his response was—he was really religious so I felt the need to tell him—he said, “I don't care about that, you're not sinning because you're with a guy.”

This type of message could function as a warning especially for bisexual individuals against engaging in same-gender sexual or dating practices, and to instead continue passing as heterosexual in order to avoid condemnation.

Despite concerns about judgment, the intersectionality of one's identities can also inspire a call for larger action. For Anne, a 41-year-old White woman and mother, advocating for better treatment and perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community amongst her family and friends came not only from her own bisexual identity but also from her maternal desire to protect her transgender son:

Advocating for myself of course came first, because it was before he actually came out that he was transgender.... When we sat down and talked about it and that's when I

realized okay, this is no longer about anybody else, no longer about myself. I have to advocate for my son ... This is a very vulnerable time for him. I need to make sure he gets to where he needs to be. So my advocacy completely did a 360 ... in the beginning for myself, I guess it was just that they don't need to know, it's a need-to-know basis kind of thing ... Now again it was like, I don't care if nobody knows anything about me. For me, it's not about me anymore. So my main focus is my kids.

However, a focus on intersectionality also captured the ways in which passing as heterosexual as a highly complex but partly beneficial experience can connect to other privileges and systems of power. Elizabeth, a 35-year-old White woman, discussed how passing connects not only to her privileged identities but also to concerns about misconceptions related to coming out:

I do think that being White, I'm able-bodied, no external disabilities, visible disabilities ... I think I view my queerness and my passing privilege as even more extreme, because I have so many other types of privileges as well. It's just like all my privileges are compounded and I feel like I live this life of privilege. I'm economically privileged, there's very few things that objectively get in my way in life. So I think that sometimes I worry about disclosing my queerness, because I wonder if other people, particularly people who may not have as many privileges as I do, might think that I am doing—or even I might feel like I'm doing it in order to be like, “But I'm not that privileged, I promise!” So I can fit into spaces where privilege is a problem, or privilege often creates barriers.... I get really anxious about disclosing my queerness in those positions, because what does that mean for others in spaces where their queerness has really been a source of adversity in their life? And I don't want to disingenuously present myself as something that I'm not or someone who's faced obstacles that I haven't faced.

Elizabeth's concerns about perceptions of her motivations to come out, especially her worry about being seen as attempting to discount her other privileges, showcases the importance of understanding coming out versus passing through the lens of balancing privilege and discrimination, visibility and misconception. Although all participants could be expected to experience and process the intersectionality of their identities to some extent, the varied connections discussed above proved to be salient in many participants' decision-making about passing as heterosexual and coming out.

### **Themes Related to Factors Hindering Identity Validity**

When understanding experiences related to bisexual identity validity, especially when passing as heterosexual, it is essential to understand possible barriers to or risks of these feelings of validity. Participants identified several such barriers, such as assumptions of heterosexuality, binegative messages and stereotypes, and negative experiences with the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as possible ways to combat or reconceptualize them.

#### ***Consistent but Incorrect Assumptions of Heterosexuality***

The experience of passing as heterosexual is often external, coming from others' perceptions of the individual as heterosexual. Although this springs partly from heteronormativity, the individual's own experiences or appearance may unwittingly contribute to assumptions of heterosexuality. Eleven participants described the experience of being perceived as heterosexual by others, and two dominant subthemes emerged from these transcripts.

**Being with a Man Fosters Misunderstanding.** Nine participants identified their partner's gender as a main source of their misidentification as heterosexual. This experience can also be exacerbated due to the length of the different-gender partnership. Sandy, a 63-year-old

White woman, described it straightforwardly: “On the surface I look heterosexual. I’m living with a man, we just celebrated our fortieth anniversary.”

Some participants further expanded this assumption as happening whether dating someone of the same or different gender, being categorized as either heterosexual or lesbian.

Ophelia, a 21-year-old biracial woman, described the experience of bisexual erasure:

There is this thing with bisexuality where if you are a woman dating a woman, people will be like “oh she’s gay,” and when you’re dating a man, it’s like, “oh, she’s straight.”

It’s a whole thing! Your orientation doesn’t change because of who you’re dating.

In this theme, participants consistently identified partner gender as a main source of misidentification of their sexual identities, and found the likelihood to increase alongside relationship length.

**Does This Outfit Make Me Look Straight?** Of note, individuals can also be perceived to be heterosexual without a partner present. Seven participants identified the way they dress as a source of being perceived as heterosexual, or how they subverted these appearance norms in order to disrupt such assumptions.

Isabella, a 25-year-old Latina woman, discussed how appearing more feminine is still associated with heterosexuality, whereas more androgynous or masculine looks are associated with the LGBTQIA+ community:

People see me and automatically assume, okay, she’s a heterosexual woman. She identifies as female, she’s super girly, she’s in a relationship with a guy. So people are definitely like, “whoa, what, what do you mean?” and I’m like “why are you so surprised, what is it supposed to look like?” ... It’s always funny to me, because again just goes back to the question of well, how is a bisexual person supposed to look? How is even a

lesbian supposed to look? ... but I feel like a lot of people tend to think about like maybe the more butch lesbian so if you don't look like that, they're like well I guess she's straight. I mean even me as a bisexual, in the dating realm, I look at other people and if they don't look, you know, more androgynous, I assume too.

With these appearance norms in mind, four participants also identified that they experiment with different clothing and appearance options in order to disrupt assumptions, such as with the balance that Margaret, a 27-year-old Black-identified biracial woman, attempts to strike:

I like to kind of play around with masculinity and femininity a bit. I feel super uncomfortable if I'm very feminine or very masculine, it doesn't feel like me, so I need both to some level. If I'm wearing a dress or something, then I won't want a lot of makeup, but if I'm wearing something very bulky, I want to have makeup on. I feel like I need to balance it out all the time. Maybe I hope that other people see that as they can't really place me but they might be thinking about it to some extent, about where do I fit in, in whatever space.

Participants also discussed times when their heterosexual male partners joined them in challenging appearance norms. Melanie, a 28-year-old Latinx woman, discussed how her partner's interest and comfort experimenting with different types of clothing and accessories helped her to further disrupt assumptions:

I will rock Doc Martens and a collared shirt all day long. So that makes me feel calm, comfortable in my own skin, especially when I'm out with my husband, you know, because we look like just a man and woman but the way that we play with our clothes and things like that will kind of show, "okay, we're a little something different" and that makes me feel valid ... Recently he wanted to paint his nails one day and I was like, "go

for it” and he really liked it so he paints his nails when we go out. Different clothing that he’s just trying to get out of his comfort zone. Before the pandemic, we went to the Goodwill and he saw some women’s skinny jeans with flowers all over it and he loves them so he bought them and he wears them. And he’s growing his hair out, he’s never grown his hair out before.

However, personal awareness of assumptions of sexuality based on dress can also be used consciously to avoid discrimination. Vanessa, a 28-year-old African-Caribbean woman, described this type of decision-making when going out in public in the Bahamas, where individuals are less likely to identify themselves as members of the LGBTQIA+ community with their clothes:

In society, especially when you’re young, you don’t really see non-hetero people like that. When you go to restaurants, movies, you’re not going to see people like that. Even now with people who are out in the Bahamas, but in terms of being together coupled up, you don’t always see that. Like I see that if I’m in a non-hetero space, I’m kind of surprised and I see them happy and I’m like “oh, must be nice!” I’m kidding ... but like the purpose of your study, even when queer people are out socializing, they still try to maintain a hetero look, to not be so easily identified, I guess. Just for themselves, the mental peace ... Even me, I do the same depending on where I am.

Consistent with the literature, appearance norms connected to the LGBTQIA+ community can be used to affirm or disrupt assumptions regarding individuals’ sexual identities. Conversely, awareness of this source of assumptions can be used to individuals’ advantage in order to avoid discrimination.

Overall, assumptions of heterosexuality can spring from multiple sources, including partner gender or appearance, and can contribute to feelings of invalidity and bisexual erasure. However, these assumptions can be consciously subverted for the purposes of visibility or disruption of such assumptions or utilized as a safety measure.

### *Experiences of Invalidation Are Universal*

All twelve participants identified ways in which they have felt invalidated in their bisexual identities, most commonly from others' negative messages about bisexuality or passing as heterosexual. Several subthemes emerged regarding the specific messages received.

