

**WHEN SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC ATTRACTIONS ARE DIRECTED TOWARD  
DISPARATE GENDERS**

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**Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my wife Jessica, whose unending patience and boundless love has allowed me to fully understand who I am and what I want in life. Without her, I would never have explored my many options for living and for loving, and would not have found out how complicated love and sexuality can be.

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### Abstract

Many pair-bond relationships begin as a result of romantic attraction and sexual desire. Romantic attraction comprises feelings of love, affection, intimacy, and a desire to spend time with another person; sexual desire involves sexual attraction, arousal, and behavior (Diamond, 2003). This dissertation explored how individuals reconcile their experience of predominant sexual desire toward members of one gender (e.g. women) and predominant romantic attraction toward members of another gender (e.g. men).

To study this experience, a small, qualitative study was performed. Participants were recruited via flyers to answer interview questions regarding their romantic and sexual attractions and the impact of those feelings on their relationships with others and their own mental health. The experiences of four participants were then analyzed via phenomenological analysis. Two of the participants identified as male, and two as female. All participants were graduate students. Three of the participants described complicated attractions, reporting that they were romantically *and* sexually attracted to members of one gender, while also being romantically *or* sexually attracted to members of another gender.

Participants discussed several aspects of this experience, including: being unsure how to identify their sexual orientations (two participants noted that they do not identify as bisexual because they feel the term implies a sense of equality between romantic and sexual attraction); the extent to which they have discussed attractions with other people (three participants reported that they do not discuss their attractions with their families); the impact their attractions have had on relationships (two participants reported they feel their attractions have impacted their dating lives); and the struggles and benefits participants report related to their variant attractions.

While each of the participants' sexual and romantic preferences was different from the others', all report that acceptance by friends and family improved psychological well-being. Counter to this sense of well-being, however, are limitations in modern language regarding personal identities. All of the participants noted that they chose a label that is closest to what they perceive their collective attractions to be, and that they experience personal confusion about how to label themselves, which translates to confusion when discussing their identities with others.



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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Many couple relationships are begun as a result of romantic attraction and sexual desire. Romantic attraction is made of feelings of love, affection, intimacy, and a desire to spend time with another person, whereas sexual desire involves sexual attraction, arousal and sexual behavior (Diamond, 2003). Although the experience of romantic attraction and sexual desire often overlap, they can also be understood as separate experiences that may be mutually exclusive in certain circumstances, or among certain individuals. For most people, these two attractions are both directed towards the same people; for example, a heterosexual female may be both romantically and sexually attracted to a particular man. These attractions often lead to a sexual orientation, which is defined by the sameness or difference between one's own gender and the gender of the people with whom an individual engages in sexual behavior.

But what if romantic and sexual attractions are directed towards people of different genders, i.e. what if a woman is romantically attracted to men, but sexually attracted to women? What if these differences are consistent so that her romantic and sexual attraction is often split between people of different genders? A lifetime of experiencing differences between one's romantic and sexual attractions may have interesting consequences for how one identifies, with whom one initiates and maintains sexual relationships, and whom one chooses as a life-long romantic partner. Consistent differences between romantic and sexual attractions may lead to emotional distress or, in some cases, contribute to strengths such as one's ability to negotiate complex relational dynamics. The purpose of this study is to explore how these individuals reconcile the consistent life-long experience of sexual desire toward members of one gender (e.g. women) and romantic attraction toward members of another gender (e.g. men). The study asks

how these differences impact sexual behavior, partner choice, sexual orientation identification and psychological well-being.

It should be noted that the author supports the idea that, like sexual and romantic attractions, gender can be fluid across time. This study, however, did not attempt to rationalize gender identity with differences in attractions; participants' descriptions of encounters and experiences primarily in terms of binary gender categories was not requested nor required.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

The literature review for this dissertation will explore how romantic attraction and sexual attraction come about, and whether they originate as overlapping or separate processes (e.g. biological, learned, sociological, etc.). Following this, theories and relevant research are presented that support the hypothesis that for some individuals, romantic attraction and sexual desire are not automatically directed towards the same potential partners. A more thorough review of relevant theories was undertaken in this dissertation because related empirical literature is scant. More importantly, the need to reconcile differences between sexual desire and romantic attraction is a novel topic for study that can be strengthened by a deeper review of relevant theories.

#### **From the Beginning: The Conceptualization of Love**

The development of romantic attraction is often conflated with sexual attraction, and tied together under the term “love”. But as research has suggested, romantic and sexual attraction are not necessarily the same (Diamond, 2003). In fact, some individuals experience romantic attraction to members of one gender (e.g. women) and sexual attraction to another (e.g. men), and these disparate feelings may last across one’s lifespan.

**Triangular theory of love.** The triangular theory of love was first hypothesized by Robert Sternberg (1986). He suggested that there are three components that comprise the general experience of love: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Intimacy encompasses the feelings of closeness, warmth, and connectedness that are experienced in a loving relationship, as well as the sharing, mutual understanding, caring, concern for another, and intimate communication shared between romantic partners. Passion encompasses the

motivation, drives, and arousal related to physical attraction, sexual behaviors, and romance in relationships. It is important to note that Sternberg uses the term “romance” in association with sexual behaviors and physical attraction. This differs from the use of “romance” in the rest of this paper where it is used to describe what Sternberg refers to as intimacy – closeness, connectedness, and warmth. Decision/commitment refers to the decision a person makes to be in a relationship with another person, and a commitment to maintain that relationship. Sternberg suggested that it is possible for relationships to be made up of any combination of these three components but that when none of the three components are present, the relationship falls into the category of “nonlove”, which denotes casual interactions where there is no love. Any relationship may have any one or more of the three components, which results in various forms of love. Thus, Sternberg’s model demonstrates that romantic attraction (which is to say, the intimacy and decision/commitment parts of the triangle), does not always include sexual passion (the passion part of the triangle) or sexual behavior, thus providing some evidence that romantic attraction and sexual desire can be different and potentially in some cases, mutually exclusive.

Sternberg tested his theory of triangular love by examining the psychometric properties of an instrument he created based on his theory. However, that measure, the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale (STLS), was found to have significant item overlap, and some of the items used the terms “committed”, “passionate”, and “intimate” to describe relationships, resulting in potential confounds. In a separate test of the validity of the triangular theory of love using the STLS, Acker and Davis (1992) found promising results. Participants were 204 adults in Florida, whose mean age was 38.3. All participants were in heterosexual relationships at the time of the study and 65 percent were married. Participants were administered a questionnaire that asked questions about the frequency of behaviors that were thought to reflect satisfaction,

passion, intimacy, and commitment in a romantic relationship. The results indicated distinct differences between the constructs of intimacy, passion, and commitment, lending support to the triangular theory of love.

Although Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love has little empirical backing, and the data gathered are somewhat inconsistent, there is preliminary evidence that three components comprise love: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Acker and Davis's (1992) study may be interpreted to suggest that sexual desire and romantic attraction are distinct constructs. A step further, there may be instances where some individuals experience differences between who their sexual desire and romantic attraction is directed toward. Moving outside of Sternberg's work on 'love', in the next section I shift to focus on sexual identity development.

### **Theories of Sexual Identity Development**

Several theories of sexual identity development focus on the development of sexual attraction and then conclude that it is followed by sexual behavior. Though it is not stated explicitly, these theories assume that romantic attraction follows or naturally correlates with sexual attraction. In these theories, the combination of sexual desire and romantic feelings creates a sexual identity, so that one's sexual identity covers both romantic and sexual attraction. However, that might not be true for all people. In fact, it is possible to develop romantic and sexual attractions separately, with romantic attraction for one gender (e.g. men) and sexual desire for another gender (e.g. women). The models of sexual identity development to be reviewed in this section include the cognitive theory, Cass's model of homosexual identity development, and Bem's theory of sexual identity development.

**Cognitive theory of sexual identity development.** Money created the term lovemap (Brecher, 1979) to describe "a developmental representation or template in the mind and in the



brain depicting the idealized lover and the idealized program of sexual and erotic activity, projected in imagery or actually engaged in with that lover” (Money, 1986, p 82). Money presented the idea that, as children grow, they develop an idea of what a romantic and sexual relationship looks like based on their own internal drives and what they observe around them, and will seek out such relationships as they age (Brecher, 1979). The idea that people have an internal drive that directs their sexual attractions and that people will generally act upon these sexual desires suggests that one would typically expect to find individuals whose sexual identity aligns with their sexual attraction and sexual behavior.

**Cass’ model of homosexual identity development.** This model of development hypothesizes that homosexual identity develops in a linear fashion (Cass, 1979). It begins with feelings of same-gender attraction and a push against such feelings. This model suggests that it is common for individuals to put up psychological walls to avoid accepting homosexual attractions. Following this stage, individuals move into a stage in which they become more accepting of their thoughts and feelings and then begin to experiment with same-gender partners. This model suggests that when the first same-gender relationship ends, some individuals experience a sense of identity crisis and revert back to feelings of internalized homophobia. The next stage involves gaining a strong sense of pride in one’s non-heterosexuality, becoming very close to other gay peers, coming out to friends and families, and separating from heterosexual peers who are not supportive. Individuals then progress to an understanding and acceptance of their feelings and are then able to form a non-heterosexual identity (Cass, 1979).

