

# **Bi+ People's Experiences in the Post Gay Era**

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THESIS

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## SUMMARY

In this dissertation, I draw on 40 in-depth interviews with bi+ people between the ages of 21 and 30 in the Chicagoland area to better understand the ways they construct identity, navigate forming connections to LGBTQ and bi+ community, and conceptualize social changes that would impact bi+ people. I supplement these data with a preliminary analysis of the Pew 2013 Survey of LGBT Adults to shed more light on the era in which my interviews take place.

My findings suggest that bi+ people navigate pervasive stigma and construct their identities in relation to these stigmas. Furthermore, the ways in which they construct identity informs how they relate to LGBTQ community. Many respondents used the term “queer” in addition to other identity labels to signify this connection. However, in LGBTQ communities, they were often othered and excluded from full participation. They struggled to find community with other bi+ people in the wake of this exclusion. Interviewees showed difficulty naming a core issue for bi+ people beyond increasing visibility. My findings suggest this is because they may not have a solid network of people with a shared bi+ consciousness when it comes to major political concerns. These findings suggest that monosexism is reproduced through social interaction, and my analysis reveals some of the pathways by which this happens. I coin the term “the monosexual imaginary” to highlight how bi+ existence is rendered invisible and monosexism is maintained in contemporary U.S. society.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### CENTERING MONOSEXISM IN THE STUDY OF SEXUALITIES

On a cloudy day in May of 2019, I decided to go for a walk to clear my head. I was deep in the process of working on this dissertation and needed a break. I decided to roam to one of the Chicago “gayborhoods” to grab some coffee and visit one of my favorite bookstores in the city. After browsing the discount fiction section, I wandered over to the rather large area of LGBTQ books this particular shop keeps in stock. In fact, one of the reasons I love this store is that they have a notably large section dedicated to LGBTQ literature (one of the largest in the city). This is understandable considering that it is situated in an area that many consider to be a gathering place for LGBTQ people in Chicago (although this supposed gathering place, and others like it, are not without their limitations and exclusions, see Ghaziani 2014; Orne 2017).

As I navigated the maze of shelves in the LGBTQ section, I saw books on queer social movements, gay and lesbian fiction, books geared specifically toward LGBTQ men and women, erotica, photobooks, queer poetry, and even the majority of a whole bookcase dedicated entirely to transgender literature. As I somewhat aimlessly perused the stacks, I began to ask myself, as I often do in my day-to-day life, “where are the bi+<sup>1</sup> people?” After all, this store supposedly has one of the largest collections of LGBTQ literature available for purchase in Chicago. So *where* is their section dedicated to the largest sexual minority population in the United States (Gates 2011)? My casual glances at the shelves became more focused as I initiated a hunt for where our designated section was among the shelves of other LGBTQ books.

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<sup>1</sup> Bi+ is a term that refers to people who do not identify as monosexual (lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). Commonly, the term bi+ refers to people who fall under “the bisexual umbrella” (Esiner 2013) and identify as bisexual, pansexual, queer, fluid, or otherwise non-monosexual (see also Sumerau, Mathers, and Moon 2019). In this dissertation, I use the term bi+ to refer to my respondents as a whole and use the sexual identity terms of their choosing when they are quoted throughout.

After a few minutes, I finally found it, “the bisexual section,” on the second-from-the-bottom shelf of a bookcase in the very back corner of the where the LGBTQ books are housed (Figure I). Had I not crouched down to investigate what was on the lower shelves, I may have missed it entirely, both because of its location and because there was a grand total of five books dedicated to bi+ experience in this store. “*Out of hundreds, maybe thousands of books featured in this galaxy of ‘LGBTQ’ literature, we have five. Five whole books!*” I chuckled to myself as I snapped the picture below, “*And on the second from the bottom shelf no less. How apropos.*” Laughing is what I often do when I encounter an example of casual bi+ erasure and monosexism such as this because these experiences are so routine to me at this point that laughing is the thing I do to keep from delving into a deep, perpetual pit of rage and frustration at the continual disregard of bi+ people in contemporary U.S. society (Eisner 2013). It also did not escape my view that the (much larger) sections around the five whole books on bi+ life featured multiple titles on “gay marriage” and “gay parenting,” a nod to the much more popular, homonormative foci of LGBTQ life today.



broader social dynamics of erasure, invalidation, and dismissal bi+ people encounter every day. As one of my interviewees, Cassidy, a 27-year-old queer cisgender woman, said, “I think that there’s more visibility for lesbian and gay people, and people understand, [want] to try to understand that...There’s [bi and queer] visibility, but it seems limited and you really have to go out and look for it if you want it, for queer and bisexual people. Like, it’s there but...it’s not...” Or, as Jackson, a 21-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, said, “We have a letter (laughs), like that’s nice. I feel like we’re kind of skipped.” Cassidy is right; in a sea of books on lesbian and gay experience, I had to “look for” anything focused on bi+ experience, and hard. When I found it, Jackson’s words rattled around in my head, “We have a letter...that’s nice.” Perhaps “having a letter” is another way of saying, “Yes, you will find yourself in the five books on the second from the bottom shelf in the very very back corner. Enjoy, and remember: at least you get *something*.”

As I continued pondering my bookstore expedition, I realized that this image of a miniscule collection of bi+ books didn’t just represent the experiences of bi+ people broadly but also the ways in which bi+ experience is handled (or, more realistically, not really at all handled) in contemporary social science literature (Monro et al. 2017). Bi+ people are a footnote in the realm of sexuality studies, positioned on some of the lowest shelves in the hierarchy of analytic focus that exists in our field to date. Such omissions are bound up in the same structural mechanisms that make invisible the experiences bi+ people deal with on a day-to-day basis. With these mechanisms at work, the ways that bi+ people not only navigate erasure in their daily lives but also deal with (or to what extent they are even aware of) structural forms of inequality specific to their existence *as* bi+ people are made invisible, too. Although I went on my walk to

take a break from my dissertation, it turned out that getting away from bi+ erasure and monosexism, even the small and unintentional instances of it, isn't really possible.

In 1990, many years before my walk on a cloudy May day in Chicago, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick stated that “An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of the modern homo/heterosexual definition” (1). Since Sedgwick’s groundbreaking analysis in *Epistemology of the Closet*, sociologists have seriously taken up the task of analyzing the ways that heteronormativity shapes social relations (Ingraham 1994; Pfeffer 2014; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In so doing, sociologists shifted their focus from analyses mainly concerning gay and lesbian deviance (McIntosh 1968; Reiss 1961) to analyses of the ways that (hetero)sexual power governs everyday societal function (see also, Butler 1993).

In later years, scholars started to analyze the ways that homonormativity (Duggan 2004) shaped lesbian and gay politics (Bryant 2008; Ferguson 2005; Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018a; Ward 2008). While this shift signaled an important focus on another element of sexual power relations, namely the ways that lesbian and gay people could approximate heteronormative standards with the hope of acceptance from broader society, this intellectual and political shift didn't benefit everyone in the LGBTQ community equally. For example, bi+ people have not benefitted from shifts in homonormative politics (Mathers et al. 2018a). In fact, bi+ people have largely been ignored in mainstream lesbian and gay politics focusing predominantly on marriage (Moss 2012) and sociological analyses of sexuality and gender (Monro et al. 2017; Owen 2003).

In addition to Sedgwick's call in the early 1990s to centralize the hetero/homosexual binary in all analyses of social relations, scholars of a similar generation began to point to the ways that the oppressive structures of gender are inextricably tied to sexuality (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993; Ingraham 1994; MacKinnon 1982; Rich 1980). These scholars pointed to the fact that heterosexuality is a power structure with differing implications for women and men (Rich 1980), and that gendered meanings of masculinity and femininity are rooted in the notion that everyone should be heterosexual and that heterosexuality is normal and good (Butler 1990, 1993; Warner 1999). With this development, sociologists of sexuality began to push sociologists of gender to significantly alter their research frameworks and take up this important relationship (Ingraham 1994).

While some sociologists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century have meaningfully followed the call to investigate the connections between gender, sexuality, and power (Garcia 2012; Pascoe 2007; Pfeffer 2014; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Sumerau et al. 2019; Westbrook and Schilt 2014), the past three decades of sexualities scholarship in sociology has largely focused their analyses on *either side* of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, rather than critically analyzing the ways that such a binary is a mechanism of power and erasure for those who are not named in said binary: bi+ people. Although sociologists on the margins of the sociology of sexualities have been calling for a more serious inquiry of the social construction, regulation, and erasure bisexuality for over a decade (see, Owen 2003), most sociologists of sexuality have not adequately taken up this call (for notable exceptions see, Mathers et al. 2018a; Moss 2012; Rust 1993a, 1993b; Scherrer et al. 2015; Sumerau and Mathers 2019).

Sociologists' minimal attention to the social construction of bi+ existence has theoretical implications for the discipline in terms of better understanding the social dynamics of sexuality.