**Stereotypes Are Used to Harm and Invalidate.** All twelve participants identified bisexual-specific stereotypes as a source of invalidation and highly impactful on their own bisexual identity development. Binegative stereotypes are diverse in range, and individuals' desires to avoid confirming such stereotypes can apply undue pressure throughout identity development. Such stereotypes involve the idea that bisexual individuals are confused or in a phase, as described by Sophia, a 32-year-old White woman:

Sometimes there are comments that I see people making ... "oh yeah, but you're married" or "you're with a man, so maybe you're just a little confused." That can throw you off and I guess mostly because I do experience a little bit of a cycle here and there and I have also gone through a period of "oh I really do feel straight right now, maybe..."

Similarly, Lucy, a 30-year-old biracial woman, recalled a comment that treated bisexuality as phasic, with either a heterosexual or lesbian identity as the ultimate destination: "There's also like, it's just a phase. This is stuff that I see on the internet mostly. It's just a phase, you're going to be lesbian or you're just experimenting."

Other stereotypes involve the untrustworthiness of bisexual individuals, particularly in their ability to date partners of any gender. Vanessa, a 28-year-old African-Caribbean woman, recounted:

A lot of people think that bisexual people in general don't know what they want, they're players, they're either going to be on one side of the fence for a while and then move to the next and forget about whatever was before. You can't trust them because you don't know what their next one's going to be, whatever that is ... Once I had someone female question me a lot and be doubtful about it, and I just told her like flat-out like, if I wanted someone else, I have that option but my option is to be here with you. So just respect that I'm being here. Forget the stereotypes, learn from this experience, that's all.

Similarly, bisexual individuals may be seen as untrustworthy not only because of dating practices but also because of stereotypes of being hypersexual or greedy. Elizabeth, a 35-year-old White woman, described her own experiences in relation to this stereotype:

When I was growing up, that was very much the messaging. Even if bisexuality was valid, it would mean that you have to be a slut because you must be sleeping with more than the average person because you're sleeping with everybody! ... I remember in junior year of high school, some kids formed the GSA, the Gay Straight Alliance, and I was like, oh this is awesome, I really want to go to this. And I went, and the reaction was, it's great that you're here but we don't want you to be here because you have this reputation of being slutty and we think that you being here might work against us ... It all goes back to this idea that my sexual orientation kind of started as a slut identity. You know, I think that that's rampant through the queer community.

Meanwhile, Vanessa, a 28-year-old African-Caribbean woman, lamented the fetishization of bisexual women and overgeneralized conflation with polyamory:

I think more so with men, I tend to steer away from blatantly identifying myself as bisexual. Because unfortunately, men take that more in a sexually erotic way. So like I'm not looking for a threesome, I'm not looking to be sexually exploited by you, just because I'm bisexual.

These stereotypes function to sow negative perceptions of bisexual individuals as untrustworthy, confused, illegitimate members of the LGBTQIA+ community. These stereotypes can also affect bisexual identity development due to the internalized pressure of stereotype threat.

**Passing as Heterosexual Draws Specific Ire.** Beyond bisexual-specific stereotypes, six participants reported that they received negative messages or pressure specifically regarding their ability to pass as heterosexual. Melanie, a 28-year-old Latinx woman, recalled the experience of having her concerns about coming out minimized due to her ability to pass:

When I was discussing my problems of not coming out to my in-laws, someone said “well, if you pass as straight, what’s the point of telling them?” ... It’s like, if you can pass as heterosexual, then just pass. It’s easier, so why are you going to make life harder for yourself? Which sucks because no one wants to feel ... hiding part of yourself is not easier.

These negative messages contribute to bisexual erasure and the internalized pressure to minimize participants’ own experiences or the personal value of coming out.

**General Negative Messages Still Have Personal Impact.** Six participants identified general negative messages about the larger LGBTQIA+ community as impactful on their sexual identity development. Most commonly, these negative messages came from a place of religious

judgment, coupled with an inquisition regarding the source of the sexual minority identity. Anne, a 41-year-old White woman, recounted:

In the 90s we always heard, you'll go to Hell, there's a demon in you, that's why you feel like this. Who made you like this? What happened to you to make you like this? And in the 90s growing up, you believed that, that was true. Because you didn't know it any other way ... I could hear the stories of people, of "oh, well if you do that, that makes you a prostitute, or if you do that, you are owned by the devil and you no longer have access to go to Heaven when you die."

These familiar messages function not only as threats of eternal damnation but also as accusations that being a sexual minority is a result of trauma or coercion, perpetuating incorrect assumptions about the nature of the identity.

**The Risk of Internalizing Negative Messages.** Consistent with the literature, binegative messages were also internalized by participants and affected identity development. Three participants identified how messages of heteronormativity and bisexual erasure caused them to dismiss same-gender attraction. Sandy, a 63-year-old White woman, described this experience as prolonging her coming out process:

I'd always had some sort of degree of attraction to women but I was also attracted to men and suffering from big amounts of internalized homophobia, biphobia, whatever. I thought since I'd enjoyed dating boys in high school I was like okay, I must be heterosexual and I thought plenty of women occasionally have thoughts about other women. Rationalize, rationalize, rationalize. Even when I was in junior high, I was noticing attractive girls in my class quicker than I was noticing attractive boys. And I told

myself the bullshit story of, well, I'm an artist, I'm appreciating them because they're beautiful. So that's the story that I told myself then.

This experience of dismissing her own same-gender attraction sprang primarily from bisexual erasure and societally-taught valuations of different-gender attraction as more legitimate.

Overall, binegativity affected participants' pride in their bisexual identities, affected decision-making and feelings of validity regarding passing, and led to the internalization of harmful self-narratives.

### ***Rules of Engagement with the LGBTQIA+ Community***

When participants were asked generally about their relationship with the larger LGBTQIA+ community, all twelve participants identified primarily negative interactions, typically with gay and lesbian individuals, as particularly damaging to their sense of belonging. These negative interactions included overt and subtle unwelcome messages, maintenance of bisexual stereotypes, and concerns about bringing different-gender partners and appearing heterosexual in LGBTQIA+ spaces.

**No Bisexuals Allowed in Queer Spaces.** When asked about feeling unwelcome, four participants were able to identify overt messages received, typically from lesbian individuals, about a disdain for bisexual individuals as partners. Isabella, a 25-year-old Latina woman, shared: "I've been on Tinder where people would be like, 'no bisexuals.'" Lucy, a 30-year-old biracial woman, similarly discussed an interaction with her apartment broker: "She's lesbian and she said, 'oh, I don't fuck with women who are queer or bisexual.'" These messages can contribute to bisexual individuals feeling undesirable as romantic partners. Participants also described feeling as though they did not belong in general LGBTQIA+ spaces or dialogues, as in Melanie's avoidance of Pride events:

Even though my city has this big Pride thing, I've never been, because I don't feel like I fit in there. And I've heard stories about bisexual people attending with their relationships with someone of the opposite gender and people at Pride tend to react adversely to that. So then there's all these stereotypes from not only heterosexuals but also the gay community, the LGBTQ community. It's hurtful so I stay away from it ... so when I see LGBTQ parades or gay bars, things like that, I don't feel welcome. I don't feel welcome at a gay bar, I don't feel welcome at a lesbian bar, I don't feel welcome at parades, so I just don't attend.

This perceived lack of belonging in LGBTQIA+ spaces or dating experiences can further isolate bisexual individuals and instill feelings of illegitimacy as a true or acceptable sexual minority.

**The LGBTQIA+ Community Perpetuates Stereotypes.** Beyond personal experiences of binegativity, participants also discussed negative experiences with the larger community maintaining binegative stereotypes. Sophia, a 32-year-old White woman, identified these intercommunity attacks as particularly hurtful when discussing her husband's experience on social media:

A follower of his, a gay girl, apparently said something along the lines of, "Isn't that difficult for you, because what if she wants to experiment with a woman or cheats on you?" That did upset me a bit, mostly because she belongs to the community and it felt like a diss from the same community that I should feel like I belong to just as much as she does ... It's a shame but I see it especially within LGBT spheres. I think because, to a level, it's harder to understand their struggles because other people aren't always with someone of the same gender so they aren't stigmatized by that, so maybe they feel like

bisexual people just want to hop onto that. Maybe that's where it comes from, it's very defensive feeling.