Cass does not mention anything about romantic attraction in her description of the stages through which sexual identity develops; however, it may be possible to use this model to formulate an idea of how a person may end up with romantic and sexual attraction directed

toward disparate genders of people. Cass's theory discusses how sexual attraction leads to sexual identity: having a sexual attraction toward members of a particular gender leads an individual to seek out an identity that describes their pattern of sexual attraction. Thus, there is a pattern of behavior that forms as a person moves through the stages of this model, being involved with members of the same gender, exiting heterosexuality, etc. Cass does not mention romantic attraction and thus likely assumes that romantic attraction follows sexual attraction, which leads to sexual identity. However, it *may* be possible that, in going through the stages of sexual identity formation, romantic attraction never lines up with sexual orientation. While it is most common that romantic attraction aligns with sexual attraction, there is evidence that this is not always the case (Diamond, 2003). However, because this situation is not common, individuals who find that their sexual and romantic attractions are not directed towards members of the same gender may, in an attempt to resolve this disparity, choose a sexual identity that aligns with *either* their sexual orientation or their romantic orientation, but not both. Thus, in choosing a sexual identity, an individual may actually be choosing a romantic identity and go through the stages in the same way, coming to the conclusion that she/he is romantically attracted to members of a particular gender and forming an identity based on that. While the term "sexual identity" may then not accurately reflect the individual's thoughts and behaviors, she/he may have chosen this identity due to lack of options or lack of language to describe the more complex feelings she/he is experiencing in having disparate sexual and romantic attractions.

**Bem's theory of sexual identity development.** Bem (1996) posited that six antecedents take place linearly to produce attractions to either the same or other gendered people. In the text that follows, I have written these six antecedents in italics. The six antecedents include

*biological variables*, those that serve as a baseline for directing sexual orientation, by way of coding for *childhood temperament* which directs what activities children enjoy doing (male-traditional activities, or female-traditional activities, or both) and what gender of peers they spend more time with based on those activities (because most children will interact with peers who are interested in similar activities) which leads to *sex-typical or sex-atypical activities and preferences*. Following this, children will start to *feel significantly different from either same or other gendered peers*. If a child feels significantly different from same gender peers (due to sex-atypical behavior), they will find these peers interesting, unique and exotic. If a child feels significantly different from other gender peers (due to sex-typical behavior), children will find other-sex peers *interesting and exotic*. These feelings of others as “exotic” will, in turn, produce feelings of heightened arousal towards those they feel dissimilar to. This arousal leads to *attraction to either same or other gender peers* (Bem, 1996).

While Bem’s theory is useful in describing one possible method through which sexual orientation develops, it does not speak to how romantic orientation develops. It may be reasonable to assume that, in most cases, romantic attraction aligns with sexual attraction (in this case, assuming that sexual attraction develops in the way that Bem suggests), while it may also be possible that additional influences impact romantic attraction in ways that do not impact sexual attraction. However, because Bem’s theory, much like other models, does not cover romantic feelings, it is unclear how romantic attraction specifically falls beside, or within, sexual identity development. Bem notes that sexual attraction is related to gender behaviors and the genders of peers, often directed towards those not in the peer group (i.e. the “exotic”).

### **Complicating Sex and Romance**

As noted, several theories of sexual identity development seem to conflate romantic attraction and sexual desire. In contrast, researchers such as Klein and Diamond aim to complicate ideas of sexual identity and suggest that romantic attraction and sexual desire are not automatically linked. Similarly, in his time, Kinsey made a point that human sexuality is much more detailed, complex and widely influenced than once imagined. The next section reviews theories and relevant research that touch on the complexities of romantic attraction and sexual desire. The intent of this section is to better understand and tease apart the constructs of romantic attraction and sexual desire.

**D'Augelli's lifespan theory of non-heterosexual sexual identity development.** The lifespan theory of sexual identity development posits that the formation of non-heterosexual identity is less sequential than Cass' model of homosexual identity development would suggest. D'Augelli (1994) presents a model of identity development that contains six stages that an individual participates in, rather than going through in a pre-determined order. These stages may be experienced one at a time, or multiple stages at the same time, and in any order, as well as at any time in one's life. The first sections of this model is *exiting heterosexuality*, in which one has the conscious realization that one is not heterosexual and makes statements to that effect to others. In the second section of the model, *developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) identity*, a person challenges their own internalized ideas of what it means to be non-heterosexual and spends time with others who can support this. In the third section, *an LGB social identity is established*; here, the individual forms peer groups with others who support their non-heterosexuality. With this stage also comes the understanding that the reactions of others will vary and may change over time. In addition to seeking acceptance from peers, in the fourth

section, an LGB person will also seek to *become an LGB offspring*, which involves coming out to parents and reestablishing relationships with them based on this new information about the individual's sexual identity. The fifth section of the process of identity formation is *developing an LGB intimacy status*, which involves dating and figuring out relationship roles. The last of the stages (though not necessarily chronologically) is *entering into an LGB community*, which may or may not involve a significant commitment, although this stage may never be undertaken due to risks with jobs/homes/etc. (D'Augelli, 1994). In this model, identifying as non-heterosexual is flexible, meaning that some non-heterosexual individuals may not engage in non-heterosexual sexual behaviors. Thus, D'Augelli's theory provides some preliminary evidence that romantic attraction and sexual desire (and acts based on sexual desire) may not always be integrated; romantic attraction and sexual desire may sometimes involve separate processes.

**Studies of sexual fluidity.** Diamond demonstrates that romantic attraction and sexual desire are complex constructs. Diamond is one of the most prominent current researchers on sexuality. Diamond's work often focuses on the fluidity of sexuality over the lifespan, especially in females (Diamond, 2000). Her work also discusses the separation of romantic attraction and sexual desire (Diamond, 2003). She postulates that individuals can have romantic attractions to members of any sex/gender, regardless of to whom someone is sexually attracted, and that romantic feelings do not automatically include sexual desire, such as in the case of asexual individuals. Her work branches off of the work of researchers before her, by understanding that there is more to sexuality than just behavior, and that there is a spectrum of attraction and a spectrum of behavior, while also looking at the ways in which romantic attraction and sexual desire develop.

When trying to understand the differences between a sexual orientation and a romantic orientation, it can be useful to look at research that supports ideas of fluid sexuality and changes in sexual orientation over time. Diamond (2005) hypothesized that women who have sex with women could be classified as stable lesbians, fluid lesbians, or stable nonlesbians. Fluid lesbians and stable nonlesbians would be more likely than stable lesbians to report that their sexual attractions were based on an attraction to a particular individual rather than a particular gender of people. Diamond interviewed 79 women four times over eight years and asked them to define/describe their sexual orientation, identity and behavior. At the first interview the women identified as lesbian, bisexual or unlabeled. At the time of the last interview, fewer women identified as lesbian, or bisexual, and more identified as unlabeled or heterosexual. Some of the women whose sexual orientation changed over time indicated that they found themselves in relationships with, and attracted to, people regardless of their gender. What Diamond concluded from this is that women may or may not maintain a stable sexual identity throughout life and flexibility should be expected, though not required. Diamond (1998, 2000, 2008) has continued to study sexual fluidity. Recognition of widespread sexual flexibility, and recognition of attractions to individuals regardless of gender, may indicate that sexual orientation and romantic attraction are more complex than once assumed.

Another article that supports the idea of fluidity in sexuality is Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995). The authors interviewed 80 women who had spent at least 10 years identifying as heterosexual (many of whom had been married to a man) and at the time of interviewing, identified as lesbian. Three-quarters of the women interviewed reported that their transition to lesbianism began when they fell in love with, or had sex with, a woman for the first time. This research documents the fluidity of sexuality and the possibility of sudden changes. When

combining these sudden changes with the discrete changes (from a lesbian label to a nonlesbian label, and back again across time) in the Diamond (2005) article, the complexity involved in transitioning from one sexual identity to another is substantial.