For example, even when some scholarship presents researchers with a ripe opportunity to interrogate the social construction of bisexuality and monosexist oppression, these opportunities are not always utilized (see, Silva 2018; Ward 2015). According to Shiri Eisner (2013) monosexism refers to a system of power and inequality where monosexual (i.e. attraction to exclusively one sex or gender) desires and practices are rewarded while bi+ desires and practices are punished. While the countless studies that interrogate hetero and homonormativity undoubtedly invigorate our knowledge about sexual inequality (Pascoe 2007; Ward 2008), the ways that monosexism underpins and supports hetero and homonormativity remain unexamined. Thus, the sociological portrait of sexual inequality remains, in Sedgwick's terms, "damaged" and in need of attention.

While this gap has theoretical implications for sociologists, there are also concrete implications for the lives of bi+ people. This is evidenced by the research in other fields that demonstrate that bi+ people have worse health outcomes compared to their lesbian, gay, and heterosexual peers (Gorman et al. 2015), are more likely to live in poverty than their lesbian, gay, and heterosexual peers (Badgett et al. 2013), are more likely to be closeted to their families and coworkers than their lesbian and gay peers (Scherrer et al. 2015), and are consistently ranked less favorably than their heterosexual, lesbian, and gay counterparts (Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Worthen 2013). Furthermore, bi+ women are more likely to face intimate partner violence than their heterosexual and lesbian peers (Walters et al. 2013). Clearly, bi+ people face issues unique to bi+ existence. The minimal existing research points to the fact that scholars need to investigate monosexism as a structure of inequality, the consequences of which cannot simply be explained through an understanding of heteronormativity and/or patriarchy. One way to mend this gap in

the field involves focusing on the ways that bi+ people navigate their social world in the face of such structural inequalities.

I concur with Sedgwick (1990) that our understanding of contemporary Western culture *is* damaged without a serious analysis of the hetero/homosexual binary. Since a serious analysis of bi+ life and monosexism is not as prevalent in the sociology of sexualities as analyses of patriarchy and heteronormativity, my aim in this dissertation is to push the field towards more critically analyzing the ways that monosexism is a powerful force in governing social interactions. In so doing, I aim to contribute to unveiling the ways that heteronormativity, patriarchy, and monosexism work *together* as systems of power relating to sexuality while also teasing apart the implications that bisexual people face in a world that normalizes monosexual existence. In so doing, I want to incorporate a “bisexual lens” (Moss 2012) to the sociology of sexualities.

To accomplish this goal, I draw on interviews with 40 bi+ individuals<sup>2</sup> to gain insights into the ways bi+ people navigate a monosexist society today. By drawing on symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), I interrogate how bi+ people construct identity in the face of pervasive bi+ stigma (Chapter 4), the barriers they encounter while trying to forge connections with LGBTQ and sometimes bi+ communities (Chapter 5), and the ways in which bi+ people conceptualize pathways for social change that would specifically impact them and other bi+ people (Chapter 6). In so doing, I aim to better understand how the process of identity construction, community connection, and political consciousness are linked together for bi+ people, and what this may mean for lessening monosexism in the future. Before moving into my findings, it is important to contextualize bi+ existence, in sociology specifically as well as the

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3 for information on recruitment and Methodological Appendix for detailed demographics of the sample.



broader social context of the United States. Thus, I present my literature review in Chapter 2 and the details of my research methods in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE

### THE SOCIOLOGY OF BI+ LIFE

According to Erickson and Steffen (1999), the agendas of sexualities research are significantly shaped by the social climate and political demands of the era when researchers conduct their studies. Given that we live in a monosexist world (Eisner 2013; Moss 2012; Sumerau and Mathers 2019), it is not entirely surprising that sociologists have failed so far to pay significant attention to bi+ existence. Very few sociologists have directed their efforts toward better understanding bi+ people, and many of the studies that do were published in the early 1990s, with a few more studies beginning to pop up in the 2000s (see Monroe, Hines, and Osborne 2017 for a review of the social scientific literature more broadly). As this trend in the literature shows, sociologists of sexuality have dedicated the bulk of their attention to studying either lesbian and gay experience (e.g. Armstrong 2002; Ghaziani 2011; Taylor and Whittier 1992) or heterosexuality (e.g. Fields 2001; Jackson 2006; Pascoe 2007)<sup>3</sup>. This trend is likely connected to the fact that the field began by focusing on homosexuality as a deviant “other” and then, with the advent of queer theory, began to pay more critical attention to heterosexuality (Ingraham 1994; McIntosh 1968; Reiss 1961).

There are a few exceptions to the lack of attention to bi+ existence in the sociology of sexualities. For example, using survey data from 60 bisexual-identified and 346 lesbian-identified women, Rust (1993a) pointed out bisexual women, when compared to lesbian women, have more varied sexual histories and tend to come out later in life. Drawing on the same data, Rust (1993b) outlined the ways that lesbian women view bisexual women as a threat to lesbian

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, this work also overwhelmingly focuses on the experiences of white people even though scholars have long critiqued the ways in which doing so presents a limited understanding of sexualities and inequality. As the field presently stands, in depth analyses of race and ethnicity remain a major gap in the sexualities literature (but see, Cisneros 2018; Collins 2005; Espiritu 2001; Garcia 2012; Moore 2011).

politics, bisexuality as a transitional sexuality, and bisexual women as more likely to abandon female friends in difficult scenarios than lesbians. Challenging the notion that two groups who are both marginalized by heteronormativity will necessarily find effortless solidarity with each other, Rust suggests bisexual women are seen as tainted benefactors *and* beneficiaries of heteronormativity due to their relative proximity to men and heterosexual normalcy (compared to lesbian women). As such, resources for sexual minority women are focused on lesbian groups and causes as opposed to resources specifically for bisexual women (1993b). Other researchers conducting work at a similar time also found that lesbian women and gay men found bisexuals to be a threat to early Pride events (Gamson 1995).

Some scholarly analysis of the relationship between lesbian women and bisexual women persisted in the mid-1990s (Ault 1996). For example, drawing on in-person and electronic interviews with 35 bisexual women, Ault (1996) documented the ways that bisexual women, facing pressure from both lesbian communities and the Religious Right, engage in identity construction strategies that reaffirm binary categorization (despite bi women's efforts to challenge binary structures of sexuality). Specifically, Ault asserts that the declaration of differences between monosexual people and bisexual people is a trap that bi women engage in, a trap that, instead of destabilizing binary sexual discourse, actually reaffirms it and obfuscates gender and sexual differences among monosexuals (1996). As such, Ault (intentionally or otherwise) affirms that the appropriate sexual binary for sociological analysis heterosexual/homosexual not mono/bisexual.

Yet, Eliason (1997) provides support for analyzing "biphobia and homophobia as related, but distinct phenomena" (317). In her survey of 229 heterosexual undergraduate students, she found that participants viewed bisexuals, particularly men, less favorably than lesbians or gay

men. Eliason's results suggest that there are important merits to understanding structures of monosexism and heteronormativity as "related, but distinct" mechanisms of inequality production. Eliason's (1997) research also points to predictors of negative attitudes towards bisexual men and women. Negative attitudes towards bisexual women can be predicted based on "lack of bisexual friends or acquaintances, younger age, conservative religion, and homophobia," and "Predictors of negative attitudes towards bisexual men were the same to the above, but also included male gender" (1997: 323).

Alongside these studies (and an explosion of studies focusing on lesbian and gay experience), sociologists in the 1990s (Namaste 1994) and early 2000s (Owen 2003) echoed the persistent call for more meaningful sociological analyses of bisexuality. Some later scholars answered this call. For instance, in her 2007 analysis, Kirsten McLean examines the coming out narratives of 60 Australian bisexual men and women. McLean's work challenges the glorified "disclosure imperative," or pressure for sexual minorities to disclose their sexual identities (i.e. come out), noting that such a narrative can't easily be thrust onto bisexuals. Since bi+ people live in a society where negative and/or false images of people like them are perpetuated while gayness gains broader societal acceptance, McLean notes that bi+ people develop strategies of "selective disclosure" when it comes to sharing information about their sexual identity. By this, McLean (2007) means that bisexual people make calculated, situational decisions about when and how to disclose their sexuality, and to whom.

Bi+ peoples' selective disclosures are informed by what McLean calls "misrepresentations" of bisexuality. As I discuss in Chapter 4, examples of such misrepresentations include notions of bisexuals as hypersexual, promiscuous, confused, illegitimate, and threatening. These misrepresentations of bisexuality constrain bisexual

existence similarly to the ways “controlling images” (Collins 2000) constrain black peoples’ existence—and these sets of controlling images overlap for black bisexual people (Rust 1996). As Collins (2000) points out, gendered and oversexualized representations of blackness, such as the black male rapist and the black female jezebel and mammy, contribute to the violence that black people face in everyday life. Thus, by pointing out what can be understood as “controlling images” of bisexuality, McLean’s (2007) research importantly disrupts the harmony of a monolithic “coming out” narrative for all sexual minorities and leads toward a better understanding of some of the societal threats bisexual people have to confront.