The hurt of experiencing binegativity was exacerbated when the source was a fellow member of the LGBTQIA+ community who was attempting to advise her husband about the risks of having a bisexual partner. Other participants also experienced this hurt from other LGBTQIA+ individuals, as in Julie's experience with a gay friend:

He was like, you know, "Those greedy bisexuals, they're so greedy, they just want everybody," just as a joke. He identifies as gay and he's in this space so that was surprising ... When I was more involved in the queer community, if somebody identified as bi, people would kind of talk behind their back and say, "When is he just going to come out as gay?" Messages I got about "Oh, now you must be straight. You picked a side."

Bisexual individuals' experiences being treated as the butt of a joke or being used to maintain binegative stereotypes (i.e., bisexuality as a phasic identity, bisexuals depicted as greedy or hypersexual) can negatively impact bisexual identity validity, especially coming from the others most familiar with the experiences of being marginalized as a sexual minority.

**No Heterosexual Relationships in Queer Spaces.** Alongside the community's negative perceptions of bisexual individuals, five participants also discussed their aversion to bringing their different-gender partner and being perceived as heterosexual in LGBTQIA+ spaces.

Isabella, a 25-year-old Latina woman, discussed her hesitation in terms of how she and her partner would be perceived as an invasive heterosexual couple:

I've never really brought my partner to an LGBTQ community type of event. I will say, I am hesitant to bring him to stuff like that, because it's not really his community. If I'm in

a setting where it's, you know, mainly lesbian and gay people then it's just like, "What is this couple doing here? They don't belong here." Yeah, there's definitely been hesitation with stuff like that, where I'm like, maybe we shouldn't show up to this together. Just because I don't want to deal with eyes and possible questions. Yeah, I haven't been in a setting where I'm straight-passing in an LGBTQ setting ... I'm not going to show up at a freaking gay bar with my significant other.

This hesitation to include their partners in LGBTQIA+ spaces and events was noted as creating a split between participants' ability to engage with the community and celebrate their identity alongside their partner, due to concerns about judgment and misidentification as heterosexual.

**Positive Experiences through Personal Queer Friendships.** Despite these negative experiences, four participants also acknowledged their positive relationships with the larger LGBTQIA+ community as important for identity development and validity. Ophelia, a 21-year-old biracial woman, reported that personal relationships (as opposed to online anonymous interactions) facilitated these feelings:

I think I've always had a weird relationship with the queer community because it's something that I identify with so strongly, but actually going to physical or virtual spaces just sometimes makes me feel a bit rocky. Because I know that there is a range of experiences but I think sometimes I'm like, "What if mine doesn't align with this or this preconceived notion of this?" I kind of get into my own head about it. I think what's been important to me is seeking and maintaining queer friendships. I think that kind of proper connection with queer people has really helped me and made me feel really comfortable in my identity.

In this way, interactions with close friends in the community cannot be ignored as a positive aspect in some participants' lives, while interactions with strangers in-person or online may lead to more invalidating experiences. These types of negative interactions with other members of the community can instill concerns about not belonging or not being wanted in LGBTQIA+ spaces, further isolating and marginalizing bisexual individuals.

### **Themes Related to Factors Contributing to Identity Validity**

Despite the negative experiences described in these transcripts, participants also cited experiences that helped them to feel valid as bisexual women with experiences passing as heterosexual. Some participants shared messages to support other bisexual individuals experiencing passing as heterosexual and their feelings of validity.

#### ***Validation as a Survival Toolkit***

All twelve participants identified experiences, messages, and/or sources that functioned as validation for their bisexual identities, even while conceptualizing validation itself as an internal or external process.

**Being Seen as Legitimate.** Seven participants identified validation as a concept springing from their bisexual identity being understood and accepted by other people. Elizabeth, a 35-year-old White woman, provided this definition of validation that captured her experiences as a bisexual woman combating erasure, doubt, and negative messages:

I think validation comes from others. There are a lot of other words that I can use that come from myself, but validation, in my experience, comes from others. I think it's the experience of being believed, being seen, not being questioned, and being seen as legitimate.

These points of her definition can be directly tied as the inverse to common negative experiences for bisexual individuals, including not being believed that bisexuality is a final rather than phasic identity, bisexual erasure, and messages of illegitimacy. Validation can be especially powerful when coming from another bisexual individual who may be more likely to understand these concerns, as described by Sandy, a 63-year-old White woman:

One of the other group members was actually a bisexual man ... I was talking about feeling like I was two separate people and couldn't find a way to go forward. He gets up, he walks over to me, kisses me on the head, and says, "I see only one person there," which was exactly what I needed.

For many participants, validation functions as a process of feeling understood as well as accepted by others for one's bisexual identity.

**Feeling Valid Within Yourself.** On the other hand, six participants identified validation as an internal process, as opposed to a concept obtained through interactions with other people. This practice of internal validation and self-affirmation may spring partly from an active resistance to negative messages or previous habits of giving undue credence to others' opinions, as discussed by Isabella, a 25-year-old Latina woman:

Feeling valid for me used to be more about, you know, like societal validity, about how people see you and about what's accepted from outside sources. But now the older I get and the more I work on myself, I'm always going to be valid as long as I feel comfortable in my skin and with who I am. So for me, validity and feeling valid is just about feeling comfortable with myself, a thousand percent, no matter what anyone thinks ... Right and it's been a long road to get here, and even still obviously, external voices will always kind of creep in before your internal voice comes in and says "Whoa, like don't

internalize that!” But it’s an active practice but, you know, I’m more and more practicing just feeling good in my skin, no matter what external sources, you know, have to say ... I just remind myself of that. It’s not like I just hopped on this wagon, it’s how I’ve always been. This is who I am. Just a lot of words of affirmation, self-affirming makes me feel valid.

Alongside this strengthened sense of self, Anne, a 41-year-old White woman, identified internal validation as a powerful motivator for coming out more actively, due to less concern about others’ reactions:

I guess a lot of people, because I did it, think of the other person. What’s this other person going to think when I tell them this? And for the longest time, I worried about that. You know? I worried about what my friends, what my family would say, all the time ... And then I started saying, no, this is who I am. It doesn’t define me. It’s a part of me ... For years, I just didn’t tell anyone. They didn’t need to know. You’re not in my sexual circles so why should you know? But then I wanted to be around my friends, around my family, around my straight friends, so I’m like, forget it! If people find out, they find out! I’ll look right at them and say, I’m bisexual, what’s it to you, you know?

The process of affirming themselves in their bisexual identities led many participants to become less concerned as well as less affected by others’ negative messages, while building a more positive internal dialogue regarding their identity validity.

**Seeing Yourself in Media.** Six participants referenced media (both social media and produced media such as TV shows or movies) as important for feelings of validity, as they saw their own experiences represented or reflected in others’ stories. Lucy, a 30-year-old biracial

woman, discussed how she used media in her youth as a way to understand her own experiences through others' stories in the media:

I would watch a lot of videos on YouTube of “Am I gay? Am I bisexual?” Taking tests, watching *The L Word*, watching more LGBTQ content, and there were a lot of things that resonated and there were moments that I was bawling because I was like wow, this is my experience!

Further, social media was identified as a way of connecting with real stories and individuals having similar experiences, including similar concerns of validity, and creating supportive networks together. Sophia, a 32-year-old White woman, noted Reddit as an important resource for bisexual women:

Well, it's been a lot of help from the subreddit actually, where I also found your interview, that's been really helpful. You see a lot of similar cases, especially for women, I feel, that already are in committed relationships with a man and they realize, and it's like “oh” ... A lot of people also feel some sort of urge to act on that in order to be valid or to feel valid. It helps to see a little bit of that struggle that I can relate to.

Julie, a 29-year-old Asian American woman, described a similar experience with social media as a source of validation, specifically through seeing positive connections between bisexual representation and other interests: “I also feel valid when I see other people who are bi. On Twitter, there's this hashtag, #BiInSci, bisexuals in science, and whenever people post about it, it makes me feel valid.”

As discussed, seeing one's own story or similar experiences represented online or in media can help to reduce feelings of isolation or illegitimacy. This representation can also be used to help demystify or clarify questions of identity development. However, some participants

also mentioned the need to seek out bisexual-affirmative social media specifically, as many general LGBTQIA+ groups online were more likely to engage in binegativity or exclusionary practices that would impact participants' feelings of validity or belonging within the community. Therefore, engaging in social media can be a validating experience, but may require that individuals sometimes actively seek out bisexual-specific spaces in order to experience the engagement as such.