**Social constructionist theory of sexual identity development.** Another theory that could help in understanding the development of romantic attraction and sexual desire is the social constructionist theory of homosexual identity development (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001), one of the more recent theories that attempts to account for socio-cultural factors in identity development. These factors include societal pressure, familial and cultural expectations, and personal and religious beliefs. Horowitz and Newcomb (2001) describe the formation of sexual identity as being a process that takes place within an individual and is heavily influenced and maintained through interactions with various groups within society

As described by Horowitz and Newcomb, social constructionist theory proposes that individuals label themselves most often using terms available to them in society (such as straight, gay, bisexual, etc.) and may also be influenced to act in accordance with the label that they find best fits them. A possible result of this is distress in an individual who feels required to define her/himself using a label and then act as that label describes, without the freedom to act outside of the label, despite a predilection to do so. This theory explains that identity development is influenced and may even be stunted by the dominant culture, which may instill in a person a loathing towards non-heterosexual individuals which then results in internalized feelings of self-loathing for homo- or bisexual feelings or behavior. In addition, social constructionist theory suggests that sexual orientation should not be assumed to be binary, nor static through the lifespan. Rather, sexual orientation is on a continuum and can be considered to be fluid, changing throughout one's lifetime (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). In some cases, there may be a

point where an individual feels sexually attracted to members of one sex and romantically attracted to members of another, which is what this current research studies.

The work of Gonzaga, Haselton, Smurda, Davies, and Poore (2008) explored whether feelings of love or feelings of arousal towards a romantic partner were related to the suppression of thoughts of romantic alternatives. Gonzaga et al., hypothesized that participants would be more likely to put thoughts of an “attractive other” (one who was not their romantic partner) out of their head if prompted to think about a time in which they felt strong feelings of love towards their partner, rather than a time in which they felt strong feelings of sexual attraction towards their partner. Gonzaga et al. were able to conclude that feelings of love towards a romantic partner can suppress thoughts about an attractive other, but feelings of sexual desire towards a romantic partner do not. These findings suggest that romantic feelings and sexual desire are complex constructs and that future research in this area is warranted.

Social constructionist theory may be useful in explaining part of why an individual may have sexual desires for one gender and romantic attractions towards another. Social norms start very early in life and the pressures to have other-gender sexual and romantic attractions are often present before an individual develops as a sexual being. As such, a romantic attraction towards other gendered individuals may be formed in a concrete manner. When an individual becomes a sexual being, she/he may discover same-sex sexual attractions, thus splitting romantic attractions and sexual desires. It remains to be seen (or defined) how such an individual would identify.

### **The Continuum of Sexual Identity**

Alfred Kinsey first proposed the idea that sexual identity could be viewed on a continuum. In 1938, Kinsey began surveying men and women to gather histories of their sexual behavior. He and his colleagues eventually collected 12,000 histories and put the findings



together into two books, *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior of the Human Female* (1953). Kinsey recorded information that included social and economic data, marital histories, physical and physiological data, nocturnal sex dreams, masturbation, heterosexual history, homosexual history, and animal contacts (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). Kinsey's studies found that individuals from all backgrounds have much more sex and a much greater variety of sex than was previously thought to be true. In addition, Kinsey and his colleagues devised the now widely used Kinsey scale, or heterosexual-homosexual rating scale, which rates sexual behavior on a scale from 0 to 6 with 0 being exclusively heterosexual and 6 being exclusively homosexual. Kinsey et al. (1948) made a very pertinent realization with this scale and his understanding of human sexual behavior. They state:

The histories which have been available in the present study make it apparent that heterosexuality or homosexuality of many individuals is not an all-or-not proposition. It is true that there are persons in the population whose histories are exclusively heterosexual, both in regard to their overt experience and in regard to their psychic reactions. And there are individuals in the population whose histories are exclusively homosexual, both in experience and in psychic reactions. But the record also shows that there is a considerable portion of the population whose members have combined, within their individual histories, both homosexual and heterosexual experience and/or psychic responses. There are some whose heterosexual experiences predominate, there are some whose homosexual experiences predominate, there are some who have had quite equal amounts of both types of experiences. (pp. 638-639).

While the Kinsey studies were done over half a century ago and have been criticized (Terman, 1948), they are still considered to be valid today. Studies performed in both the United

States and other countries confirm the findings, and the comparisons made between groups are considered to be an accurate representation of human sexuality. Although Kinsey's work is primarily centered on sexual behaviors and feelings, his work is relevant to this dissertation in that it demonstrates the complex nature of how individuals choose sexual and romantic (e.g. marriage) partners. For example, partner choice may be driven by sexual feelings in addition to other influences, like societal pressures.

### **An Integrative Theory of Sexual Identity Development**

While individual theories seek to explain the development of sexual orientation, identity, and behavior, no theory is sufficient to completely explain all of these. One set of researchers has made an attempt at an integrative model of sexual identity (Klein, Sepekoff & Wolf, 1985). These authors created a method of looking at sexual orientation by creating a grid system rather than a one-variable linear model that used the simple terminology of heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual. Klein and colleagues came up with seven dimensions that they believed contribute to sexual orientation: sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-identification, and heterosexual/homosexual lifestyle. Klein, Sepekoff and Wolf looked at these aspects of sexuality not just in the present state, but also in the past (before the past six months), present (the past six months to current), and the individual's ideal future. Their work indicates that sexuality is a complex construct and that sexual identity is composed of many factors; it is not solely based on whom someone has sex with, and a single heterosexual- bisexual- homosexual dimension may not be sufficient to understand the complexities of sexual attraction, identity and behavior for all individuals.

When integrating theories, it is important to consider which parts of theories might work best together. In the proposed research on discordant sexual and romantic attractions, it is

important to look into the societal piece of the development of sexual identity. Diamond (2003) points out that it is reasonable to suggest that romantic attraction is strongly influenced by societal influences. Similarly, Cass' model (1979) proposes that a variety of influences work together (including biology and society) to result in sexual identity. This then relates to the idea that if sexual identity formation is complex, with multiple influences, romantic attraction may also be complex and formed with multiple influences.

Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos and Altemus, (2006) hypothesize that romantic love (feelings of intimacy, commitment, and connection) and sexual desire (passion and infatuation) develop simultaneously but remain distinctly *different*. These authors tested this hypothesis through coding the behaviors of 63 couples and comparing the coded results to the self-report measures. Gonzaga et al. concluded that self-reports of feelings of love (such as happiness) were more strongly correlated to gestures related to affiliation cues, while self-reports of feelings of desire (which are correlated with arousal states) were more strongly correlated to gestures related to sexual cues. Thus, the researchers were able to support their hypothesis that romantic attraction and sexual desire are distinct and measurable variables. This research is beneficial when studying the differences between romantic attraction and sexual attraction as it lends credence to the notion that the two states may be separate, and if they are separate, perhaps they are sometimes directed towards individuals of differing genders.

### **Impact, Understanding, and Personal Acceptance of One's Own Sexual Identity**

Romantic attractions and sexual desire do not occur in a vacuum. Often, these feelings direct partner choice and identity development that also impacts our relationships with important individuals in our lives, like parents, siblings, and friends. In this section, I review articles that describe how acceptance and non-acceptance of a sexual minority identity impacts individuals'

psychological health and their relationships with important others. Although these articles were conducted with LGB people, they are relevant to my dissertation study in that they cover acceptance, or lack thereof, of non-mainstream sexual and romantic relationships.

Gregory (1998) explored the relations between outness of an LB sexual orientation and resiliency. With a sample of 420 lesbian and bisexual women, Gregory found a positive correlation between later stages in identity development, increased outness, and resiliency. The women who were later in their stage of identity development had greater levels of resiliency, which included measures of self-efficacy, ability to handle challenges, and self-esteem. In addition, the more "out" a woman was about her sexuality, the higher her ability to deal with difficulties. Again, this study concludes that the more comfortable an individual is with her/his sexual orientation, the higher her/his self-esteem, well-being, and ability to cope effectively.

Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter (2011) surveyed 156 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youths to explore links between LGB identity formation and psychological adjustment. The researchers gathered youth participants through LGB community-based organizations and college LGB organizations, and performed semi-structured interviews with the youth at three time periods: baseline, and six and twelve month follow-ups. They measured youths' period of sexual identity formation using the Sexual Risk Behavior Assessment Schedule - Youth for LGB youths (Meyer-Bahlburg, Ehrhardt, Exner, & Gruen, 1994). To measure the level of identity integration of the participants, the researchers measured their involvement in LGB related activities, their attitudes toward homosexuality or bisexuality, their comfort with others knowing their LGB status, and their disclosure of their homosexuality or bisexuality to others. The researchers also measured the self-esteem and psychological distress of the participants as well as social support and level of acceptance each participant felt she/he received from family,

friends, and society. The researchers found that while the timing of identity formation (when a participant began to think about their own potential bisexuality or homosexuality) did not correlate with psychological adjustment, greater identity integration (acceptance of one's own sexual orientation and identifying as bisexual or homosexual to self/others) was associated with higher self-esteem, fewer depressive and anxious symptoms, and fewer conduct problems.

Mohr and Fassinger (2003) examined how parental acceptance of participants' LGB identity affected their sense of self and degree of outness. The authors found that LGB individuals who have greater parental support also have a more positive and accepting view of themselves and are more likely to be out to their friends and family. Since parental support can increase self-acceptance in LGB individuals, it is reasonable to suggest that family support can help individuals whose sexual and romantic attractions are oriented towards different genders. As a group, they too lack understanding and acceptance that may negatively impact their sense of self and relationships with important individuals in their lives.