Scherrer and colleagues (2015) followed McLean’s 2007 analysis of selective disclosure but limited their analysis specifically to the family setting. Supporting McLean’s (2007) findings, they found that bisexual people employed selective disclosure strategies when making decisions about how and when to come out to certain family members based on relationships with individual family members and their broader location within their family system. Also, in the realm of studies on bisexual families, Alison Moss (2012) focuses on the ways married polyamorous bisexual women enact their sexuality in a family context. Drawing on oral history interviews with bisexual women married to men and partnered with women, Moss (2012) points to the ways that these women are situated at a very specific nexus of state, gendered, and sexual oppression and erasure. Since these women challenge respectable and legal notions of monosexuality *and* monogamy in the Defense Of Marriage Act (DOMA) era, they are not only challenging structures of monosexism and mononormativity (i.e. the view that monogamy is normal, right, and good, see also Barringer, Sumerau, and Gay 2017), but also in danger of structural violence that could threaten their families.

Some research in more recent years resurrected the focus on attitudinal studies of beliefs about bi+ people. For example, Herek (2002) draws on survey data with 1,335 heterosexual respondents to analyze their attitudes towards bisexuals. Herek reveals that heterosexuals ranked bisexuals more negatively than any other group on the survey, “including religious, racial, ethnic, and political groups—except injecting drug users” (2002: 264). Echoing Eliason’s (1997) research, Herek points out that “the most negative ratings were those of heterosexual men for male sexual minorities.” Importantly, Herek’s analysis demonstrates important gendered differences in the interpretation of bisexuality. Specifically, these findings show that heterosexual men are more likely to rate sexual minorities based on gender, ranking *all* male sexual minorities lower than female sexual minorities. Women, however, ranked bisexuals (regardless of gender) lower than homosexual people (regardless of gender). Herek (2002) points out that this ranking could come from anxieties around bisexuals as promiscuous and carriers of a variety of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV (see also, Garber 1995; Sedgwick 1990). Furthermore, Herek (2002) suggests that this may come from the manner in which bisexuals interrupt and destabilize the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, though there is no way to know for sure based on Herek’s data. This study leaves much room for further exploration of these gendered differences in my dissertation.

Following Herek’s study, M.G.F Worthen (2013) called for scholars of sexuality and gender across all disciplines to stop grouping sexual and gender minorities into a monolithic category for analysis. Following her suggestion, Cragun and Sumerau (2015) designed a survey that measured not only attitudes towards sexual minorities, but also heterosexual people. Echoing Eliason (1997) and Herek (2002), Cragun and Sumerau found that men are less likely to rank bisexuals favorably than women are. Additionally, they found that lesbian and gay people ranked

bisexuals even less favorably than did heterosexuals. Cragun and Sumerau (2015) also point to the fact that the more religious the respondent, the less favorably they ranked bisexuals and all other sexual and gender minorities. The exception to this finding is in the case of Jewish respondents who tended to have more positive views toward sexual and gender minorities. Lesbian and gay people rated both heterosexual and bisexual people less favorably than gay people. Though it was not statistically significant, Cragun and Sumerau (2015) also found that when they controlled for religion, black respondents viewed bisexuality more favorably than white respondents. Thus, Cragun and Sumerau's (2015) findings suggest that, counter to dominant discourses that frame black people as more homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic than white people, religiosity—not race— might be the major predictor of negative views toward sexual and gender minorities. As such, Cragun and Sumerau's (2015) findings demonstrate that the ways respondents of different sexual, gender, racial, and religious identities make sense of sexual and gender minorities based on their social locations and the meanings, norms, and values of their communities and broader society.

The studies outlined above are the beginning of social scientific insights into the lives of bi+ people and the specific inequalities that bi+ people face. Yet, studies like these are still relatively rare in sociology. Since many of the important sociological insights about sexuality focus on either heterosexuality or homosexuality, sociologists of sexuality still leave many questions about bisexuality unasked and, thus, unanswered.

For example, in her recent book, Jane Ward (2015) contributes a great deal of knowledge to the field regarding the ways that sexual identity and practice may not always align and the ways that men who identify as straight explain away their “gay” behavior based on the context of their actions. One of Ward's major contributions involves her specific focus on whiteness in

these interactions. Ward points out that when men who identify as straight seek out male partners, they do so with specific racialized ideals in mind. The white men in Ward's study specifically sought out other white men to have sex with, naming things like "surfer guy" or "bro" as aesthetics they desired. In her work, Ward (2015) points to the ways that scholars need to not only investigate peoples' sexual identities, but also the sexual acts they actually engage in. Specifically, Ward (2015) discusses the ways that straight white men who sleep with other men work to maintain their white heterosexual masculinity. While the contributions of Ward's work about the disjuncture of sexual identity and practice as it is specifically rooted in whiteness are useful for understanding the complicated ways heteronormativity presently operates, the rich potential for Ward to explore similar implications regarding monosexism is ignored. As such, despite the multiple contributions of Ward's (2015) book, her manuscript provides one example of the way questions regarding bisexuality remain unasked in the sociology of sexualities literature, even when the data suggests they would be useful questions to pose.

Tony Silva (2018) demonstrates a similar pattern in his study of rural white men who sleep with men. Though his research sheds important light on the dynamics of living in a rural context and engaging in same-sex sexual activity, the fact that Silva relies on heteronormativity as the only explanation for the disconnect between men's actions and identities, as opposed to incorporating a more nuanced analysis of how monosexism may also be to blame, he misses an opportunity to expand what sociologists recognize as forms of sexual inequality governing the lives of people in varied social contexts.

Another example of unasked questions regarding bisexuality is present in the work of Mignon Moore (2011). Moore's manuscript on the families of black lesbian women is a crucial contribution to the field since much of the literature on lesbian families previously focused only



on middle class white families that conceived via sperm donation (Moore 2011). Thus, Moore's work provides extremely valuable insights into how black lesbian women's experiences of their sexuality, family, and gender expression are deeply informed by their specific social location as black, lesbian, and of varying class backgrounds. While these contributions, like Ward's (2015), cannot be ignored, it is still important to point out that Moore's work does not utilize the potential for exploring the significance of monosexism in the lives of her respondents, even though many of them practiced de facto bisexuality at some point in their lives.

In cases like these, there may be significant and important reasons why participants did not identify as bisexual. As Paula Rust (1996) points out, sexual identity labels are not always an important component to one's sense of self. Specifically, Rust (1996) recognizes the fact that people who practice bisexuality who are not white might experience specific difficulty coming to a bisexual identity due to familial and cultural norms and living in the context of white supremacy. Rust (1996) also points out that for working class respondents and respondents who come from highly religious backgrounds, coming to identify as bi+ may not be the most beneficial course of action for them, despite their sexual practices. This is because for non-white, working class, and highly religious respondents, the danger of losing the connection to family and loved ones is greater than the benefit that comes from openly identifying as bisexual. These networks might provide crucial forms of support that cannot be risked in order to identify as a sexual minority, and bisexual specifically. Taking into account racial, classed, and religious variations in terms of people's social locations is an important component of completely understanding bi+ existence and monosexist inequality today. However, by not further exploring the reasons why respondents might eschew bi+ identities, Ward (2015), Silva (2018), and Moore (2011) miss an opportunity to explore the nuances of this inequality.

Though these authors would be remiss to impose the identity label of bisexuality onto their respondents, they include people in their samples that engage or have engaged in bisexual *practices*. While these works provide countless valuable insights into the sociology of sexualities, they are also reflective of a pattern within the sociology of sexualities that has persisted since the 1990s: bi+ erasure via not asking questions about 1) bi+ existence and 2) how monosexism structures our understanding of sexuality. For example, all three authors could have dug deeper into the reasons why their respondents refrained from using the language of bisexuality to explain their practices and life histories, and incorporated an analysis of monosexism into their writing. These questions could have strengthened these works by expanding on the ways that not only heteronormativity, racism, and classism inform the sexual experiences of their respondents, but also monosexism.

Furthermore, my point here is not to suggest that these (and other studies like them) intentionally omit analyses of monosexism, or that they contribute nothing new to the literature. In fact, each of these studies *does* tell us important information about sexualities, gender, race, and family. Rather, I focus on them to reveal broader blind spots in the current era of sexualities research. Like scholars who have underscored how previous sociological analyses could be, intentionally or unintentionally, missing important dynamics of inequality reproduction (Collins 2005; Ingraham 1994; Rich 1980; Smith 1987), I highlight these studies to make a similar point as it relates to monosexism. As such, these undoubtedly important works point to the ways that *either* heterosexuality *or* homosexuality have remained the primary focus of sexualities scholars to date.

Though some scholars are starting to pay more attention to bi+ existence with an explicit focus on monosexism in the sociology of sexualities (see, Barringer et al. 2017; Mathers et al.

2018a; Mathers forthcoming; Sumerau and Mathers 2019; Sumerau et al. 2019), there is still much we don't know about how bi+ people navigate the social world. This is particularly the case given that much of this research was either a) published before the recent ruling on same sex marriage and/or b) involved data collection that took place before said ruling. Thus, the analysis of my interviews I present in this dissertation seeks to remedy this existing disconnect in the sociology of sexualities by taking a specific focus on the ways that bi+ people conceptualize themselves, their community, and their most pressing political issues.