### *Words of Wisdom*

Eleven participants provided recommendations for other bisexual individuals passing as heterosexual. However, several participants emphasized the importance of context and individual factors, and how not all recommendations are generalizable to all experiences in bisexual identity validity or passing as heterosexual. With this context in mind, recommendations fell into two subthemes: encouragement to trust the process of developing a sense of validity in one's bisexual identity, and a call to find support and validation from others regarding this process.

**Trust the Process but Do the Work.** Eight participants gave recommendations about strengthening internal feelings of validity, sometimes referencing how these recommendations were pieces of wisdom they would have appreciated during their own early identity development. Participants also mentioned how developing this sense of validity is often a long-term process that requires consistent intrapersonal work to combat internalized binegativity and heteronormativity as well as frustration with others. Julie shared this personal mantra:

Only you decide who you are. It doesn't matter what other people think, and that you know internally who you are. It doesn't matter whether you've had experience dating a woman, a man, internally you know who you are. Whether or not people recognize bisexuality as valid, you are valid.

Moreover, Elizabeth emphasized that trusting the long-term process involves developing a sense of peace with ambiguity and contradictions, especially when navigating the coming out process with others:

Be comfortable with contradicting feelings, living in gray spaces, and that feeling two conflicting things is super normal and everyday. So be comfortable with that, know that both of those feelings... anger and gratitude... are valid and legitimate.

Similar to the consistent practice of becoming more comfortable with ambiguity, Vanessa, a 28-year-old African-Caribbean woman, also emphasized the importance of taking the time to unpack internalized biases in order to intentionally and consciously avoid introducing negative mindsets into one's relationships:

I know it may take time or adjustment but those heteronormative biases or just general stereotypes tend to be sort of engrained in you as you grow up, if you don't have the freedom to just be yourself and be out especially with your family, because that's where a lot of stuff starts. If you never had that freedom before, you have to be conscious of what you do when dating. But in the way that you treat other people, you kind of have to expect the same to return to you ... So if you, as a bisexual person, may be dating another bisexual, and be like, "Oh well, you shouldn't dress this way because guys might hit on you" or "You can't go to this place because there's too many girls in there." Like you got to turn all that off. I know it's hard for people in general to not be jealous, you're gonna be wary about someone else, but at the same time being non-hetero, there's so many other things that you have to deal with. The last thing that you want is for the person that you're dating to be putting these added pressures on you.

As evidenced in these recommendations, the process of identity development and validity involves strengthening one's own as well as unpacking internalized negative messages about the self, others, and the discomfort of conflicting emotions.

**Build Communities of Support.** Although internal sources of validity were emphasized in trusting the process, four participants also recognized the importance of receiving support from others as a contributor to overall well-being. Sophia, a 32-year-old White woman, discussed that taking the time to find affirmative spaces and individuals with similar experiences, either in-person or online, can be helpful throughout all forms of identity development:

Take the time to see what's up for yourself, in a way. Think and just try to find like-minded people, in that sense, or try to find understanding people, that's most important, at least. And whatever helps! I think that Reddit and other forums like that help a lot, because at least you get to talk about it with other people who are also bisexual and maybe more so than with straight people or people around you. Yeah, as with anything, share as much as you want to do, and until then, that's also okay.

Ruby, a 28-year-old Black woman, also emphasized how this type of support and validation could also come from other media sources, even those not focused on interpersonal discussion:

Making sure that you're consuming media that is validating, making sure that you follow queer creators. I personally would recommend that everybody follows at least one wedding photographer, just because you need those positive images, even if you don't think you do! They're so great to see, you need to see queer people who are happy... You need to see those positive images and it's not something that a lot of us grew up with.

With these recommendations for support in mind, however, Sandy, a 63-year-old White woman, recognized the privilege of being able to openly seek support, and outlined the importance of safety while still emphasizing the importance of consistently accessing affirmative content:

A lot of people live in situations where they gotta stay in the damn closet because they'll get killed, literally. In that case, I would advise them to get to as many bi and queer affirmative things as they can, quietly. Get support, one way or another from somebody, because otherwise you'll feel like you're in a jail in Antarctica.

With these many different ways to seek support, either quietly for individuals who are not out or as part of a larger support system, participants consistently encouraged other bisexual individuals to find the validating content and spaces that work best for their situation and needs.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

#### Discussion of Results

The narratives explored in these transcripts outline the essential intrapersonal and interpersonal practices participants engaged in for the sake of their bisexual identity development and validity. The findings of this research are both supported by extant research, as will be discussed, and also contribute new understanding to participants' complex processes surrounding passing as heterosexual and maintaining feelings of validity as bisexual women. The present study utilized intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989/1993) and Brown's (2002) bisexual identity model as the foundations of its theoretical framework. The themes discussed thus far can be organized into Brown's (2002) model of bisexual identity development in order to exemplify the experiences of each stage.

#### *Initial Confusion*

The stage of Initial Confusion can last for years and involves the anxiety-provoking confusion regarding an individual's emerging bisexual attractions, including heteronormative assumptions of heterosexuality, especially based on partner gender (Brown, 2002; Ingraham, 2006; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011; Sue et al., 2019). With regard to their own early identity development, participants reflected on the negative impact of internalized heterosexism and binegativity, often recognized as having stunted their identity development and coming out process by having them dismiss or minimize their non-heterosexual attractions. Sandy described this common experience, "I thought since I'd enjoyed dating boys in high school I was like okay, I must be heterosexual and I thought plenty of women occasionally have thoughts about other women." This form of binegativity and bisexual erasure, most notably through the mislabeling of

oneself as “still heterosexual,” can be particularly impactful as it misconstrues bisexuality as phasic or illegitimate (Flanders et al., 2016b; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Hayfield et al., 2014).

Participants discussed their male partner’s gender as a common source of their misidentification as heterosexual or, conversely, their female or feminine-presenting nonbinary partner’s gender as a source of misidentification as lesbian. Participants also identified their own appearance as a source of misidentification; even without their partner present, participants were perceived to be heterosexual either due to a presence of feminine dress or lack of androgynous or masculine dress. However, similar to extant research, participants often experimented with appearance norms and dress in order to disrupt assumptions of heterosexuality (Daly et al., 2018; Hayfield, 2013; Hayfield, 2020; Huxley et al., 2014). Partner gender also plays a role in this decision-making, as bisexual women in different-gender partnerships may dress in “lesbian”-classified ways (e.g., masculine-styled clothing, shorter haircuts) and women in same-gender relationships may dress in more feminine ways in order to combat bisexual erasure in both cases (Daly et al., 2018). This experience speaks again to participants’ resilience against such misidentification as heterosexual as well as their creativity and openness to different practices in order to disrupt assumptions. Although all participants were already out and identified as bisexual by the time they may have been experimenting in these ways, this sort of curiosity about self-expression can facilitate other individuals’ transition into the next stage of identity development.

### ***Finding and Applying the Label***

This stage, in which individuals begin to identify as bisexual, can originate through personal acknowledgement of their bisexual attractions, engagement with individuals of multiple genders, receiving encouragement, and/or learning about bisexuality. The label itself can be

utilized to represent a wide range of varying (but not necessarily equal) sexual and romantic attractions to multiple genders that may extend beyond male and female, regardless of romantic or sexual experiences (Flanders et al., 2016a; Hayfield et al., 2018; McLean, 2007).

Identification with this label can also function either as its own identity or as an umbrella term to avoid confusion over other non-monosexual identities (e.g., pansexual, queer; Flanders et al., 2017a, 2017b). As seen in Appendix C, participants identified as bisexual alone or alongside other identity labels; this is also in line with extant literature, which identifies bisexual and other plurisexual individuals as more likely to use multiple labels (Galupo et al., 2015).

Although participants received encouragement and recognized the importance of representation in the media for the identity development, as will be discussed in the next stage, learning about bisexuality can also reap negative consequences. As they learned about the label or started identifying as bisexual themselves, all twelve participants reported experiencing binegativity in response, including hearing bisexual stereotypes as well as negative messages about passing as heterosexual and the LGBTQIA+ community in general. Although these stereotypes (e.g., bisexual individuals are confused, hypersexual, untrustworthy, or the identity is inherently phasic or synonymous with polyamory) were common and in line with extant research, the current study expanded upon specific negative messages around passing as heterosexual as particularly harmful (Anderson et al., 2016; Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Brownfield et al., 2018; Dyar et al., 2014). In line with extant research, negative messages included minimization of the coming out process due to participants' ability to pass as heterosexual, such as in Melanie's reflections on being told, "Well, if you pass as straight, what's the point of telling them? ... It's easier, so why are you going to make life harder for yourself?" This perceived choice to avoid heterosexism and reap

the rewards of heterosexual privilege by passing is directly connected to messages of illegitimacy as a “true” sexual minority both in the present study and in the literature (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Dyar et al., 2014; Matsick & Rubin, 2018).