D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) found slightly different results when studying disclosure rates of LGB youths to their parents, the level of support from parents, and the patterns of victimization (verbal and physical abuse) that occurred in families. The authors recruited 105 lesbian, gay and bisexual youths (ages 14-21) who were living at home. Participants were recruited through LGB community programs (support groups, social groups, and recreational groups) to fill out survey questions that covered topics of sexual orientation and behavior, disclosure of orientation within the family, social aspects of sexual orientation, adjustment problems (as measured by psychological symptoms and self-esteem), and number of suicide attempts. The researchers found that youths who disclosed most often did so to their mothers first and their fathers second, if at all. Additionally, the participants who disclosed

received a variety of reactions from supportive, to tolerant, to intolerant, to rejecting. The participants who reported that they had not yet disclosed often predicted that their parents would be intolerant or rejecting of them. Participants who had disclosed to family members had higher rates of victimization, but also had higher rates of protection, compared to those who had not disclosed. Participants who had disclosed also reported higher rates of suicide attempts compared to those who had not disclosed. There was no significant difference in adjustment problems between the two groups. The authors concluded that concerns of youth about coming out to family members while living at home are justified, that it might be beneficial for some LGB youths to wait until they move out of the house to disclose their LGB identity, and that providing support for LGB youth becomes even more important when parents are not supportive of their “out” LGB children.

The body of literature supports that when one perceives and receives acceptance of her/his personal identity, an increase in self-esteem and well-being follow (Walters & Simoni, 1993; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Gregory, 1998; Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2011). Related to this dissertation study, individuals who experience differences in sexual desire and romantic attraction may not perceive and/or receive acceptance of their sexual orientation identification or their choices of sexual and/or romantic partners, thus compromising their well-being, among other factors.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how individuals reconcile their experience of sexual desire toward members of one gender (e.g. women) and romantic attraction toward members of another gender (e.g. men). This study will investigate how these differences impact sexual behavior, partner choice, sexual orientation identification and psychological well-being. I

hypothesize that these individuals may experience distress surrounding their mixed orientations and feelings of misunderstanding from romantic and sexual partners, family members, and friends. Additionally, I hypothesize that these individuals may have developed effective coping skills, born out of negotiating or defending their sexual and romantic feelings and choices, that are used to deal with stress and/or interpersonal difficulties.

The specific research questions of my dissertation are:

- *How did individuals come to understand their sexual and romantic attractions, specifically experiencing sexual desire for members of one gender, and romantic attraction for members of a different gender?*
- *How did these differing attractions impact their sexual behavior, romantic behavior and identity?*
- *How does the reconciliation of these differences impact partner choice and relations with other important individuals (family and friends)?*
- *How do these differences impact their feelings about themselves (related to mental health)?*
- *How does the negotiation of these differences impact their ability to handle other life and interpersonal stressors?*

## CHAPTER III

### Methods

This is a qualitative study, designed to use interviews to elicit an understanding of the experiences of participants. The interviews are then transcribed and analyzed to allow for reporting of the results of individual experiences, as well as comparison of experiences from all participants.

#### Use of Case Studies

Case studies can be beneficial especially when the phenomenon that is being studied has not yet been explored or has very little empirical research on which to rely (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies can also be beneficial when being performed for the purpose of postgraduate theses work (Perry, 1998). Case study reports should have no fewer than four participants and no more than 10-12 (Eisenhardt, 1989). The cases are analyzed and the results are presented by first considering each participant as an individual, and then comparing the participants to one another (Eisenhardt, 1989). In this study, cases were chosen with the aim of achieving “maximum variation”, by choosing cases that represented varying aspects of the phenomenon, rather than seeking out cases that had maximum similarities, which might have allowed for generalizations (Patton, 1990).

#### Participants

Participants were four adults who met the following criteria: between the ages of 25 and 60; able to speak and read English; identify as having primary sexual or romantic attractions towards members of one gender and secondary romantic or sexual attractions to members of another gender. The sample size was small (four) to allow for thorough investigations of each participant’s sexual and romantic histories. All participants were emailed a second set of



supplementary questions after the interviews had all been collected and initially analyzed. This is consistent with the data analysis method that is described below.

A fifth participant was excluded after the interview, when, upon further analysis, the participant's interview information did not meet the initial questionnaire criteria.

Twenty-five was chosen as the minimal age to allow for some experience in recognizing one's sexual and romantic feelings, and the consequent challenges and/or effective coping mechanisms associated with those feelings.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment involved, first, communication to the director of student affairs at Alliant International University as well as local colleges (SFCC, USF, DVCC) requesting permission to post a notice inviting participants. A flyer (Appendix A) was disseminated at coffee shops, restaurants, and community bars in the Castro neighborhood of the San Francisco area. The Castro neighborhood was chosen since there are more social events that occur in that neighborhood for sexual minority individuals on topics of sexuality and relationship development.

### **Procedure**

Potential participants contacted the interviewer via e-mail to arrange for a 15-30 minute initial phone screening interview (Appendix B). The potential participants were informed that it was an eligibility interview, and that if a participant met the criteria, she/he would be contacted again by e-mail to ask if she/he was still interested in participating in the research. If the participant was still interested, a time was scheduled for an interview.

Interviews took place primarily over the phone. One participant was able to do an in person interview, which took place in a local university. Participants were asked to complete the

phone interview in a quiet, private area. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Prior to commencing the interview, the participants received an e-mail containing the consent form (Appendix C), which they were asked to read over, print, sign, and mail to the researcher. The interview began with the researcher going over the consent form with the participant.

The interview began with demographic questions (Appendix D). Then the interview asked about the identity of the participant, how she/he came to that identity, how her/his identity impacts relationships, etc. At the end of the interview, the participants were informed that the interview would be transcribed (by the researcher) and e-mailed to the participant. Participants were also given a list of community resources (Appendix E) should they feel the need for additional support. In an effort to ensure credibility of the data, the transcription was sent to the participant (a process called member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)) who was given an opportunity to make edits and elaborations and clear up any perceived misconceptions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2011). No participant made adjustments to the transcripts. Each participant was offered a \$25 gift card. All participants turned down the offer.

Approximately 11 months after the initial data collection started, the researcher reached out to participants again via e-mail to ask additional questions (Appendix F). Participants were reminded of the confidentiality of their participation, as well as reminded that they were free to skip any question that they preferred not to answer.

### **Measures**

A demographic questionnaire was read to participants that inquired about their age, gender, race/ethnicity, hometown, occupation, level of education, religion, relationship status, number of children (Appendix D). A semi-structured interview followed.

The semi-structured interview consisted of seven open-ended questions about sexual and romantic identity, dating life, positive or negative effects of identity on mental wellbeing, and social interactions. A semi-structured interview format was chosen as the primary means of data collection because it allowed the participants to describe their experiences in their own words while having them answer common questions, in order to allow for comparisons between responses. These kinds of qualitative data are useful in exploring phenomena for which there is little research (Perry, 1998).

### **Data Analysis**

Phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the data, as it provides a structured method for comparing and contrasting interviews. The interview transcripts were analyzed for themes and patterns as well as similarities and differences between participants (Eisenhardt, 1989). On the first read of these transcripts, the researcher listened to the audio recording while following along, which allowed for note taking on the inflection and tone of the interviewee. The goal of the first reading or two was to become immersed in the transcript and to get a clear picture of how the subject was feeling during the interview (Eisenhardt, 1989; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2011). The purpose of these notes was to move beyond the text and to understand the meaning and emotions behind the transcript. Notes on key concerns—e.g. specific points the participant makes, as well as descriptive comments (such as a note about how the participant behaved, what the word choice may indicate) and comments on deeper ideas that are present—were made. These notes and comments aimed to address the context of the transcript (defined as descriptive comments), the specific language used by the participant (linguistic comments), and the conceptual level of the transcripts (conceptual comments) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2011). The conceptual comments are thoughts and notes that help delve deeper into analysis.

In order to identify themes and patterns, statements were drawn from the transcripts that describe the experiences of the participants. The goal was to compile a list of statements from each participant that were non-repetitive and encompassing of their experiences with the subject matter (Moustakas, 1994). These statements were grouped into themes and patterns that, once identified, could be grouped into emergent categories (e.g. positive feelings, negative feelings, relationships), and the key words associated with them were identified. These key words were helpful in re-reading the transcripts to find additional details about the theme, and allowed for looking across transcripts to identify patterns among participants. Themes were identified and statements grouped together as they relate to the themes. For example, a theme may be “positive feelings about sexual attraction”. Underneath this theme were quotes, comments, and notes from all the transcripts and analyses (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2011).

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

To understand the experiences presented by the participants, this section is divided into two parts. The first looks at each of the case studies individually, and explores the experiences of each of the participants as they related them. The second part considers the participants as a group and looks for themes that appeared across the interviews.