### BI+ LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. CONTEXT

According to the best information available at present, bi+ people make up the majority of the LGBTQ population (Gates 2011). According to preliminary analyses of the most recent 2018 General Social Survey data, the number of people identifying as bisexual jumped dramatically between previous years and this year. Importantly, this jump is driven primarily by women, particularly black women (Compton and Bridges 2019). This finding mirrors what Gates (2011) found; women are more likely to openly identify as bisexual than men. Despite the large number of bi+ people in the U.S., bi+ people continue to face stigma, erasure, and structural inequalities that differ from lesbian and gay people.

#### *Monosexism, Bi+ Stigma, and Erasure*

As I noted in my introduction, monosexism is a system of sexual inequality where monosexual (or, people who are attracted to only one sex or gender) are awarded resources while those who are non-monosexual (often referred to as bi+) are blocked from such resources (Eisner 2013). Thus, monosexism is a *system* of inequality much like hetero- and homonormativity. Previously, like early conceptualizations of other systems of inequality including sexism (Smith

1987) and racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003), effects of the system of monosexism were classified as forms of “biphobia,” or minor slights that negatively impact bi+ people (Eisner 2013). However, as Eisner (2013) points out, such an approach to the oppression of bi+ people eclipses the ways that biphobic actions actually reinforce a *systemic form of discrimination* against bi+ individuals. Thus, Eisner argues that bi+ realities are disadvantaged systematically and that such experiences should be conceptualized within a framework of “monosexism” as opposed to “biphobia” only (see Warner 1999 for similar observation in relation to homophobia).

Though sociologists have been slow to explore the ways monosexism as a system of inequality disadvantages bi+ people and rewards monosexuals, scholars in other fields have started to explore the impacts of monosexist inequality. For example, over the past two decades, researchers have demonstrated systemic patterns of bi+ erasure (Eisner 2013; Garber 1995; Yoshino 2000). Such scholarship demonstrates that bi+ people are erased in familial interactions (Scherrer et al. 2015), media representation (Johnson 2016), LGBTQ spaces (Gamson 1995), and the social scientific literature more broadly (Monro et al. 2017). Specifically, these studies reveal that monosexual people work to enforce a world view wherein bisexual people don’t exist and are simply waiting to discover their “true” monosexual existence as either lesbian, gay, or straight (Barringer et al. 2017).

While these studies demonstrate that bisexuality is largely discounted by monosexual individuals, as I note above, much of the sociological writing on this phenomenon took place in the 1990s (see e.g. Ault 1996; Gamson 1995; Rust 1993; but see Barringer et al. 2017; Moss 2012; Scherrer et al. 2015; Sumerau et al. 2019 for recent exceptions to the pattern). To date, there has been relatively little sociological exploration of bi+ issues at all (Barringer et al. 2017). Yet, studies in other fields such as psychology (Kertzner et al. 2009) and public health (Flanders

et al. 2017) reveal that the prevalence and impacts of monosexism and bi erasure are still quite ubiquitous (see also Worthen 2013 for a review of these and interdisciplinary literatures).

Some of these studies point to the ways that bisexual erasure has an economic impact on bisexual people, particularly when compared to other monosexual sexual minorities. For example, Gorman and colleagues (2015) note that bi+ people are more likely to live in poverty when compared to their lesbian, gay, and heterosexual counterparts. Others have pointed to the fact that bisexuals experience higher rates of unemployment (Eisner 2013) and poverty (Badgett et al. 2013) compared to lesbian and gay individuals. Further, others have shown that when employed, bisexual individuals make less than their lesbian, gay, and heterosexual counterparts (Mize 2016). As such, bisexual erasure, a component of monosexism, negatively and structurally influences bisexual people's access to economic resources.

Furthermore, research on the effects of bi+ erasure demonstrates that there are multiple negative health outcomes related to such patterns of social inequality. For example, researchers have found that bisexual erasure in media negatively impacts bisexual people's mental health (Johnson 2016). Additionally, other health researchers have pointed out the ways that bisexual women and girls are at a greater risk for depression, anxiety, and suicidality compared to straight and lesbian girls and women (Shearer et al. 2016). Furthermore, health scholars have pointed to the fact that, compared to monosexual people, bisexual men are at a much higher risk for substance abuse including smoking, drinking, and other forms of substance abuse (Marshall et al. 2009). In fact, these studies highlight the systemic operation of monosexism and further note the overrepresentation of bi+ people in prisons in America today (Meyer et al. 2017).

Other studies have pointed to the fact that bisexual erasure leads bisexual people to be less likely to disclose their sexual minority status. Building on McLean (2007), Scherrer and

colleagues (2015) reveal that within family contexts, bisexual people face a great deal of pressure in terms of deciding whether to come out and often worry about facing invalidation of their bisexual selves if or when they elect to come out to family members. To alleviate some of this stress, Scherrer and colleagues note that bisexual people develop a strategy of coming out as lesbian or gay to avoid such encounters with family members. Most recently, Barringer and colleagues (2017) utilized a nationally representative sample of LGBT Americans to show that there are large-scale differences in terms of how bisexual people come out compared to lesbian and gay people. While this body of research is valuable for revealing the facets of structural monosexist inequality, we still have very little sociological knowledge about the ways in which interactional patterns work to uphold monosexism.

Representation of minority groups in broader society is important for understanding how members of a given society make sense of each other (Collins 2005). For example, Ezzell (2009) found that dominant representations of women in pornography, young men's magazines, and video games supported ideals that normalized rape and sexual violence against women. McCabe and colleagues (2011) further found that in children's books, young boys are twice as likely to be represented as young girls. As such, this research shows that various forms of media representation aid in the creation of unequal gender classification schemas that can translate into the concrete ways young men interact with women (Sweeney 2014). Like men interpreting dominant images of women, broad societal representations (or lack of representation) of bi+ people in media (Corey 2017) may shape the ways that both monosexual and bi+ people understand bi+ existence today.

Gamson (1998) shows that lesbian and gay representation is important. For example, Martin and Kazyak (2009) demonstrate the ways that heteronormativity is reinforced through

popular and high-grossing children's films, wherein heterosexuality is portrayed as a magical experience that transforms the main characters in a positive way. Additionally, some research has shown that being exposed to positive images of lesbian and gay people might lead to more positive attitudes about lesbian and gay people, while being exposed to negative images of lesbian and gay people may lead to more negative attitudes about these groups (Levina et al. 2000). Thus, these studies show that, while heteronormativity dominates a significant portion of popular media, positive representations of sexual minority groups may shift how those groups are perceived and welcomed in multiple social spheres.

Taken together, the research on bi+ erasure and societal representations of marginalized groups shows that such forms of representation contribute to, and are shaped by, the classification schemes put forth by those in relative positions of power. It is important to note that representations of bi+ people have fluctuated greatly throughout history. For example, Garber (1995) has pointed out that while bisexuality was considered "chic" in the 1970s, the onslaught of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s led to portrayals of bisexuality as imminently threatening to the safety of heterosexual people and that bisexual people were especially prone to be vectors of disease (Garber 1995; see also Sedgwick 1990 for more exploration of this), and, as I discuss later on, this stereotype is still prevalent, particularly for bi+ men. Furthermore, some scholarship has pointed out that bi+ people in most contemporary media are portrayed in negative ways (such as villains and serial killers) (White 2001). Thus, these representations of bisexuality might inform the ways gay and lesbian people reproduce monosexism in their everyday interactions with bi+ people.

In addition to these representations of bi+ people, there are many other dominant ideas about bi+ people, such as that they are indecisive, untrustworthy, lying, and hypersexual (Eisner

2013). Though these stereotypes present stigmatized “controlling images” of bi+ people in society more broadly, they also seep into LGBTQ communities and impact the ways in which bi+ people are excluded from these spaces (Gamson 1995). Overall, this research demonstrates that not only is representation important, but that lack of representation or negative representation can impact not only those in the groups erased or negatively portrayed, but also the attitudes of others in relatively powerful positions. For example, if bi+ existence is depicted as transitory and threatening, this may shape the ways that monosexual sexual minorities feel the need to distance themselves from bi+ members of their communities (Cragun and Sumerau 2017), particularly in order to be seen as “respectable” (Ward 2008) by the broader heterosexual public. As such, in Chapter 5, I explore how a lack of positive bi+ representation in society more broadly informs the ways in which lesbian and gay people erase bisexual existence in LGBT spaces.

*Fantasies of Identification, LGBTQ Politics, and the Monosexual Imaginary*

In 1990, Judith Butler asserted that we exist within a “heterosexual matrix,” or a tight knit system of meanings and value, within which a) people are only considered fully human if and only if they have a normative gender conferred upon them and, b) that dominant gendered meanings corresponds to normative heterosexual expectations for procreation, monogamy, and family (Butler 2004). Around the same time, Michael Warner (1991) coined the term “heteronormativity.” In a similar vein as Rich’s 1980 assertion that heterosexuality is a structural force, Warner asserted that heteronormativity is a system in which heterosexuality is seen not only as the statistical norm, but also the moral standard for sexuality (Warner 1999). Warner vociferously critiqued the shift in the gay and lesbian movement from a politics of resistance and aberration to one of respectability and approximation of heteronormative standards. Specifically,



Warner questioned what led to gay marriage taking the center stage in the national lesbian and gay movement (1999). Noting that many other issues, such as health care, challenging poverty, and getting sodomy laws off the books, were of much greater import to early lesbian and gay activism, Warner (1999) points out that a shift in neoliberal politics undergirded the decision of a few lawyers to focus on gay marriage and lead it to the center of the lesbian and gay political imagination.