With these general narratives of frequent negative messages in mind, participants also identified negative experiences with other members of the LGBTQIA+ community and a feeling of not being welcome in safe spaces. In line with past studies, some of the most overt binegative messages participants heard came from lesbian and gay individuals, including beliefs in the instability of bisexuality, sexual irresponsibility, and untrustworthiness (Anderson et al., 2016; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Dyar et al., 2014; Sarno et al., 2020). Although academic literature has already captured this familiar experience of binegativity within the LGBTQIA+ community, the present study further identified connections between not feeling welcome, concerns about bisexuality as a less valid sexual minority identity, and participants’ hesitation to bring their different-gender partner into LGBTQIA+ spaces and be perceived as heterosexual and invasive. Although participants also identified positive connections with the community through personal friendships, as might be expected according to Allport’s (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory, the negative experiences with other LGBTQIA+ individuals, consistent with the literature and across participants’ narratives, should not be dismissed. In these experiences, while identifying as bisexual, participants also learned about the negative associations or messages of being unwelcome in queer spaces that seemed to be unavoidable. However, the validation that they also experienced would function as a buffer against such ubiquitous binegativity and continue to facilitate their bisexual identity development and validity.

### *Settling into the Identity*

This stage involves the experience of becoming comfortable with and accepting one's sexuality—often facilitated through social support and personal acceptance—but can still involve questioning the legitimacy or permanency of one's own bisexual identity. This stage also exemplifies the importance of the varied types of validity that participants described, especially when navigating the negative messages discussed above. Participants identified validation from others in response to their own personal experiences, through other bisexual individuals sharing their stories on social media, and through positive and open representation of bisexuality in the media as a major contributor to feelings of identity validity. However, participants also recognized that feeling valid in the legitimacy of their identities and steeled against negative messages required active and conscious internal work and self-assuredness.

Settling into one's bisexual identity may also require participants to think about their decision-making about coming out versus passing as heterosexual. Even when participants have been out for decades, safety and avoidance of discrimination were still major factors in deciding whether to come out or continue passing as heterosexual (Evans & Barker, 2010; McLean, 2007; Warren et al., 2014). Further, the literature identifies passing as heterosexual and avoiding bisexual identity disclosure as a way of avoiding others' misunderstanding of bisexuality, stigmatization, conflict, and loss of support (McLean, 2007; Quinn et al., 2017). As a result, one's bisexual identity is hidden to avoid discrimination. However, some participants identified this likelihood of being perceived as heterosexual as motivation for coming out in order to disrupt assumptions early. Therefore, decision-making about passing was seen as striking a balance between visibility as bisexual individuals and maintaining a sense of safety.

Although not to be confused with heterosexual privilege, as this was a common concern for participants as well as in the literature (see Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Dyar et al., 2014; Ghabrial, 2019; Matsick & Rubin, 2018), participants identified that there were benefits as well as drawbacks to passing as heterosexual. Benefits included that same sense of safety as well as an ability to engage in heteronormative practices which often construct barriers against same-gender relationships (e.g., interacting openly in public, renting apartments, getting engaged and married). Meanwhile, the drawbacks were more internal and personal: participants reported concerns about illegitimacy and invisibility, others' minimization and dismissal of their experiences or concerns as sexual minorities, and a subtle but persistent internalization of such delegitimizing messages that isolated participants. Often, these benefits and drawbacks were seen as two sides of the same coin: invisibility as both a result of maintaining safety and also a function of bisexual erasure. These inextricably paired benefits and drawbacks also clarify the differences between passing as heterosexual and privilege afforded only to heterosexual individuals. This balance between the benefits and drawbacks also outlines the comfort and continued discomfort of this stage: coming to an understanding of one's own identity while still entertaining concerns about one's own legitimacy when feeling invisible.

### ***Identity Maintenance***

In this ongoing, process-oriented stage, individuals maintain their identification as bisexual in the intrapersonal or interpersonal ways that work most effectively for them. Therefore, participants' recommendations, geared almost exclusively toward other bisexual individuals, speak to these effective methods of maintenance. Participants encouraged self-assuredness in bisexuality as a valid and legitimate identity that they had struggled to accept. At the same time, participants urged other bisexual individuals to engage in the process of

unpacking learned biases, especially internalized heterosexism and binegativity that may otherwise affect their identity development or other relationships. This call to action connects with extant literature in the powerful impact of internalizing negative societal, historical, and personal messages. Internalized heterosexism and binegativity are related not only to interpersonal distress (e.g., lower self-esteem, substance use, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation; Ryan et al., 2017; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014) but also to interpersonal concerns and endorsement of negative stereotypes (Baumgartner, 2017; Hoang et al., 2011). Therefore, engaging actively in a process of bisexual identity validity includes unpacking societally taught messages as well. An active engagement in one's own identity validity can also allow individuals to respond accordingly and intentionally if new circumstances or concerns may disrupt their identity development and cause them to move through earlier stages again, as Brown (2002) identified as very likely to occur.

These stages of identity development do not fully capture the participants' experiences, as no single model can capture such diversity and complexity. However, the themes discovered in the present study can be better understood in relation to the function of these stages as well as serve as potentially familiar landmarks to encourage future bisexual individuals about their ability to continue progressing in their identity development.

### ***Intersectionality***

Intersectionality was a major focus of this research and illuminated important considerations in decision-making about passing as heterosexual, as well as feelings of validity as bisexual women. In line with extant literature, some BIPOC participants emphasized their own racial or cultural groups' negative perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community as a major contributor to the decision to pass. Specifically, participants discussed not being out or changing

their behaviors when around people of their own race, including loved ones, in order to avoid discrimination; this maps onto Pachankis and Goldfried's (2004) own findings regarding pressure to have to choose affiliation with either the bisexual community or their own racial/ethnic community. Participants also discussed the impact of racism on their decision-making: Julie, an Asian American woman, discussed how she was less likely to come out and be "othered" further when others, typically White individuals, already perceived her racial identity as her most salient or only identity. Of note, all three biracial participants also identified the similarities between their bisexual and biracial identities being reduced or erased. Past studies echoed these same sentiments, while this research expands upon the negative impact of double identity erasure through being perceived as heterosexual and being perceived as White (Ghabrial, 2019; Paz Galupo et al., 2019; Rostosky et al., 2010).

As another function of intersectionality, religiously based judgment and discrimination played a role in decision-making about coming out. Participants with religious family members discussed their hesitation to come out or cited threats of eternal damnation in reference to their sexual identities. Moreover, when participants came out to religious individuals while in a different-gender relationship, their bisexual identities and the resulting severity of their "sins" as sexual minorities were minimized or dismissed as a result of their ability to pass as heterosexual. The intersections of sexual orientation, race, religious affiliation, and other identities played essential roles in participants' decision-making and their feelings of validity as bisexual women.

### **General Discussion**

Supported by extant literature, the narratives explored in the present study suggest that bisexual women navigate many factors that relate to their identity validity in positive and negative ways as well as affect decision-making regarding passing as heterosexual. Factors such

as considerations of trust, the type of relationship, a desire to confront heterosexist assumptions, and the intersectionality of participants' different identities and experiences inform participants' decision-making to come out or pass as heterosexual. With these considerations, the experience of passing itself also comes with interconnected benefits and drawbacks (e.g., simultaneous safety and invisibility, both of which can deeply affect feelings of validity).

Participants experienced factors which negatively influenced feelings of validity and their larger developmental process, including assumptions of heterosexuality based on partner gender and appearance norms and experiences of binegativity in general and specifically within the larger LGBTQIA+ community, including bisexual stereotypes, negative messages about sexual minorities in general or about passing as heterosexual, and messages of exclusion from queer spaces. Despite the complications of passing as heterosexual and many negative factors discussed, participants identified ways in which they feel valid, including both internal validation through self-assuredness and positive self-talk and external validation through connection with others and positive representation of bisexual narratives in the media and online. These experiences of validation laid a groundwork for participants' recommendations, including encouraging others to commit to unpacking internalized biases and to find supportive communities.