#### Case Studies

**Participant #1 – Xavier.** “Xavier” is a 42 year old Caucasian man. He is currently dating a woman, and has three children from a previous marriage, ages 12, 14, and 20. He has a Master’s degree and he is working toward a doctorate in psychology. His income is approximately \$4000 a year, which he earns as a teaching assistant. Xavier grew up in California with his parents as the middle child of three boys. Xavier was very articulate in his descriptions of his experiences (which may come from having discussed them with therapists in the past). The interview took place by phone.

Xavier first noticed having sexual attractions at age 12 or 13 and noticed that, rather than having specific attractions to members of one gender, he was sexually attracted to people of both genders. At 13, he found girls at his school attractive, but also noticed having a strong sexual attraction for his best friend, who was male. He found it to be a rather confusing experience, perhaps due to the fact that it was 1985 and there were significantly fewer out gay people at the time. Through high school Xavier dated women exclusively, and continues to only have romantic relationships with women.

Xavier’s experiences with men have been strictly sexual. After his marriage ended, he considered seeking out a boyfriend but found that he could not imagine being “open and

intimate” with a man and feels like it would not serve a “purpose”. He has never experienced having a sense of “intimate warmth” with men and cannot imagine doing so. However, the feeling of “intimate warmth” is present with women, as is the sexual attraction.

***Discussing romantic and sexual attractions.*** Xavier has discussed his attraction situation with two different therapists with mixed experiences. The first therapist struggled to understand the situation and Xavier found him to be unhelpful. He had a better rapport with the second therapist who looked at things from a Jungian and Freudian standpoint—which very much aligned with Xavier’s own psychological philosophies—and Xavier found the therapist to be very helpful and understanding. He has also discussed his experiences with his current girlfriend, who responded with “kindness and support” which Xavier has found to be “amazing”.

***Identity.*** Xavier identifies as straight, but also that he is also partly gay, given that he has sex with men.

***The impact of sexual and romantic attractions on mental health.*** Xavier said that his attractions have had both a positive and negative impact on him. The negatives relate to a pattern of self-destructive behavior, such as excessive alcohol use, which he attributes largely to the denial of his same-sex attractions. He found that the more he explored those feelings, the more he came to understand and accept them. This acceptance has been one of the positive impacts on him. Xavier noted that he has a great deal of self-acceptance, which has helped him. Additionally, his experiences have helped him better understand himself and his clients. His ability to recognize that a problematic behavior might be hiding some unexplored feeling or desire is serving him well in his training.

Xavier reports having had an uncle who was gay, and while his family accepted the uncle, they did have a problem with him “flaunting” his homosexuality. Additionally, some of

the family members, who are very religious, referred to his death from AIDS as being “God’s punishment” for his homosexuality.

**Participant #2 – Zoey.** “Zoey” is a 25 year old Caucasian/Latina woman. She is currently single but dating, and has no children. She is attending graduate school in psychology and does not have an income. Her highest level of education is a bachelor’s degree. The interview took place in person. Zoey was very forthcoming with information, but struggled slightly in figuring out how to answer the initial question about what led her to volunteer for this study. Zoey described her sexual attractions as being exclusively toward men, and her romantic attractions as being predominately towards men, with three notable exceptions.

The most notable of these was “Katie”. The two women were “together” for approximately five months, and during that time they spent most of their free time together. One of the noticeable differences Zoey experienced in her relationship with Katie—as opposed to previous relationships with women — was the feeling that the relationship was much deeper than just close friends, and that describing the relationship as a friendship was not sufficient, that “life partner” was more accurate.

Katie is a 30-year-old woman who identifies as lesbian. She and Zoey grew very close, very quickly, in large part due to Zoey becoming part of Katie’s social circle, and Katie being something of a mentor for Zoey. The two spent a great deal of time together, cooking, talking, enjoying each other’s company, and sharing numerous common interests.

Zoey and Katie never discussed explicitly the state of their relationship. Zoey reported that Katie would have liked to have included sex in their relationship, and was sexually attracted to Zoey. She and Katie would joke with each other and friends that they were life partners without the sex, which Katie would describe as being “kinda stupid”. Zoey attributed the

underlying sexual tension to Katie's homosexuality and being sexually attracted to her. Zoey was happy to have just the "romantic" relationship with Katie.

Other people, when talking to Zoey and Katie, would ask how the two had met and Zoey noted that the tone of the question felt like that addressed to a couple rather than just two friends.

She also noticed a desire to keep Katie to herself and avoided introducing Katie to her social group. Zoey also found herself withholding information from Katie regarding sexual experiences—something she would have been comfortable discussing with a close friend. She avoided this topic in an effort to prevent Katie from getting uncomfortable and to keep her from feeling "jealous or upset".

The five months they spent together were the "honeymoon" period of the relationship – they hit it off and wanted to spend all their time together and found it exciting and fun, which made the relationship's termination even more difficult. The end of their relationship came about because Katie's male friends were paying Zoey a great deal of attention, which caused a rift between the two women. Additionally, Zoey posits that it became difficult for Katie to be in a relationship where she was not getting all of her needs met and having the desire for a sexual relationship go unfulfilled. Zoey describes the end of the relationship as very much a break up between two people in love – "very painful". The end of the relationship lacked any sort of solid conclusion as well, which caused Zoey additional pain.

While Zoey does not (and did not at the time) feel a sexual attraction towards women, she did consider experimenting sexually with Katie in order to preserve their relationship. She recognized that she did not want to engage in a sexual relationship with a woman and would have been doing things she was uncomfortable with, but valued that relationship so much that she considered it.



Zoey's experience with Katie was not the only time she had experienced a romantic attraction towards women. When she was 16 or 17, she had a strong attraction to another girl (who identified as straight). Although Zoey was "in love" with this other girl, Zoey reports feeling a weaker attraction to this other girl than to Katie because this other girl was not simultaneously attracted to Zoey. The other girl was actually attracted to Zoey's twin brother, and Zoey encouraged the two of them to date and tried very hard to get her brother to like the girl. The hope was that she could essentially live vicariously through her twin by encouraging her brother to have a relationship with this girl. Zoey later found out that her brother was gay, which was why he was so uncomfortable when Zoey was encouraging the relationship.

***Discussing romantic and sexual attractions.*** The first time Zoey discussed her romantic attractions to women was at age 20, when she talked with a close female friend about her feelings. She felt particularly safe with this friend, in part due to this woman recently coming out as bisexual and then as lesbian. Zoey reports the conversation with her friend went well, that she was "understanding". Zoey has also discussed the situation with her parents recently, because they asked about her relationship with Katie and asked Zoey if she identified as lesbian, since she has not ever had a serious boyfriend. Zoey explained the situation to them, though they did not particularly understand the potential fluid nature of sexuality. She has also briefly mentioned it to her sister, but found that her sister is very sexually conservative, and that while she is accepting of folks who are gay, straight, lesbian, or bisexual, she believes that people should fall into one of those categories, not somewhere in between.

***Identity.*** Zoey identifies as 85% straight and 15% gay. Outwardly she identifies as straight because she feels that bisexual involves more of an even split of attraction. She said that several of her friends have suggested that she should experiment with women sexually, but

explains that she does not feel as though she is fighting or ignoring a sexual attraction towards women – there just is not one there. She does recognize her romantic attraction towards women though, and experiences both sexual and romantic attractions to men.

*The impact of sexual and romantic attractions on mental health.* Zoey has found that her romantic attraction towards women has not negatively impacted her mental health, though it has had an impact on her friendships and relationships with women, given the intensity with which her romantic feelings towards women sometimes arise.

**Participant #3 – Gino.** “Gino” is a 31 year old Caucasian/Mediterranean man. He is currently single and dating, and has no children. He has a Master’s degree and is a graduate student in psychology. He does not currently have an income. Gino grew up in a suburb outside of a large city “back east”. His immediate family consisted of his mother, father, and younger brother. His parents are still married and he is close to his parents and brother as well as other family members. Gino is polite and friendly and answered questions readily. The interview was taken over the phone.

While Gino currently finds that he is sexually and romantically attracted to men, this has not always been the case. Through high school and into college, he was sexually and romantically attracted to women. After his first summer of college, a fraternity brother of his introduced him to “Anne”, a woman from his hometown with whom he formed a deep connection. He and Anne spent the summer growing close and fostering a relationship. He described having an immediate connection with her that was close to a best-friendship. When the summer was over and he returned to college out of state, he found that he did not want to be involved with anyone else, and the two continued their relationship. Gino and Anne dated for

nearly three years, during which time Gino did not have any romantic or sexual feelings towards men. He mentioned that being with Anne was the only time he has felt romantic love.