Lisa Duggan frames this neoliberal shift as the shift towards a “new politics of homonormativity” (Duggan 2004). Specifically, Duggan, like Warner, situates this shift alongside welfare cuts in the 1980s and the Clinton administration in the early 1990s. Duggan defines the new politics of homonormativity as: “A politics that does not contest heteronormative assumptions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2004: 50). Importantly, all of these theorists conceptualized shifts towards homonormativity *before* the legalization of same-sex marriage nationally in the United States. In the years following the 1990s, when Warner argues the obsession with marriage began in the lesbian and gay movement, lesbian and gay movement toward respectable self-presentation picked up and, as Duggan (2004) notes, led to a milquetoast gay culture bent on acceptance from the heterosexual public. As such, lesbian and gay people went to great lengths to demonstrate to heterosexuals that they are “just like them” simply with a different object of attraction (Duggan 2004; Warner 1999).

Part of the ways lesbian and gay people achieved this respectability was by making biological claims of being “born” as sexual minorities (Duggan 2004). These claims can be understood in the framework of Ellen Samuels’ (2014) conceptualization of “fantasies of

identification.” According to Samuels (2014), fantasies of identification are ways of understanding and locating types of people in a given society. Fantasies of identification overflow into the cultural realm and are enforced not only by “experts” of knowledge, but by everyday individuals as well. Thus, fantasies of identification are discursive constructions that wield the power of self and interactional regulation. Everyday social actors use fantasies of identification to make sense of themselves and identify “others” based on the scientific discourse that supports the notion that difference is located intrinsically in the body and is, thus, unchangeable. Fantasies of identification are persistent even throughout waves of social change. In fact, Samuels (2014) points out that the discourses of social justice movements are easily absorbed into the frameworks of fantasies of identification. This is part of what allows them to persist so intensely despite being contradicted and disproven by those who exceed the boundaries of these identifications.

Through drawing on the narrative of being “born” as lesbian and gay people (i.e. *monosexual*, just like heterosexual people), lesbian and gay people were able to normalize their experience through a fantasy of identification—that their sexualities were intrinsic in biology—to normalize their experience in the face of persecution from heterosexual others. Through these claims, lesbian and gay people were able to highlight their monosexual similarities and, thus, proximity to heterosexual people in an effort to gain rights and respect. Samuels (2014) further points out that when fantasies of identification absorb the rhetoric of social justice movements, there is a pressure to “prove” one’s existence in an identifiable, homogenous category. As such, by leaning into the “born this way” narrative, lesbian and gay people distanced themselves from bi+ people whose experiences did not fit neatly into such a framework.

While it may have made sense to position monosexual sexual minorities as the ultimate “other” in the context of heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix in the early 1990s, this may no longer be the case. In fact, with the rise of homonormativity, lesbian and gay people may have more in common with heterosexuals than they do bi+ people. Some scholars have thus marked this era of LGBTQ existence as the “post gay era” (Ghaziani 2011; 2014), where one’s existence as a sexual minority becomes increasingly less important to the ways they interact with social others. As part of embracing this shift, however, lesbian and gay people (intentionally or otherwise) contributed to the already-rampant stereotypes of bi+ people as promiscuous, dangerous, confused, and—as Warner would say— “queer.” Bi+ people challenged monosexual sexual minorities’ claims of normalcy and the biological “truth” of sexuality since their patterns of attraction couldn’t simply fit within a heteronormative or homonormative framework (Eisner 2013; Mathers et al. 2018a), and, as I discuss in Chapter 5, lesbian and gay people continue to draw on negative narratives about bi+ people to exclude them from LGBTQ communities.

Clearly, the context of the current cultural moment adds a crucial element to understanding bi+ existence and monosexism in relation to these shifting political dynamics. As other scholars have pointed out (Moss 2012), marriage and monosexist standards that benefit lesbian, gay, and heterosexual people do not necessarily translate into benefits for bi+ people. However, very little research has been done on the ways that bi+ people conceptualize their most pressing political agendas in the homonormative, post gay era (but see Eisner 2013; Holthaus 2015; Nutter-Pridgen 2015 for exceptions). Despite recent attention to LGBTQ issues beyond marriage, such as the debate over transgender people using public restrooms (Cavanagh 2010; Mathers 2017), at the time of this writing, the author is aware of no sociological studies that specifically seek to ascertain the ways that everyday bi+ people frame their most significant

political concerns, and the one sociological study that *does* exist on this issue focuses on how those who self-identify as bi+ activists do this framing (Nutter-Pridgen 2015). This means that, despite the evidence that bi+ people experience structural inequalities that differ from lesbian and gay people (Badgett et al. 2013; Eisner 2013; Gorman et al. 2015; Mathers et al. 2018a; Mize 2016; Moss 2012; Sumerau et al. 2019; Walters et al. 2013), and the fact that these inequalities still persist even after homonormative “victories,” sociologists, following the trends in social scientific literature more broadly (Monro et al. 2017), have not lent much attention to issues that impact bi+ people differently than lesbian or gay people, despite calls to do so for the past decade and a half (Owen 2003).

This is not the first time sociologists have failed to identify and interrogate systems of inequality that overlap in the (re)production of sexual and gendered inequality. In 1994, Chrys Ingraham coined the concept of the “heterosexual imaginary” as a mechanism to critique the prevalent sex/gender theories of the 1980s and 90s. Namely, her critique is that the feminist sociological theories of sex and gender at the time failed to meaningfully consider the role of heterosexuality in structuring gender and sex. In so doing, Ingraham argues that the feminist sociological theories of gender during the time of her writing did not allow any space for considering the ways that heterosexuality functioned as an organizing institution of society (Ingraham 1994: 203). The heterosexual imaginary refers to:

[T]hat way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution. The effect of this depiction of reality is that heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned, while gender is understood as socially constructed and central to the organization of everyday life (203-204).

Following Ingraham, I contend that sociology currently takes place in a *monosexual imaginary*.

Furthermore, based on the ways in which bi+ people, and non-monosexual possibilities more

broadly, are erased from our social world, I suggest that not only sociology but also all of U.S. society exists within the monosexual imaginary. Informed by Ingraham's (1994) articulation of the heterosexual imaginary, I define the monosexual imaginary as a system, or way of organizing the social world, which eradicates the possibility of bi+ existence and in so doing allows monosexism to persist largely unacknowledged and unchecked. Because bi+ existence is rendered impossible in the context of the monosexual imaginary, bi+ people are forced into modes of existence that don't fit their lived experiences, pushed out of spaces where they would otherwise be able to claim membership. Furthermore, monosexist inequality is able to persist so easily in the context of the monosexual imaginary because, since bi+ people are rendered inconceivable, any inequality they may experience because they are bi+ is inconceivable as well.

Within sociology, the monosexual imaginary structures much of our thinking and conversation about sexuality and inequality. For example, scholars are able to talk about bi+ experience without speaking to the ways in which such experiences are structured based on presumptions of monosexuality (Silva 2018; Ward 2015) *and* cultural understandings of sexuality (such as the idea that one is *born* as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). In so doing, these lines of scholarship take for granted that all people embody a monosexual existence, and that deviation from *heterosexuality*, not *monosexuality* is at the root of understanding sexual inequalities. As a result, questions pertaining to the ways in which bi+ people may have distinct experiences from lesbian and gay people, particularly in the ways that we think about structural inequity, go unasked by scholars and unacknowledged by society at large.

The operation of the monosexual imaginary in sociology and beyond is evidenced in the literature I just reviewed and, while the contributions of the aforementioned scholarship cannot be ignored, it is important to point out and correct this persistent trend in the field. At present,

monosexism is the ghost that haunts much social scientific analysis of sexualities. The fact that there are significantly fewer studies that focus on bi+ existence than heterosexuality or homosexuality, and that such studies have happened in a fragmented intermittent form over the past 30 years are reflective of the monosexual imaginary at work. Furthermore, the fact that most gender and sexualities research—as insightful as it may be—still does not seriously consider bi+ existence and monosexism crucial components of understanding the complexity of sexual inequality today also reflect how the monosexual imaginary persists in the social sciences and sociology. The fact that, as I will discuss in the analysis that follows, bi+ people are seen as “less queer” despite comprising a larger segment of the LGBTQ population than lesbian and gay people (Gates 2011) is not possible unless our society at large exists within a monosexual imaginary. In this dissertation I seek to address this hole in the literature and ask the questions about bi+ existence that have largely gone unasked. Specifically, the questions that inform my analysis are as follows: First, how do bi+ people construct a positive sexual identity in a social context where they are erased and highly stigmatized when visible? Second, how do processes of identity construction inform the ways in which bi+ people experience exclusion from LGBTQ spaces and community, and how do they negotiate community in the face of such exclusion? Third, how does the exclusion they face in LGBTQ communities inform how they form a bi+ political consciousness? In addressing these questions, I specifically attend to the ways that monosexism and the monosexual imaginary impact the interactional negotiation of identity, community, and social change for bi+ people and conclude by highlighting the implications of my findings. In so doing, I hope to upset sociologists’ current operation within the monosexual imaginary in order to gain a better understanding of not only bi+ life in the “post gay era” but also the ways that monosexuality shapes sexual inequality more broadly.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The seeds for this study were planted in 2015 as I studied for my preliminary exams in the area of sexualities. I was struck by the fact that on a reading list comprised of over 100 sources related to the development of the sociology of sexualities, only one book chapter published in 1996 specifically focused on the experiences of bisexual people. Initially considering that perhaps this was a result of the areas of concentration of the faculty at my institution (i.e., no one specializing specifically in bisexuality studies), I began exploring the broader sociological literature on sexualities to try to locate current conversations about the lives of bi+ people in sociological scholarship. I found that the conspicuous absence of literature pertaining to bi+ people on my prelims list was, in fact, more representative of the current state of sociology (and the social sciences more broadly, see Monro et al. 2017) than it was about my particular institution.