As discussed, the findings of the current study are based in extant literature and can be connected to Brown's (2002) established identity development model, while still expanding upon the experiences of the general population of bisexual women passing as heterosexual. Moreover, the inclusion of BIPOC women's narratives emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in understanding decision-making about passing as heterosexual and bisexual identity validity.

## **Implications and Clinical Applications**

### ***Thematic Implications***

The major implications of the present study are founded in its focus on the narratives around passing as heterosexual, the emphasis on intersectionality in participants' experiences, decision-making, and implications for clinicians, and an analysis of passing as heterosexual through the lens of a specific bisexual identity development model.

This study is one of the first of its kind to utilize qualitative methods to explore passing as heterosexual for a more general population of bisexual women. Personal narratives around passing as heterosexual have so far been explored primarily among bisexual women experiencing their first year of parenthood (Goldberg et al., 2019); therefore, the research has represented only a small portion of the population. Qualitative research has also been lauded as an especially important approach to research work with minority groups in general due to its focus on individual processes and experiential meaning making. Therefore, the broadened scope of bisexual women's experiences, while keeping in mind the representational limitations discussed, alongside these qualitative methods allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making and other factors involved in passing and identity validity.

Another major takeaway from this study is its connections between bisexual identity development and decision-making and other factors related to passing as heterosexual. Although participants were not directly questioned regarding their current place in Brown (2002)'s model, the utilization of the model in relation to experiences of validity and decision-making about when to pass versus come out is unique to the present study and helps provide structure for the complex processes the participants were navigating. As discussed, participants' experiences

helped to elucidate the concepts of each stage in the model and may help other bisexual individuals to recognize their place within the lifelong process of identity development.

The final major implication of the present study is in its ever-present focus on intersectionality. Although the connections between social identities made in the present study are not novel in nature (e.g., the parallel experiences of biracial and bisexual “othering,” considerations of discrimination based on visible or invisible identities), the utilization of intersectionality within its framework also involves a specific call to action. The present study focused on intersectionality in order to underline the importance of representing QTBIPOC women in LGBTQIA+ research. Queer liberation—the sociopolitical movement calling for equal rights and status in society for the LGBTQIA+ community—exists primarily due to the work of QTBIPOC women including activists like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera of the Stonewall Uprising and writers like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Alice Walker (Riemer & Brown, 2019). Therefore, research that seeks to represent the experiences of QTBIPOC women in the LGBTQIA+ community honors them as the foundation of queer liberation and seeks to fill gaps in academic literature that focuses primarily on men’s and White people’s experiences within the community.

### ***Clinical Applications***

The clinical application of the present study’s findings links to the need for therapists and clinicians to be better informed about specific concerns of LGBTQIA+ and bisexual individuals as well as their own biases. Bisexual individuals may be expected to experience some of the same concerns as the general LGBTQIA+ community including coming out, experiences of discrimination, and navigating family and aging concerns alongside heterosexist societal messages. The prevalence of heterosexist bias in therapy, ranging from the “othering”

experiences of well-meaning therapists to the widespread use of conversion therapy even today, not only distances clients but also connects to therapists misidentifying presenting problems, pathologizing sexual minority identities, and providing unhelpful or incorrect interventions (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011; Sue et al., 2019).

Bisexual clients also experience unique concerns in therapy, including a greater likelihood of experiencing mental health concerns due to the double discrimination of heterosexism and binegativity (Brooks & Inman, 2013; Ebersole et al., 2018; Kerr et al., 2013; Smalley et al., 2015; Worthington & Strathausen, 2017). Clinicians should especially seek to understand the emotional aspects of experiencing this discrimination; consider, for example, the powerful emotional and mental impact of current study participants' negative self-talk around their decisions to pass versus come out (calling themselves "cowards" or "impostors" for their experiences in passing, even when these decisions were made for their own safety). Of note, in the current study, participants were comforted by the normalization of passing, such as with the quotation of the statistic that 84% of bisexual people in committed relationships are with a different-gender partner. Therefore, clinicians, clients, and partners may benefit from the normalization of passing as a common experience.

Other concerns for bisexual therapy clients include experiences with binegativity (including in the therapeutic space) through negative messages, stereotypes, and exclusion from LGBTQIA+ spaces (McNamara & Wilson, 2020). Similar to unchecked heterosexist bias, stereotypes may also affect therapists' perceptions about clients' functioning, incorrect links between problems and stereotype realization, and minimizing the seriousness of clients' presenting problems (Mohr et al., 2009; Scherrer, 2013). Therefore, the current study providing more information regarding bisexual individuals' experiences when passing as heterosexual and

navigating different forms and sources of binegativity may help to further educate therapists and clinicians hoping to provide adequate and knowledgeable support for bisexual clients.

With these concerns in mind, clinicians have several opportunities to strengthen their competency in working with bisexual clients. In Ebersole et al.'s (2018) study of therapist competency, participants reported lower perceived competency (specifically knowledge and intervention skills) in affirmatively counseling bisexual clients compared to lesbian and gay clients, although there were no significant differences in awareness of affirmative attitudes towards either group of clients. Therefore, therapists' concerns about working competently with bisexual clients may be based on having less knowledge and skill in relevant psychological and contextual factors for bisexual clients and providing affirmative care, usually due to a lack of training. Studies have also observed strong associations between competency in training and perceived affirmative counseling of LGBTQIA+ clients as well as general positive attitudes towards the community (Alessi et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012); therefore, more training is required in order to strengthen therapeutic outcomes for bisexual clients.

For therapists who are no longer in formal training, continuing education (CE) credits for working with the LGBTQIA+ community or bisexual clients specifically can help to address gaps in knowledge; these programs are typically made readily available especially as some state licensure boards require differing allotments of credit hours for LGBTQIA+ concerns (APA, n.d.; *CE Courses for LGBT*, n.d.). In terms of nonformal education regarding bisexual clients' concerns, APA's Division 44, the Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, has a task force that focuses specifically on bisexual mental health concerns as well as associated issues and standards of practice. The division publishes relevant and recent research for the LGBTQIA+ community in its journal and leads workshops and discussions during APA's

annual convention. The American Psychological Association (2012) also suggested that therapists familiarize themselves with LGBTQIA+ and bisexual-specific resources for clients, including organizations rallying for support and civil rights, educational support, youth advocacy groups, and other state and local resources. Other ways to further commit to affirmative practice with bisexual and other sexual minority clients will be discussed.

### ***Implications for Advocacy and Social Change***

Beyond the present study's goal of recognition of QTBIPOC women in the history and future of queer liberation, Warner and Shields (2018) discussed how research studies' implications within an intersectional framework also must brainstorm ways in which the research can be utilized to confront systems of injustice. There are several ways in which the current study's findings may be used to inform clinicians' approaches to confronting heterosexism and binegativity.

As discussed, mental health professionals are called to confront their own biases in their work with bisexual clients in order to reduce the prevalence of reported negative experiences. The Preamble of the APA Ethics Code also specifically calls psychologists to "respect and protect civil and human rights" and therefore encourages advocacy that extends beyond the therapeutic space (APA, 2017). Because this advocacy includes the protection of clients' access to effective treatment and other necessary resources (both of which are affected by societal issues and systems of power and privilege), these same systems must also be under scrutiny.

Advocacy can take many forms including volunteering in community organizations or on task forces; writing opinion pieces online or in papers to engage others in awareness and reflection regarding heterosexism, binegativity, and associated systems; and encouraging students and trainees to engage in advocacy (DeAngelis, 2018). Therapists may also advocate

through legislative means such as contacting elected officials about anti-LGBTQIA+ legislature or actions. APA's website provides tips for crafting effective messages via email, letter, and phone and how to find contact information for the elected officials associated with specific pieces of legislation (APA, 2017). For LGBTQIA+ concerns specifically, APA's Division 44 offers a free state-level legislative advocacy webinar to facilitate psychologists' efforts to support clients and communities (APA Division 44 Public Policy Committee, 2021).