In college Gino had a variety of friends, including some gay men. Gino did not notice having an attraction to any of them, but did ask some questions out of curiosity, mostly related to what it is like to date men and spend time in a gay bar with guys being “so aggressive”. When his friends first invited Gino to join them at a gay bar, he was nervous about what Anne might think if he went to a gay bar. He overcame those concerns and went with his friends to a gay bar and found that he got a great deal of attention. He found the experience to be “surreal” because the men were more direct with their attentions than the women with whom he had interacted prior to this experience.

He and Anne eventually broke up for reasons unrelated to attraction; Gino’s uncle passed away, and Anne struggled to understand Gino’s feelings—she had never lost a close relative and was not sensitive to Gino’s suffering nor patient with his long-lasting grief. The two ended their relationship in 2003. Shortly after the breakup, Gino’s friends invited him out to the gay bar again in an attempt to get his mind off of both the breakup and the death of his uncle. At the bar, Gino started making out with one of his fraternity brothers, which came as a shock to the rest of his friends, as he had not discussed having any attraction towards men. For the following year, Gino did not notice a progression in his attractions, but ended up dating another woman while continuing to hook up with (i.e. have sexual relationships with) men. He continued to enjoy having sex with women, as well as feeling romantic attractions towards women. He never found that he felt a romantic attraction to men.

Gino discussed how he felt there was no progression to his attraction to men. He found that his questions for his gay friends were rooted exclusively in curiosity and that he never felt

like he was repressing any hidden desires or ignoring them, but rather he just found a sudden sexual attraction to men and, simultaneously, a sudden lack of sexual attraction to women.

While Gino experiences sexual attraction for men, he has struggled to find a romantic attraction to men. He has had some crushes on women, though cannot determine if the feelings come from an appreciation of the woman as a person—who may be kind, pleasant, and attractive—or if there are deeper romantic feelings underlying that. He noted that he has some negative assumptions about men and the way they behave in relationships that may play a part in hindering his ability to be in a relationship with a man. Gino describes men as having struggles in relationships related to “communicating, verbalizing problems” or talking about needs.

***Discussing romantic and sexual attractions.*** Gino is close to his family but does not discuss his romantic and sexual attractions with them. One of his uncles was gay, and he has a second cousin who is a lesbian. His family has been very accepting of him and his other family members who are not straight. He has discussed his romantic and sexual attractions with friends to mixed responses. He found that some folks who identify as gay or lesbian have an attitude of “oh, just pick something”, but that overall, most people (of various orientations) have been very understanding. Gino contrasted his experience with same-gender attraction as being “sudden” to others who fought or ignored the attraction for a while. Rather, Gino found that it came abruptly.

***Identity.*** Gino identifies as gay, largely because he finds this easier than trying to describe the complex nature of his attractions. He feels that he doesn’t care for the word “queer”, and feels that “bisexual” implies a sense of equal degrees of attraction to men and women that he does not experience.

***The impact of sexual and romantic attractions on mental health.*** Gino noted that he has struggled with his differing attractions. Because he does not have exclusively same-gender

attractions, he occasionally finds himself in conflict with other members of the LGB community. Additionally, Gino finds it difficult and frustrating to date, since he has a romantic attraction to women, but a sexual attraction to men.

**Participant #4 – Mercedes.** “Mercedes” is a 28 year old Caucasian woman. She has been in a relationship for five and a half years and has no children. She is working on getting a Master’s of Education and has completed a bachelor’s degree. She grew up in the Bay Area with her parents and is the middle child with two brothers. Mercedes was very open and eloquent in discussing her experiences. The interview took place by phone.

Mercedes had exclusively been romantically and sexually attracted to women until she met her partner. She had been out to friends and family since high school and had recognized having romantic and sexual interests in women from a young age. In college she tried online dating and decided she wanted to be open to dating whoever came along. A man contacted her and asked her out on a date. She figured that if she was “open to trying new things”, then she would date whoever asked her out. Mercedes describes her date with “Jack” as being “wonderful”. The two had an instant connection and she found herself falling for him. She quickly felt that she would like to continue dating him, but struggled with a lack of sexual attraction to men. Her solution to this was to arrange an open relationship that would allow both of them to engage sexually with people outside of the relationship, allowing both Mercedes and Jack to satisfy desires for women.

Mercedes describes Jack as being “soft” and “sweet”, with a good personality, and that he was “extremely patient” with Mercedes as she figured out how to balance her romantic and sexual attractions. The relationship was rocky for a bit, but Mercedes found that, approximately one year into the relationship, she was becoming more sexually attracted to Jack. She still finds

women sexually attractive and does not find most men sexually attractive, but finds Jack sexually attractive. She feels like this is a bit confusing, but does not let it concern her since it makes her relationship with Jack work.

With hesitation, Mercedes described her romantic attractions. She had always enjoyed being in relationships with women and found them to be exceedingly satisfying. However, since she started dating Jack, she has found that she very much enjoys the dynamic of a mixed-gender relationship. She expressed feeling “sick” about having such feelings, but has found that it is “simpler” to be in a mixed-gender relationship and that it is different in such a way that she thinks she is much more open to the idea of dating men in the future (if her current relationship were to end). However, although she is more open to dating men, she is hesitant to do so, given her lack of sexual attraction to men and the impact that may have on a future partner, or on her current sexual partner in her open relationship.

***Discussing romantic and sexual attractions.*** Mercedes has not talked about her attractions much with family, but her family has been open and accepting. They were very accepting of her coming out as a lesbian in high school and it took them a little while to adjust to understanding her desire to date a man. However, they grew to like Jack and enjoyed seeing Mercedes happy. Mercedes has also discussed her situation with friends, who have been somewhat confused but, overall, understanding. She has lost a couple of friends who were adamant that she was not a lesbian anymore because she is dating a man, which led to fights that could not be resolved.

***Identity.*** Mercedes identifies as queer. If asked what that means for her, she says that she’s a “lesbian dating a man”, and feels that Jack may be the exception to her attraction for women, but also that she would consider dating men in the future, though she remains sexually

attracted to women. She finds that identifying as queer generally allows her the freedom to feel comfortable with her mixed desires.

*The impact of sexual and romantic attractions on mental health.* Mercedes feels that her differing romantic and sexual attractions have benefited her, particularly in giving her the confidence to embrace who she is, regardless of the complexities of her sexual identity, and that it has allowed her to be “solid” in who she is and has allowed her to “stand up” for her own identity. She has always been interested in women and now she is dating a man, and she is still free to identify as she chooses, regardless of what other people may think or say.

### **Comparisons**

In studying the experiences of all four participants, patterns begin to emerge: the way they identify; the people with whom they discuss their experiences; women’s vs. men’s approach to romantic, non-sexual relationships; the impact of their mixed attractions on their relationships; and the benefits they feel they have derived from their pattern of attractions.

**Identity.** Participants reported that how they identify is complicated by their variant attractions.

Xavier and Zoey both identify in ways that reflect their predominant romantic and sexual attractions, to the exclusion of their other attractions (in Zoey’s case – a romantic attraction to women, in Xavier’s case, a sexual attraction to men).

Mercedes, Xavier, and Zoey noted that they are partly straight and partly gay. Zoey described herself as being 85% straight and 15% gay. In her case, the gay is restricted to romantic attraction towards women. She finds that she sometimes forms incredibly close bonds with women, but continues to be exclusively sexually attracted to men. Xavier noted that he is mostly straight but also somewhat gay – he is sexually attracted to men, but not romantically

attracted to them. Mercedes, who identifies as queer, finds that she is sexually attracted to women (and her male partner), but also feels a strong romantic attraction to men. These participants have found that their orientations are a mix of straight and gay.

Mercedes is the only participant who identifies as queer – all other participants noted that queer is not a term they are comfortable with.

Gino and Zoey mentioned that they do not identify as bisexual because they feel that bisexual implies a more even split of attraction – that a bisexual person is sexually *and* romantically attracted to men and women, rather than feeling a more complex mix between romantic and sexual attraction. Both wanted to represent themselves as accurately as possible and opted for choosing identities that reflect their current attractions more closely.

**Discussing attractions with others.** For the most part, the participants reported that they do not discuss their attractions with their families, but have done so with people outside of their families, such as friends or therapists. Zoey had done so briefly with her parents, but largely because of their inquiries about her relationship with Katie. Mercedes found that she discussed her attraction to Jack just to the extent that it explained her decision to date him, rather than getting into the complexities of her attractions. Gino, Mercedes, and Zoey, however, have opened up with friends and experienced a great deal of acceptance from them.

Xavier found that talking about his sexual attraction to men with therapists was met with mixed results. One therapist did not handle the situation well. The other was open and accepting and supported Xavier, looking at his situation from a perspective that resonated with him – an experience that may have contributed overall to his positive view of his therapeutic experiences.

Zoey described a friend's suggestion that she should just try experimenting sexually with a woman to let out the "lesbian sexual energy". Her friend does not think that this will result in



Zoey having sexual attractions to women in the future, but will allow her to explore something that she believes “needs to come out”.