This recognition was compounded by the fact that I was growing ever more secure in my self-identification as a bisexual nonbinary transgender person. I had already started doing work related to transgender issues, another frequently neglected realm of scholarship (see Schilt and Lagos 2017). Based on doing this work and seeing just how much was missing from our understanding of gender due to our field's general lack of attention to cisnormative inequalities, I couldn't help but imagine how more seriously incorporating a "bisexual lens" (Moss 2012) into the sociology of sexualities might reveal similar blind spots. As such, I continued browsing sociological and other scholarly literature on bi+ experience (what little of it there is), news reports discussing bi+ issues, blogs and essays by bi+ people, and internet pages dedicated to bi+ issues. I saw that bi+ people encountered serious disparities compared to lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals, but there was little to no recognition of these issues beyond the

occasional essay or blog post. I was struck by the disconnect between the structural disparities impacting bi+ people and the lack of awareness of the seriousness of these inequalities by bi+ and monosexual people alike. I also saw that, despite the useful insights of the literature in fields like public health and psychology, bi+ existence was frequently operationalized as a form of “risky” behavior in much of the health and quantitative literature.

Alongside my exploration of these literatures and outlets, I also saw pervasive messaging about the recent sexual victories that had been won for LGBTQ people. It was 2015, the summer specifically, and the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision had just come down from the U.S. Supreme Court. Across the internet and in the corners of cafes around Chicago, I heard proclamations that “we” had “won.” With each of these statements, I wondered who exactly “we” referred to when so many bi+ people are excluded from LGBTQ spaces, and what does it mean to “win” when such benefits meaningfully impact such a small segment LGBTQ people? Nowhere in these celebrations did I see any mention of the fact that bi+ people experience disproportionately high rates of intimate partner violence (Walters et al. 2013) or that they experience serious disparities in health outcomes when compared to monosexual people (Gorman et al. 2015) or that they tend to earn less than lesbian, gay, and heterosexual people (Mize 2016) and are more likely to live in poverty (Badgett et al. 2013). Thus, I wondered, where are the bi+ people, the largest sexual minority group in the U.S. (Gates 2011), in all these conversations about the supposed victory of *gay* marriage? What do they think about these things? How do they see themselves connecting with the LGBTQ community and narratives of victory and politics more broadly? What would *our* issue be, if there were to be one?

As someone with a background in qualitative research methods and symbolic interactionism, as well as a bi+ person, I decided that I wanted my dissertation to focus on in-



depth interviews with bi+, heterosexual, lesbian, and gay people to better understand both how bi+ people make sense of themselves in the ways I listed above, as well as how monosexual others frame bi+ existence in the social world. I initially wanted to interview individuals from all of these groups so that I could juxtapose the narratives of bi+ people with those of monosexual others. However, due to issues with recruitment (which I discuss below), I ended up conducting interviews only with bi+ individuals and opted to save the interviews of heterosexual, lesbian, and gay people for a later research project.

### *The Study*

In total, I conducted 40 interviews with people between the ages of 21 and 30<sup>4</sup> who identify as bi+ and live in the Chicagoland area. I used this age bracket because I wanted to know how the generation commonly known as “millennials” thinks about bisexuality. I wanted to focus on millennials, particularly younger millennials, because they came of age in a time when identity politics was taking hold of social movements for sexual equality (Armstrong 2002) and because (especially since the 2004 U.S. presidential elections) homosexual rights have been a dominant component of cultural conversations (Puar 2007). Additionally, many millennials were either very young or born after the AIDS crisis of the 1970s–1990s and this could influence how they think about sexuality and identity. For example, when compared to other generations, millennials have been consistently more supportive than all other living generations (Doherty et al. 2015). Furthermore, since sociologists have largely ignored bi+ experience for the past two decades, I wanted to see how the meanings of non-monosexuality outlined in the 1990s and early 2000s may be persisting or changing over time (see e.g. Owen 2003; Rust 1993a) as a new generation reaches adulthood. Interviewing young adults who grew up during the era of

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<sup>4</sup> My original sampling frame was between the ages of 20 and 30, but no 20-year-old individuals participated in the study. The median age of my sample is 26, the mean age is 26.175, and the mode is also 26.

normalizing lesbian and gay existence (Duggan 2004; Puar 2007; Warner 1999) allowed me to investigate how the broader cultural context shapes societal conceptions of bi+ sexualities.

Interviews were, on average, two and a half hours in length, with the longest interview approaching five hours and the shortest at just under one hour. I recruited people through an online screening survey on the UIC Qualtrics platform that I shared in online LGBTQ groups for people in the Chicagoland area. The screening survey asked respondents about their age, gender identity, sexual identity, if they lived in the Chicagoland area, and if they would be willing to share an email address so that I could contact them if they were eligible for the study. Those who saw and/or completed the survey could have shared the link with friends, but there is no way for me to know how many people may have done this. The survey for this first round of recruitment was shared in the spring of 2017, and I started conducting interviews that April. Although I anticipated that I might have difficulty recruiting bi+ respondents, I found that it was precisely the opposite—there were more people who initially filled out the screening survey than I was prepared for (close to 80), and some people reached out to me saying they were just over my age limit but still wondered if they could participate. Although not all of the people who filled out the screening survey responded when I reached out for an interview, it showed that there was significant interest in a study like mine.

After I made progress on some of the interviews with bi+ respondents, I sought to recruit the lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals I initially wanted to include in this study. However, unlike bi+ people, it proved difficult to find lesbian, gay, and heterosexual people who wanted to meet me for an interview. So, in consultation with Lorena, I decided to focus my dissertation entirely on bi+ people's experiences. I continued interviewing those who were eligible and willing from the first recruitment survey, and I also sent out a second round of the

screening survey over the summer of 2017. As part of the second recruitment survey, I removed the gender parameters for inclusion in my sample, largely in response to questions I received from nonbinary people who would have been interested in participating during my first round of recruitment. I continued conducting interviews with bi+ until I reached saturation at 40 interviews. Respondent demographics are in Table V in the Methodological Appendix.

One of the limitations of this sample is that most people are white (31 out of 40), report being somewhere in the middle class (36 out of 40), and have obtained some level of college education (40 out of 40). Furthermore, this sample is predominantly comprised of cisgender people (35 out of 40), specifically cisgender women (29 out of 40). Put a different way, 23% of respondents are people of color, 10% stated they were outside of the middle class, and 13% are transgender. Furthermore, 80% of respondents are women, with 73% cisgender women and 7% transgender women. Men comprise 15% of this sample, all of them cisgender and white, and nonbinary people comprise 5% of the sample.

The relative homogeneity of my sample likely emerged for a couple of reasons: 1) I did not have funding to pay participants, thus anyone who opted to sit down with me was doing so because they wanted to *and* could afford to spend an hour or more talking about bi+ issues without being paid. This dynamic likely skewed my sample in terms of class and education. Furthermore, 2) though I sought to share the screening survey in as many groups as possible online, my networks are limited in the sense that I am not in LGBTQ groups for people of color and do not know to what extent the recruitment survey was shared in these spaces. Even if the survey was shared in these online groups, given that people of colors' sexualities are highly stigmatized in a white supremacist social context such as the United States (Collins 2005; Garcia 2012), particularly when it comes to non-monosexuality (Ward 2015), it would not be surprising

if people of color who may have otherwise been interested in participating declined to complete the screening survey because they may not have felt comfortable talking with me, as a visibly white person in my profile picture on the internet, about sexuality, particularly if there was no payment involved.

Additionally, 3) my recruitment call was initially limited to people who identify as women or men. Even though I made an effort to clarify that this *did* mean that transgender women and men were eligible to participate, some transgender respondents may have read this limitation with suspicion and not felt comfortable participating. Finally, 4) limiting my recruitment to the internet means that I was only reaching people who have access to such a resource. This means that the people I interviewed needed to have some regular access to a phone and/or computer, an email address that they used for such correspondence, and that their access to the internet was regular enough that they could check email and respond to my messages to set up an interview.