Professional advocacy or advocacy specifically to promote the professions of psychological services can focus specifically on rebuilding connections with members of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, it can also involve advocacy for confronting barriers to services such as the Medicare coverage gap, licensure portability restrictions across state lines, a lack of funding for mental health treatment across many different settings, and a lack of public knowledge about the profession (ACA Advocacy Task Force, 2020). A call to action should also acknowledge the ways in which barriers to accessing mental health services affect bisexual individuals, who are more likely to experience poverty than heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals (Lee Badgett, 2018; NCHS, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2013).

Advocacy and a social justice framework can even have a place in formal training beyond the knowledge and skill building of a multicultural focus; for example, in experiential activities such as supervised service-learning experiences, immersion in marginalized and culturally diverse communities, and participation in community partnerships (Toporek & Worthington, 2014). These partnerships could involve general LGBTQIA+ resources or more specialized connections with QTBIPOC organizations or resources for older sexual minority adults. With these considerations for advocacy in mind, the findings of the present study can be utilized not only for the betterment of therapists' personal experiences with bisexual clients but also for the

reconstruction of the larger systems that function to benefit from the perpetuation of bisexual clients' concerns.

### **Limitations**

There were several expected limitations to the current study. Primarily, it was expected that this researcher's positionality as a bisexual White woman who has also navigated the experience of passing as heterosexual could be a limitation in relation to interview questions, content, and the coding process. Although the assistance of a co-coder and auditor partly helped to account for question development and the coding process, the researcher conducted all interviews and might have introduced personal bias.

A second limitation of the present study involves gender representation. Although research on bisexual cisgender women helps to close gaps in the literature that focuses primarily on bisexual cisgender men's experiences, there is still a significant lack of research regarding bisexual trans and nonbinary individuals' experiences. This gap is especially pronounced when considering gender differences in experiencing binegativity, as a large portion of the gender spectrum is lost when considering only cisgender men's and women's comparative experiences. Future research would do well to focus primarily on bisexual trans individuals' experiences in relation to how passing as heterosexual may connect to transphobic messages or larger patterns of misgendering and trans erasure.

Third, qualitative research is still held to quantitative standards regarding generalizability to a larger population despite the much smaller sample size (such as this study's group of 12 participants). With this in mind, qualitative research provides the opportunity to represent richer details of individuals' lived experiences rather than hypotheses or generalizations (Wertz, 2005). Although generalizability can be a concern and limitation with a small sample size, Gill (2014)

further reframed this concern: focusing on rich qualitative accounts rather than data quantity is a valuable method of contributing to the larger population.

Several other limitations emerged outside those expected above. Despite the researcher's plan to utilize a stratified sample for participant racial identity, the exhaustion of recruitment efforts required implementation of the secondary strategy: no more than four slots were allotted to White women and all other slots were kept for BIPOC women in order to focus more on BIPOC narratives. With such a strategy there is always the risk of creating a monolith of BIPOC experiences when grouped unconsciously into a singular "non-White" category. As a result, participants' experiences as bisexual women passing as heterosexual may not be generalizable in relation to their specific racial groups and should not necessarily be treated as generalizable to the larger QTBIPOC communities.

Other concerns around representation also arose, specifically around participants' age, social class, and education status. Despite the reported mean of 32.25 years and standard deviation of 10.4, the median (a measure less affected by outliers) is 28.5. Seven of the 12 participants were in their 20s (six in their late 20s) and 10 of the 12 participants were either in their 20s or 30s. Therefore, these narratives may be missing crucial representation of bisexual women's experiences passing as heterosexual, especially for those who grew up or came out during seminal periods of LGBTQIA+ rights activism. Further, the present study's participant demographics may not fully capture bisexual individuals' diverse, intersectional experiences with educational and socioeconomic statuses. The demographic form did not directly assess socioeconomic status, but participants were found to have more access to higher education than the general bisexual population may typically be able to access (two participants had associate degrees, four participants had bachelor's degrees, four participants had master's degrees, and two

participants had obtained their doctorates). As discussed, bisexual individuals are more likely than their monosexual counterparts to experience poverty and lower educational attainment, so this gap in representation may impact an understanding of individuals' experiences, especially in decision-making about passing as heterosexual for career-related, educational, or financial reasons.

Further, many social identities that intersect with bisexuality or the experience of passing were not captured, including identities such as ability status and immigration status. These identities can relate to different levels of access to services and privileges, and an additional marginalized sexual identity may further inform access, so decision-making about passing as heterosexual may differ.

Moreover, representation within this sample may have been limited due to the requirement that participants be out to their current romantic partners (if applicable). Although this inclusion criterion originated from a motivation to maintain safety for participants if they chose to disclose personal information in their own homes, it may have limited access to narratives around passing as heterosexual. As discussed, only approximately 19% of bisexual individuals are out to all or most of the important people in their lives – although the statistic of 55% of bisexual individuals being out to “some” or “only a few” of these important people may more fully represent individuals who are at least out to their partners – while approximately 88% of bisexual individuals are in committed relationships with different-gender partners (Pew Research Center, 2019). With the inclusion criterion of being out to partners, the present study did not interview participants who are navigating passing as heterosexual even with their own partner, and may have missed out on important decision-making and processes of identity validity for a large portion of the population.

Another limitation lies specifically in the constrained recruitment of participants. The recruitment measures of this study based mostly on social media relied upon participants already involved with general bisexual-specific or LGBTQIA+ communities online, in order to see the invitation to participate. This may lose potential participants who do not engage with online bisexual communities, are not tech-savvy, do not have access to or interest in these social media platforms, or may be engaging with more age-specific, race-specific, or other specialized LGBTQIA+ community platforms of which this researcher is not aware or may not be able to access.

Finally, with the exception of three participants hailing from the Bahamas, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, all other participants were United States residents. Although national status was not an initial inclusion or exclusion criterion in this study, these participants' narratives suggest that bisexual women's experiences (especially in passing as heterosexual) may differ based on their countries' current perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community, and may represent social changes regarding the community that are developing differently than the United States. Moreover, different countries' cultural and historical experiences in the intersections of race, sexual orientation, and other identities accompanied by associated systems of power and privilege may inform participants' decision-making differently but invisibly if not properly explored. For example, the historical implications and cultural impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and British imperialist systems' strict punishment of same-gender sexual activities in the Bahamas may have impacted the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation for Bahamian culture, especially for African-Caribbeans like Vanessa (Arnold-Forster, 2014). Ophelia's experience of being bisexual and biracial while navigating her parents' British and Trinidadian cultures may have informed her experiences in navigating multiple spaces and identities in ways

that are unique to her upbringing in the United Kingdom, which has a long history of discrimination against immigrants and biracial individuals (English, 2018). Finally, Sophia's experiences growing up bisexual in the Netherlands (one of only nine countries with monuments that honor the lives of LGBTQIA+ Holocaust victims) may be informed by the longstanding cultural impacts of World War II, especially as Nazi occupiers recriminalized same-gender sexual activity in Dutch law during the war (McKnight, 2017). These examples exemplify the many ways in which historical and current systems of oppression inform the experiences of individuals' intersectional identities; future research might look to expand on the initial findings within this study by focusing on a greater number of participants' intersections and with more countries' historical experiences in mind.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research would benefit from expanding upon the still extant gaps in the literature and limitations discussed. Primarily, research focused on more gender representation can be expected to reveal new and valuable connections in the intersections between gender and bisexual experiences. Similar to biracial participants sharing parallels between biracial and bisexual experiences in passing or not as White or heterosexual, valuable insight may come from trans and nonbinary individuals sharing their experiences and decision-making about passing or not as cisgender or heterosexual. Future research would also benefit from larger sample sizes and more detailed narratives regarding marginalized individuals' experiences, especially QTBIPOC women.

Further, future research utilizing Brown's (2002) bisexual identity development model or other stage models may benefit from directly assessing participants' current position. Although it was possible to organize the themes into representations of the different stages, an ability to work

with participants throughout the entire developmental span posited by the model may lead to more nuanced, diverse, and stage-specific experiences regarding decision-making and feelings of validity while passing as heterosexual. However, as discussed, stage models also tend to misrepresent, essentialize, or erase the diversity of individuals' experiences, especially for individuals attempting to engage in identity development in heterosexist spaces or alongside another conflicting social identity (Bregman et al., 2013; Pinto, 2018). The experiences discussed by participants within the present study may also serve to provide a new understanding of the ways in which the nonlinear, sometimes recursive, but still transformative progress of bisexual identity development can be informed by decision-making around passing as heterosexual.