**Men’s romantic non-sexual relationships.** Both men in the study, Xavier and Gino, reported that they had not had romantic relationships with men. Xavier discussed his reasoning was because he does not feel comfortable being that “open” with a man, though he is able to do so with a woman. Gino reported that he has not had a romantic relationship with a man due to multiple concerns—one of which is that he finds himself so busy and overwhelmed by graduate school that he has not had time to date. Another reason is that he is concerned that he has not had romantic feelings for men in the past and worries that he will hurt someone’s feelings by beginning a romantic relationship.

**Impact on relationships.** Two participants described the ways in which they felt their variant attractions impacted their relationships. Gino found that he holds back from dating men for fear of hurting them given his lack of romantic attraction for men—though he also indicated that he may be spending so much time on graduate school, that he does not feel he has the time and energy to commit to dating. Zoey mentioned that her friendships with women are impacted by her romantic attraction towards them. She may hold back a bit when interacting with women knowing that she may develop feelings for them.

**Struggles of variant attraction.** Gino and Xavier both described problems they encountered in life that they believe related to their variant attractions. Gino described experiences with people who identify as “strictly” gay or lesbian who have told him to “just pick something”, and feels he has experienced some prejudice within the LGBTQ community regarding his “non-standard” attractions.

Xavier expressed that struggles with internalized homophobia may have led to alcohol problems. He described his drinking as a way to avoid addressing his sexual attraction to men. Currently, Xavier is sober and has been for years; he feels he has made significant improvements to his life since then – one of which is accepting his sexual desires as they are, rather than trying to repress them.

**Benefits of variant attraction.** Both Mercedes and Xavier commented that they believe their variant attractions have helped them. Mercedes found that it has made her stronger in her convictions of who she is as a person and how she identifies. She has found that her relationship with a “male identified person” has caused some tension with others, who tell her that she has to “give back her lesbian card”, yet she feels that she has been able to stand strong in her identity and maintains that she can identify however she chooses. Xavier described how helpful it has been for him to understand some of the underlying causes of his alcohol abuse – a desire to reject his sexual attraction to men. This has allowed him to better understand the clients he is working with and to help them to explore what may be underlying their more surface level distresses.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

This project focused on four people who find that they, currently or in the past, have disparate romantic and sexual attractions. Participants described experiences in which they find that they are romantically attracted to members of one gender and then sexually attracted to members of another gender. The discussion focuses on the ways in which the results relate to existing research, and the strengths and limitations of the current study, the clinical implications of the current research, and recommendations for future research.

#### Corroboration of Existing Research

**Fluidity.** To some extent, the experiences of participants reflects the findings of published research. For example, Mercedes reported that she identified as a lesbian for most of her life, but met and fell in love with a man. She reports that her sexual attractions continue to be primarily towards women (and her male partner), but that she has found an overwhelming romantic attraction towards her male partner and men in general – something she hadn't considered until she started dating a man. This is the complement to the experiences found by Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) who interviewed 80 women, three quarters of whom went from identifying as straight to identifying as lesbian when they fell in love with, or had sex with, a woman. Perhaps this pattern guided the advice of Zoey's friend, who suggested she try engaging in sexual activity with a woman to see if that might result in her developing a sexual attraction to women, which would then sync with her romantic attraction to women.

**Independence of sexual and romantic attraction.** Diamond (2003) discusses the potential for romantic and sexual attractions to develop independently of one another. Consistent with Diamond's assertion, Zoey reported that she found herself sexually and romantically

attracted to men, and romantically attracted to select women in her life. Xavier reported that he is sexually attracted to men and women, but only romantically attracted to women.

**Labels for identity.** Horowitz & Newcomb (2001) discuss the labels that participants use to describe themselves and their sexual and romantic orientations. Most participants in the current study (three of four) reported that the term they chose for their identity was based on available language and was the closest to being representative of the expression of their attractions, but not entirely encompassing of it, because “there is not really anything that fits more” (Gino). People choose words for their identities that are found within their society already, even if they need to exclude a portion of who they are from the identity (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). Two of the participants avoided identifying as bisexual because they felt that the term bisexual generally implies a “50-50 split”, with romantic and sexual attraction towards both men and women, something neither experiences – neither Gino nor Zoey are sexually attracted to women, though they both report romantic attraction to women.

**Acceptance.** Several authors speak to the importance of acceptance by peers and families (Gregory, 1998; Mohr and Fassinger 2003; Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter; 2011). In the current study, participants reported an improvement in psychological well-being when they were met with acceptance by family and peers. Xavier reported that when he found a therapist who was accepting of his sexual attraction to men, he felt more comfortable with his psyche in general. A therapist in training himself, Xavier feels that having a better understanding and acceptance of his own sexual attraction allows him to work better with therapeutic clients.

**Women’s romantic non-sexual relationships.** Smith-Rosenberg (1975) documents other experiences like those Zoey described – being in a romantic relationship with a woman and having other romantic attractions to women. These relationships are described as being very

close and romantic, though lacking a sexual component. The women in these relationships have described them as being “a couple without the sex”, much the way that Zoey described her relationship with Katie (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). One difference between Zoey and Katie and the women in the literature is that the women in the literature identify as straight, and while Zoey identifies as straight, Katie identified as a lesbian.

### **Strengths of the Study**

One strength of this study is its presentation of the varied nature of love and attraction. No two participants described the same combination of sexual and romantic attractions. Although the sample was very small, the participants varied by gender (two identified as female and two identified as male), and represented a variety of sexual orientations – one participant identified as queer, one as gay, and two as straight.

This is one of the only works currently addressing the differences between romantic and sexual attraction. Most studies into the topic of the disparate romantic and sexual attraction have been performed by Diamond. However, Diamond’s (2003) work studies the phenomenon using a biobehavioral model, while this study takes a psychological/experiential perspective, perhaps making it the first study to investigate the psychological experiences of people who have disparate sexual and romantic orientations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most prominent limitation of this study is that, due to the small sample size and qualitative nature of the study, its observations and results are not generalizable to a larger population. The participants all are college educated; all but one participant are attending graduate school for psychology; there is limited racial/ethnic diversity; and there is an absence of participants who identify as neither female nor male, or who identify as trans.

Another limitation of this study is that it is a retrospective study. Questions were asked about childhood and adolescent experiences that participants may not have considered in depth prior to this research. Such research risks the incomplete recall of a memory long past, or colored by later experience.

Additionally, participants were not asked to self-identify their gender. The author worked under the assumption that all participants were gender conforming (e.g. pronouns aligned with gender expression). This led to the understanding that sexual identity terms, such as “gay” and “straight”, were based on the presumed gender identification of all participants.

### **Clinical Implications**

As previous and current research indicates, attractions and relationships are more complicated than a mono-sexual vs. bisexual model, and therefore, so is sexual identity. This realization should encourage clinicians to view all people as complex individuals, rather than defining a client by attribution into simple “boxes”. Indeed, participants reported that feeling accepted and more fully understood improves their mental health. Therapists, then, can best support their clients by being open to the possibility of fluid and complex sexuality. By supporting clients in the exploration of their feelings, rather than trying to push clients into a box or a label, whether it is a traditional or non-traditional label or relationship, therapists can help clients better cope with the experiences they are having and the reactions of others. Clinicians, likewise, are encouraged to examine their own beliefs and attitudes about romantic and sexual attraction.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several avenues of research would add to the understanding of people with mixed attractions. Gender differences among participants, even among a small sample population,

could be explored in future research – e.g. does gender impact romantic relationships? Or, does a person who feels “85% straight” also identify as “85% woman”? The current study found the men reported a lack of same-sex romantic relationships; does a dominant identity as “man” influence one’s comfort with romantic relationships? Another focus related to gender would be the romantic and sexual attractions of, and to, trans and/or genderqueer people. Future research should focus on experiential well-being or psychological serenity in relation to disparate romantic and sexual attraction, and it would be beneficial to explore the topic in more depth. The sample should be expanded, and include a wide variety of ages, races, ethnicities, genders, education levels, and orientations. Future research could look into the existence of such experiences in adolescents. Interviewing participants across time would also benefit research. It could lead to understanding what, if any, changes in sexual and romantic attractions occur across time and what impact these changes – or lack thereof – have on participants. Continued research could also investigate how people with differing romantic/sexual attractions are able to handle ongoing relationships – how, if at all, does one satisfy both attractions?

### **Conclusion**

Diamond has affirmed that sexual orientation can be fluid over time (2008) and that romantic and sexual orientations can develop independently (Diamond 2003). It can further be stated that not all people experience romantic and sexual attractions to the same gender. Dissimilar attractions can be temporary—limited to a specific period of a person’s life—or may signify an upcoming change of identity status (e.g. the recognition of a non-heterosexual identity). The modern vernacular does not possess terms that describe persistently dissimilar attractions. While the acceptance of non-heterosexual identities is growing around the world, people who experience these persistent dissimilarities in their romantic and sexual attractions are

left out of the discussion, in favor of more narrow views of singular human experience regarding sexuality and attraction, that is, one is gay or straight, or this or that.