Based on these dynamics, one of the limitations of this study is in the homogeneity of this sample in terms of race, class, education, and gender. Therefore, my findings should not be generalized to all bi+ people. Instead, I use these data to highlight shared processes that emerged in the lives of my respondents and, in so doing, aim to “sensitize” (Blumer 1969) readers to some of the ways in which monosexism impacts the day to day life of bi+ people. It is worth noting that even though most of the respondents in my sample experience privilege in terms of race, class, education, and gender, they still detailed examples of the difficulties they experienced navigating the world as bi+ people. As such, this leads to future research questions: if those who would be considered the most privileged among bi+ people are so negatively impacted by monosexism, what does it look like for those who are more marginalized than the individuals in

my sample? In the future, I hope to be able to secure more funding to expand on this research to see to what extent these findings hold or shift based on race, class, education, and gender.

The people who did meet me for an interview often asked me questions about who I was, why I was doing this study, and what I intended to do with my findings. It is through these conversations that I came out as bisexual to most respondents. While this allowed me to cultivate a degree of rapport with respondents that may not have been possible otherwise, it also proved complicated at times. As Garcia (2012) notes, when participants understand that you may have overlapping lived experiences with them, they sometimes assume that you have a shared understanding of the social world. There were times where respondents took for granted my knowledge of bi+ issues and occasionally seemed perplexed or suspicious when I probed them for more information on something that they thought should be clear to me as a fellow bi+ person (i.e., experiences coming out, stigmas against bi+ people).

While these assumptions came up from time to time, the most notable thing I encountered while doing interviews was respondents thanking me for interviewing them and giving them a space where they could talk about bi+ issues openly. There were times when I asked respondents questions they had never thought about before and gave them the space to work through their initial reactions to these topics. Respondents sometimes noted that they felt relieved to be able to discuss bi+ topics in-depth because they didn't have other people they could talk to about the things I brought up in interviews. Thus, while there was a risk of respondents having a strong, potentially negative, emotional reaction to some of my questions, it actually turned out that, more often than not, respondents expressed that the interview process was cathartic.

My interviews were semi-structured and covered topics related to current bi+ events or issues, as well as respondents' life history narratives as they related to sexuality. In this way, I

provided respondents the space to talk about coming out, learning about sexuality in early life, navigating sexuality in their families, workplaces, friendship networks, religious contexts, and educational settings. I also included vignettes at the end of the interview. These vignettes were originally geared towards the heterosexual, lesbian, and gay respondents I planned to include in this study to gauge their response to situations that commonly come up for bi+ people. I continued to use the vignettes in the interviews with bi+ people because, even though respondents did not necessarily talk much about the explicit content of the vignette, it often prompted them to return to and think through earlier mentions they made of when they have navigated monosexism in their daily lives. There were two versions of the vignette that I alternated between from interview to interview, but there was no discernable difference in the ways in which respondents reacted to each version of the vignettes. A copy of my interview schedule is in Figure II in the Methodological Appendix.

My analysis emerged inductively and following the tenants of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). I entered the field with a general list of topics that might be interesting based on my knowledge of bi+ and sexualities literatures but was open and flexible depending on what respondents wanted to talk about. After the first few interviews, I began memoing and doing open coding. It was through this process that themes related to identity, community, and politics came up as central topics in my interviews. As such, I began to probe these questions more deeply in later interviews to parse apart what respondents were saying about them. It was through this analytic process, and multiple rounds of gradually more focused coding, that I arrived at the three chapters presented here. I used Microsoft Word to code my interviews, creating a new Word document for each new code and copying text from interviews into the new code document. I then did more focused coding within these documents through color coding

and bolding text. To contextualize my interview data, I completed some very basic descriptive statistics from the 2013 Pew LGBT Life survey, which I address below. Though these statistics are not the focus of my dissertation, they demonstrate the broader cultural context in which my interviewees were situated and helped inform the direction of my analysis.

### *The 2013 Pew Survey of LGBT Adults*

To provide some broader social context for my interviews, I conducted a basic, preliminary analysis on the 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of LGBT Adults. The survey was run by the GfK Group through KnowledgePanel, GfK Group's online nationally representative panel. Respondents were recruited online and GfK group provided internet access for respondents who did not already have a stable internet connection. Individuals who completed the survey were given a ten- to twenty-dollar incentive for completing the survey. The original sample size is 1,197 LGBT adults. The survey started with questions that were not related to LGBT experience, and all recruitment materials avoided mentioning that the survey was geared toward understanding LGBT experiences to avoid priming respondents.

The original sample breakdown of the data included 277 lesbian women, 398 gay men, 479 bisexual people, and 43 transgender people. Importantly, because of how the survey was designed, respondents were only able to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, *or* transgender. For the purposes of my analyses, I dropped the 43 transgender respondents and the one bisexual respondent who did not select a gender from the sample and incorporated the weight designed by the Pew Research Center to make the sample nationally representative, which resulted in a final N of 1127. To look at differences between bisexual and monosexual respondents, I recoded the dataset to create a binary "bisexual" variable. Anyone who was identified as bisexual by the Pew Research Center in the original dataset was coded as 1, anyone who identified as lesbian or gay

was coded as 0. For more on the methodology and sampling of the 2013 Survey of LGBT Adults, see the Pew Research Center 2013 Survey of LGBT Adults Codebook.

The following tables highlight some key differences that appeared between monosexual and bisexual respondents in the survey. For example, Table I shows the weighted column percentage breakdown of respondents' answers to the question "Overall, how much social acceptance, if any, of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people do you think there is in this country today?"

**TABLE I. ACCEPTANCE OF LGBT PEOPLE TODAY**

	Refused	A lot	Some	Only a Little	None at all
Bisexual	30.25%	31.9%	39.9%	54.7%	100%
Monosexual	69.75%	68.1%	60.1%	45.3%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

These percentages highlight that of the people who felt that there was significant acceptance of LGBT people in the U.S. today, only 32% of them were bisexual while 68% were monosexual. Additionally, bisexual people represented the majority (about 55%) of people who said there was "only a little" acceptance of LGBT people today. This may be because, even though monosexual lesbian and gay people have experienced greater visibility and attention, bi+ people are still wrestling with gaining broader societal acceptance, a dynamic I discuss in Chapter 4. The next table expands on this dynamic and shows the weighted percentages for the question "Compared



with 10 years ago, would you say the level of social acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in the country today is ...”

**TABLE II. LGBT ACCEPTANCE NOW COMPARED TO 10 YEARS AGO**

	Refused	A lot more accepting	A little more accepting	No different	A little less accepting	A lot less accepting
Bisexual	15.4%	31.4%	51.9%	60.3%	79.3%	78.5%
Monosexual	84.6%	68.6%	48.1%	39.7%	20.7%	21.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note that of the people who said the U.S. had become “a lot more accepting” between 2003 and 2013, only 31% of them were bisexual while 69% were monosexual. Furthermore, of the people who said there is no difference in the level of social acceptance in 2013 compared to 2003, the majority of them were bisexual (60%) as opposed to monosexual (40%). Taken together, these differences reflect that bisexual people interpret the supposed gains for LGBTQ people very differently than monosexual people and appear to be less optimistic about how these supposed changes have impacted the level of tolerance for LGBTQ people in the United States.

Additionally, there were some differences between monosexual and bisexual respondents in terms of their close friendships with other LGBT people and connectivity to LGBTQ politics. Table III illustrates the weighted column percentages of responses to the question “How many of your close friends are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?”

**TABLE III. HOW MANY OF YOUR CLOSE FRIENDS ARE LGBT?**

	Refused	All or most	Some of them	Only a few	None
Bisexual	74.5%	16.6%	38.2%	49.1%	62.2%
Monosexual	25.5%	83.4%	61.8%	50.9%	37.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table III shows that of the people who reported that all or most of their friends were LGBT, the vast majority (83%) were monosexual. Additionally, of those who report that some of their friends are LGBT, nearly 62% are monosexual compared to 38% bisexual. This suggests, as I elaborate on with my interview data in Chapter 5, that perhaps bisexual people struggle in forming meaningful connections with LGBT others. These numbers fit with what I found in my interviews, where bi+ people struggled to form connections within the LGBTQ community due to pervasive stigma and exclusion.

As I discuss in Chapter 6, bi+ people struggled to identify major political issues that directly impact them. This may be because bi+ people are so excluded from LGBTQ spaces, and thus may not have shared frames of reference for political engagement. Table IV highlights the disconnect bi+ people may feel from LGBT communities and politics. This table demonstrates the weighted column percentages of peoples' responses to the question "Here are a few activities some people do and others do not. Please indicate whether or not you have done this each of the following: Attended a rally or march in support of LGBT rights."

**TABLE IV. ATTENDED MARCH OR RALLY IN SUPPORT OF LGBT RIGHTS**

	Refused	Yes, in the last 12 months	Yes, but not in the last 12 months	Never
Bisexual	69.2%	24.4%	25.35%	47.4%
Monosexual	30.8%	75.6%	74.65%	52.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

This table shows that of the people who have attended a march or rally, both in the last 12 months or not in the last 12 months, about three quarters of them are monosexual lesbian and gay people, where 76% of those who attended in the last 12 months are monosexual, while about 75% of those who have attended but not in the last 12 months are monosexual. This means that of those who have attended a march or rally, bisexual people represent only about one quarter of those who answered that they did.