There are many benefits to qualitative work, including illuminating the experience of passing as distinct from having heterosexual privilege or a function of cowardice. This study also served to understand the importance of how clinicians approach exploring bisexual clients' experiences, as questioning without affirming may be taken as yet another experience of disbelief or delegitimization. However, future research may also consider a mixed-methods approach and the inclusion of quantitative measures in order to capture a more standardized perspective for participants' experiences. Scales such as the internalized homonegativity/binegativity subscale of Mohr and Kendra's (2011) Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale can provide a standard for understanding the intensity of internalized binegativity; meanwhile, Brewster and Moradi's (2010) Anti-Bisexual Experiences Scale (ABES) and Mulick and Wright's (2002) Gender-Specific Binegativity Scale (GSBS) lend further credence to bisexual individuals' reports of frequent and pronounced binegativity from the larger LGBTQIA+ community. As suggested in the current study with the balance of negative and positive experiences, scales such as the subscales of the Bisexual Identity Inventory (Paul et al., 2014)

that can also simultaneously capture internalized binegativity and identity affirmation may further capture the nuances of this identity development and associated decision-making.

Future research would also benefit from the involvement of QTBIPOC throughout the full research process, including during the formulation of research questions and interview protocol. As discussed in the reflexivity statement, this writer's identities as a White bisexual woman may still have imperceptibly affected the lens through which this research was inspired, structured, and analyzed. Although the support of BIPOC co-coders and auditors (as in the present study) can help to reduce bias in the analytic process, future research will benefit from earlier involvement of QTBIPOC researchers in capturing such important narratives.

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**Appendix A: Demographic Form**

Full name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual Orientation \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Identity \_\_\_\_\_

Racial/Ethnic Identity \_\_\_\_\_

Current Relationship Status

 Single  Dating  In a committed relationship  Married  Other, please specify

Highest Level of Education \_\_\_\_\_

Current state of residence \_\_\_\_\_

Current type of residence location

 Rural  Urban  Suburban  OtherHave you ever dated, or are currently dating someone of a different gender?  Yes  No

Current Partner's Gender (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Partner's Sexual Orientation (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Mode of Compensation

 Amazon eGift Card  Visa eGift Card  PayPal

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

Questions introduced in later interviews through semi-structured approach are in bold.

### **Research Focus**

How does passing as heterosexual relate to one's bisexual identity validity?

What factors hinder bisexual identity validity in this experience?

What factors contribute to bisexual identity validity in this experience?

### **Getting Started**

Do you have any questions about the informed consent? About the study?

**You mentioned on the demographic form that you live in \_\_\_\_\_. Would you describe that as urban, suburban, or rural?**

**Did you grow up in that area?**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about your experience as a bisexual person.
2. Do people assume you're heterosexual while dating a current or past partner? What was that like for you?
3. Do you feel that "bisexual" fully captures your sexual identity?

*Probe: some individuals may also use other sexual or romantic identity names (e.g., queer, demiromantic, asexual/aromantic) to describe their identity.*

4. Are you out? What was your coming out process like?

*Probe: If you're not out, what do you feel are the factors in that decision?*

*Probe: What was it like coming out to your partner? To friends and family?*

*Probe: Do you have any specific memories of events that influenced you coming out?*

5. I'll be asking questions about feeling "valid" as a bisexual person. What does that mean to you?

*Probe: By validity, I mean that bisexual people can be told that bisexuality is a phase, that we'll grow out of it, that it's only a transition into being gay or lesbian or just something that heterosexual people do when they're bored – so by valid, I mean, how do you reaffirm for yourself that your sexual orientation is real and worthy of respect?*

6. What helps you feel valid as a bisexual person when your current relationship appears to be heterosexual?

**7. Is there anything you do to feel more visible as a bisexual person?**

8. What gets in the way of you feeling valid as a bisexual person?

9. How do you feel about your relationship with the LGBTQIA+ community?

*Probe: Have you received any messages related to your bisexuality from other members of the LGBTQIA+ community? Have you received any messages related to passing as heterosexual?*

10. What have you been told about bisexuality, either in general or in relation to you? *Probe:*

*From family, friends, society? Can you give me an example?*

11. How do you think being bisexual connects to your other identities, if at all (age, race, gender, religion, etc.)?

**a. How does the experience of passing as heterosexual connect to your other identities, if at all?**

12. Is there anything you would want to communicate to other bisexual people navigating passing as heterosexual?

*Probe: Words of wisdom, encouragement, recommendations?*

13. Is there anything else you want to add about your experiences that we didn't cover today?

**Debrief**

1. Do you have any comments or concerns about how this went?

### Appendix C: Participant Demographics

**Table 1.** *Participant Demographics.*

Name	Age	Race*	Sexual Orientation*	Religious Identity*	Educational Status	Location	Current Relationship	Partner Identity
Melanie	28	Latinx	Bisexual	None	Bachelor's	California	Married	Heterosexual man
Vanessa	28	Black (African-Caribbean)	Bisexual	Christian	Master's	The Bahamas	Committed Relationship	Lesbian woman
Isabella	25	Latina	Bisexual	Spiritual/non-denominational	Associate's	New York	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual man
Anne	41	White	Bisexual	Methodist	Associate's	Virginia	Widowed	N/A
Ophelia	21	Biracial	Bisexual/ Queer	Agnostic	Bachelor's	United Kingdom	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual man
Sophia	32	White	Bisexual	Agnostic	Bachelor's	The Netherlands	Married	Heterosexual man
Sandy	63	White	Bisexual	Feminist Wicca	Doctorate	Ohio	Married	Heterosexual man
Lucy	30	Biracial (Mexican, Filipino, White)	Bisexual/ Queer	Spiritual	Bachelor's	New York	Single	N/A
Elizabeth	35	White	Bisexual/ Pansexual	Atheist/Jewish	Doctorate	California	Married	Heterosexual man
Ruby	28	Black	Bisexual/ Pansexual	"Christian-ish"	Master's	North Carolina	Committed Relationship	Lesbian non-binary person
Margaret	27	Black, Biracial	Bisexual	Christian	Master's	Pennsylvania	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual man
Julie	29	Asian American	Bisexual/ Pansexual	None	Master's	Pennsylvania	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual man

*Note.* All demographic questions marked with \* were open-ended and allowed participants to describe their identities in their own words.

### Appendix D: Table of Themes

**Table 2. Themes.**

Research Question	Theme	Subthemes
How does passing as heterosexual relate to bisexual identity validity?	A. To Pass or Not to Pass?	Coming Out and Passing Both Involve Boundary-Setting Purposefully Coming Out to Disrupt Assumptions of Heterosexuality
	B. Two Sides of the Passing Coin	To Pass is to Be Safe To Pass is to Be Invisible Rejection of Identity, Safety in Costume
	C. Understanding Intersections of Identity is Essential	
What factors hinder bisexual identity validity in this experience?	D. Consistent but Incorrect Assumptions of Heterosexuality	Being with a Man Fosters Misunderstanding Does this Outfit Make Me Look Straight?
	E. Experiences of Invalidation are Universal	Stereotypes are Used to Harm and Invalidate Passing as Heterosexual Draws Specific Ire General Negative Messages Still Have Personal Impact The Risk of Internalizing Negative Messages
	F. Rules of Engagement with the LGBTQIA+ Community	No Bisexuals in Queer Spaces The LGBTQIA+ Community Perpetuates Stereotypes No Heterosexual Relationships in Queer Spaces Positive Experiences through Personal Queer Friendships
	G. Validation as a Survival Toolkit	Being Seen as Legitimate Feeling Valid Within Yourself Seeing Yourself in Media
What factors contribute to bisexual identity validity in this experience?	H. Words of Wisdom	Trust the Process but Do the Work Build Communities of Support

## Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter



November 19, 2020

Megan Ingraham  
Seton Hall University

Re: Study ID#2021-154

Dear Megan:

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled, "Passing as heterosexual: a qualitative study" as submitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval as exempt. If your study has a consent form or letter of solicitation, they are included in this mailing for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Sincerely,

Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR  
Associate Professor  
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Phyllis Hansell, EdD, RN, DNAP, FAAN  
Professor  
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

### Office of the Institutional Review Board

Presidents Hall · 400 South Orange Avenue · South Orange, New Jersey 07079 · Tel: 973.275.4654 · Fax 973.275.2978 ·  
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