The participants of this study are still coming to terms with their contrasts, finding mixed success with intimate relationships, the degree to which friends and family are supportive, and therapy. That divergence in romantic and sexual attraction exists is only a recent acknowledgement. As Diamond's work continues, and other researchers become interested in the phenomenon, future research might focus on identifying people of disparate romantic and sexual attractions—clinically or via assessment—and helping them in therapy and by increasing awareness of the natural variance we have in selecting intimate partners.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**Recruitment Flyer**

**PEOPLE WITH DIFFERING SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC ATTRACTIONS  
NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY**

...

Do you find that usually the gender of people you want to be sexually involved with (experience sexual attraction toward) is different from the gender of people you want to be in a dating relationship with (experience romantic attraction for)?

**IF YES, YOU MAY QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY**

We are seeking volunteers for a research project aimed at better understanding people who are usually sexually attracted to members of one gender and romantically attracted to members of another gender.

Volunteers will be asked to first complete a phone screening to assess their match to the research criteria (about 15 minutes). Volunteers that move to the next phase will be invited to complete a confidential in-person interview (up to 2 hours) that will explore their individual stories, coping skills, personal identities, experiences with romantic and sexual partners, and impact on relationships with friends and family.

Our hope is that this research study will contribute to understanding your experiences and any psychological needs, as well as increasing visibility of individuals with differing romantic and sexual attractions.

The interview will be audio recorded. All data will be kept confidential and your participation will remain anonymous. Interviews will be completed at a secure location that is convenient to you. You will be provided with monetary compensation of \$20 for your participation.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me with your contact information -and the best time to reach you.

This research project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Alliant International University in San Francisco. You can reach the IRB at [irb-sf@alliant.edu](mailto:irb-sf@alliant.edu) or 707-980-7226.

Corissa White  
[loveandsexresearch@gmail.com](mailto:loveandsexresearch@gmail.com)

**APPENDIX B**

**Phone Screen Interview Script**



### Phone Screen Interview Script

Thank you for your interest in our research study. My name is Corissa White and I am a doctoral student at the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University in San Francisco. I am conducting a study to understand the experiences of individuals who experience predominant romantic attraction toward members of one gender and primary sexual attraction toward members of another gender. The goal of this study is to improve the knowledge base about experiences that are unique to such individuals that will inform and hopefully improve clinical services for them.

There are a few criteria for participation in this study. I would like to ask you a few questions and will need about 15 minutes of your time. Is this a good time?

If no: Schedule another time.

If yes: Great. The purpose of my questions is to assess whether you meet the criteria for participation in this research study. If it turns out that you qualify, I will explain the next steps of the project. If it turns out that you do not qualify, I will let you know and no further steps will be taken. Are you still interested?

If no: Okay, thank you for calling. Please contact us if you change your mind.

If yes: Great. Before we start I want to make sure you know that any information you share is confidential and will only be shared between my dissertation chair and me, and only for the purposes of this research. Do you have any questions about this?

If no: Continue to screening questions.

If yes: Answer questions as appropriate.

Are you between the ages of 25-60?

Are you comfortable having an interview in English?

Of what gender are the individuals with whom you are **most often sexually attracted**? For example: male, female, or some other category.

Of what gender are the individuals with whom you are **most often sexually involved**; i.e. those with whom you participate in sexual activities?

Of what gender are the individuals to whom you are **most often romantically attracted**?

Of what gender are the individuals with whom you are **most often romantically involved**?

If person does not meet criteria: Thank you for your interest in our study but it seems that you do not fit the criteria for our study.

If person does meet criteria: Thank you for your interest. You qualify for participation in our study. Can we schedule a time for an in-person interview? The interview should take about two hours to complete and will be held at a secure location at either Alliant International University or another private location that is convenient to you. We can provide compensation for your participation of 25 dollars.

**APPENDIX C**

**Consent Form**

### Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Valory Mitchell, Ph.D. and Corissa White from the California School of Professional Psychology, San Francisco. The purpose of this study is to learn about the life experiences of people who experience predominant romantic attraction toward members of one gender and predominant sexual attraction toward members of another gender.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are 25 years of age or older, self-identity as having predominant romantic attractions toward members of one gender and predominant sexual attractions toward members of another gender, and are comfortable being interviewed in English.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an in-person interview about your romantic and sexual attractions. Altogether, your participation in this project should take about two to two and a half hours to complete. The in-person interview will remain confidential and the only individuals with access to your interview will be Valory Mitchell and Corissa White, the primary investigators of this study, and a research assistant. However, it is important for you to know that there are potential breaches to confidentiality under California law if you provide information that suggests child, elderly, and/or dependent adult abuse. Confidentiality may also be breached if you suggest that you are in imminent danger to yourself or others. All interview data will be destroyed after five years of the start of this research project, or after publication, whichever comes first.

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the California School of Professional Psychology or the primary investigators. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You will be provided with 20 dollars at the end of the interview as compensation for your participation.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us: Corissa White, 509-378-9264, [loveandsexresearch@gmail.com](mailto:loveandsexresearch@gmail.com). If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Institutional Review Board at the California School of Professional Psychology, San Francisco at [irb-sf@alliant.edu](mailto:irb-sf@alliant.edu) or (415) 955-2151. This Office oversees the review of research to protect your rights and is not involved with this study.

By signing your name below, you indicate that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, and that you are waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

**Name (please print):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

O I am interested in receiving feedback regarding the results of this study when the study is complete. The findings will be a summary of collected results with no possibility of identifying participants. Please provide your contact information so that we can send you the results.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**APPENDIX D**

**Interview Questions**

### Interview Questions

Demographic Questionnaire:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Hometown:

Occupation:

Level of Education:

Religion:

Relationship Status:

Number of Children:

#### Interview Questions:

- What is your sexual orientation?
- Using the same language that is applied to sexual orientation, what is your romantic orientation?
- How did you determine each orientation?
- With whom do you have sexual relationships?
- With whom do you have romantic relationships?
- Do you experience any kind of emotional distress around the differences between your romantic and sexual attractions? If so, can you please describe it?
- Do you find that you experience any strengths in having a separation between romantic and sexual attraction? If so, what kind of strengths?
- How has this separation between romantic and sexual attraction improved your life (if at all)?
  - Has negotiating this difference made it easier for you to handle other life stresses? If yes, explain.
- How has this separation between romantic and sexual attraction created problems in your life (if at all)?
  - Has it impacted your sexual or romantic partners? If yes, how so?
  - Has it impacted your friendships? If yes, how so?

- Has it impacted your relationships with your family? If yes, how so?
- How do these differences impact your sexual behavior? Like, who you hook up with or they kinds of sexual practices you engage in.
- How do these differences impact how you identity, like how you self-identity and/or how you identify and describe yourself to others?
- How do these differences impact your mental health?
- Do you have any suggestions or advice for other people (young or old) who find themselves experiencing a difference between their romantic and sexual attraction?

**APPENDIX E**

**Community Referrals for Psychological Support**



### Referrals

For some, discussing sexual and romantic experiences may be a difficult process. Below is a list of resources that you can access if you feel that you would like support in further exploring your experiences. If you would like additional resources, you are more than welcome to contact me, Corissa White, [loveandsexresearch@gmail.com](mailto:loveandsexresearch@gmail.com), (509) 378-9264.

Thank you.

1. Haight Ashbury Psychological Services  
2166 Hayes Street, Suite 308  
San Francisco, CA 94117  
415.221.4211  
[staff@hapsclinic.org](mailto:staff@hapsclinic.org)
2. Pacific Center for Human Growth  
2712 Telegraph Avenue  
Berkeley, CA 94705  
510.548.8283  
[info@pacificcenter.org](mailto:info@pacificcenter.org)
3. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force  
<http://www.nglhf.org/>

**APPENDIX F**  
**Additional Interview Questions**

## SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC ATTRACTION ORIENTATIONS

### **Additional Interview Questions**

- Where did you grow up (I want to remind you that I will not name the location, but give a broad description)?
- Were there any/many opportunities to explore a variety of romantic/sexual relationships?
- Where do you live now?
- Are there more opportunities to explore a variety of relationships and sexual interactions in your current location?
- Who comprised your family growing up?
- Do you know of anyone in your family who has variant romantic and/or sexual attractions (i.e. relationships that aren't straight)?
- If so, how did the rest of your family respond to that person's coming out?
- How old were you when you first engaged in a romantic relationship?
- What was the gender of the person?
- How old were you when you first engaged in a sexual relationship?
- What was the gender of the person?
- How old were you when you first became involved with a person outside your more common attractions (e.g. if you identify as straight, when did you first engage with a person of the same gender in either a romantic or sexual relationship)?