Taken together, these tables show that bisexual people and monosexual people may interpret the current social context and their connections to LGBTQ community very differently. As I will show through my interviews, this seems, at least for the people I interviewed, to be the case. By attending to the fact that bi+ and monosexual people encounter differences in terms of sexual inequalities, we as sociologists can work to undo the ways the monosexual imaginary informs our writing and social world more broadly.

#### AN INTERACTIONIST APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING BI+ LIFE

In order to elucidate the ways in which bi+ people make sense of their identities, communities, and political concerns, I draw on symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969). The most basic tenant of symbolic interactionism is that people act, alone or in groups, toward

objects, people, and issues based on the meaning those things have for them (Blumer 1969). In the analysis that follows, I primarily draw on the concepts of “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987), “generic processes in the reproduction of inequality” (Schwalbe et al. 2000), and “framing” (Goffman 1974). Furthermore, in all of these chapters, my focus is on the *processes* that maintain monosexist inequality as explained from the perspective of bi+ people. Thus, my analysis relies on tenants of “analytic generalizability” wherein I focus more on generalizing social processes rather than specific populations (Charmaz 2006; Kleinman 2007).

In Chapter 4, I focus on the ways that bi+ people do identity work to form positive sexual identities in the face of pervasive stigmas against bi+ people. Identity work involves the things individuals do to signify to others who they are (Snow and Anderson 1987). More specifically, identity work is “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 115). This can involve modes of dress and personal style (Bridges 2014), social networks or groups one affiliates themselves with (Anthony and McCabe 2015), and the ways in which people speak about their identities (Hunt and Benford 1994). Furthermore, the literature shows that individuals who embody stigmatized sexualities frequently engage in identity work to assert positive meanings about their sexualities. For instance, Espiritu (2001) demonstrates the ways in which Filipina girls do identity work related to race, culture, gender and sexuality to distance themselves of Americanized narratives of assimilation and assert positive understandings of sexuality despite the ways in which their bodies are racialized as young women of color. In a different context, Bernstein (2007) demonstrates how middle-class sex workers engage in identity work to assert their work as moral and create “authentic” interactions between themselves and their clients. These studies reflect the

ways in which identity work is a key part of understanding the ways in which people socially construct positive sexual selves in the face of stigma.

I begin Chapter 4 by focusing on how bi+ people do identity work and assign positive meaning to their bi+ identities. As part of this analysis, I discuss the ways that bi+ people select various identity labels such as bisexual, pansexual, queer, fluid, and others, and how these selections of identity terms are a form of identity work they do to distance themselves from or embrace stigmas levied against bi+ people. Furthermore, I focus specifically on the ways that the vast majority of the people I interviewed, regardless of how they personally identify, are aware of pervasive stigmas against bi+ people, as well as stigmas specifically associated with the term *bisexual* and in so doing highlight the disjuncture between how bisexual and other bi+ people make sense of bisexuality. I close this chapter by interrogating the prevalence of “queer” as an identity term among respondents, even those who use other terms, and the ways in which people’s definition of queer is very similar for individuals even if they use different sexual identity labels. Throughout, I highlight how the people in this sample do identity work as a way to counteract the stigmas they encounter and conclude by drawing out some implications about the connection between stigma, bi+ identity work processes, and the ways in which bi+ people collectively construct what it means to be bi+ and queer.

In Chapter 5, I investigate the ways that bi+ people navigate exclusion from LGBTQ communities, and the ways in which lesbian and gay people, intentionally or otherwise, reinforce sexual inequalities by excluding bi+ people from LGBTQ spaces. In order to demonstrate the ways that monosexual sexual minorities reinforce sexual inequality, this chapter is rooted in Schwalbe and colleague’s (2000) definitions of “othering” and “boundary maintenance,” two generic forms of inequality reproduction. Othering is a means of social action whereby a group

defines another social group with less power as morally or intellectually inferior (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 423). Although othering generally involves a more powerful group defines into existence a less powerful group, “defensive othering” refers to a process whereby a marginal group, in this case lesbian and gay people, rely on dominant understandings of another marginalized group, in this case bi+ people, to reinforce existing understandings of that group and, thus, their marginalization (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Notably, maintaining boundaries around sexuality has been well-documented by sociologists (Collins 2005; Garcia 2012; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Pascoe 2007; Sumerau et al. 2019), and this chapter seeks to continue this line of literature by focusing on how boundaries are maintained around LGBTQ communities.

As part of the process of defensive othering, I also highlight how lesbian and gay people involve in boundary maintenance, or the process whereby people draw boundaries around certain groups and determine the flow of cultural capital based on the credentials of relatively subordinate others. As Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) highlight, if one does not possess the appropriate forms of social, economic, or cultural capital, their access to networks of information and benefits may be cut off by those in relative positions of power. In this way, lesbian and gay people rely on the “fantasies of identification” (Samuels 2014) about what it means to be lesbian or gay, and thus prevent bi+ people from gaining full membership in LGBTQ communities. Furthermore, I illustrate the ways in which bi+ people internalize narratives used against them in LGBTQ communities and engage in preemptively removing themselves from the spaces. As a result of this self-removal, bi+ people are often left with no, or at best very few, connections with other bi+ people, and don’t necessarily make sense of themselves as members of a broader bi+ community.

Considering these patterns of inequality and erasure, this chapter builds on existing literature to explicate the pathways through which bi+ people make sense of and navigate such erasure. More specifically, I connect previous literature on bi+ erasure and representation to the generic social processes through which such erasure happens, and the impacts this has on the ways LGBTQ politics and communities may reproduce monosexism. I draw on Schwalbe and colleagues' (2000) conceptions of othering and boundary maintenance to show how lesbian and gay people delineate boundaries around "real" sexual minorities who are deserving of rights, attention, and community.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the ways in which bi+ people frame major political issues that would impact them. Drawing on Goffman's notion of "frame analysis" (1974), I interrogate the ways that respondents make sense of the major issues in their lives and the lives of other bi+ people, and what should be done about it. Building on the previous two chapters, I illustrate the ways that, given the pervasive negative ideas about bi+ people and how such ideas lead to their exclusion from LGBTQ spaces, bi+ people have few frames to draw on beyond increasing bi+ visibility to make sense of social issues that would impact them.

Specifically, I interrogate the ways that existing frames around bi+ political issues resonate (Goffman 1974) with respondents in this study. Though very little literature exists on contemporary bi+ politics (but see Eisner 2013; Holthaus 2015; Nutter-Pridgen 2015), the literature that does exist points to the fact that increasing bi+ visibility is a central issue and frame through which bi+ groups talk about their politics. In this chapter, I also highlight the ways in which bi+ respondents sought to make sense of a bi+ politics that moved beyond visibility, and the difficulty they had constructing frames for what that politics might look like.

I conclude this dissertation by considering how my findings can contribute to future understandings of sexualities and inequality. Specifically, I reflect on how each layer of exclusion bi+ people experience connects to another, and how the ways in which bi+ people are routinely erased from larger social and political conversations may need to change in order for existing sexual inequalities, and inequalities in general, to be ameliorated. The final chapter is an Appendix that details my methods.

It is clear that the current social scientific knowledge regarding bi+ experience and monosexism is incomplete (Monro et al. 2017); there is still much to be desired when it comes to attention to bisexuality in sociological research. Thus, this dissertation is a crucial step forward in the sociology of sexualities and sexual inequality. A failure to investigate monosexism to the degree that sociologists have already analyzed heteronormativity and homonormativity is not only detrimental to grasping a clearer understanding of the tensions bisexual people face. This hole in the literature also leaves our broader understanding of sexuality and sexual inequality “damaged” (Sedgwick 1990).

Various reports demonstrate that bisexual people experience concrete inequality when compared with heterosexual, lesbian, and gay people (Badgett et al. 2013; Gorman et al. 2015). Yet, since we are failing to ask more questions about this, it remains difficult to grasp the full scope of how this inequality is maintained and how we can combat it. By focusing on the personal narratives (Nowakowski 2016) of bi+ people’s experiences, this work pushes us towards identifying concrete starting places for policy and advocacy dedicated to ameliorating bi+ marginalization. As such, presenting an analysis with monosexism at the center is not only theoretically interesting, but it is also crucial if we want to have a full grasp of the persistence of sexual inequalities and how to combat them in the post gay era.



## CHAPTER 4: BI+ IDENTITY WORK

During our interview at a busy Chicago coffee shop, Inez<sup>5</sup>, a 28-year-old cisgender woman who identifies her sexuality as “vacillating between fluid and queer,” was discussing how she came to those terms to define her sexuality when she said to me, as if she were disclosing a juicy Hollywood controversy, “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but there’s splintering in the bisexual community about [how] having so many labels separates us instead of uniting us.” Sandwiched between her broader explanation of her sexual identity language choices, this brief and somewhat offhand comment from Inez speaks to a dynamic among bi+ people that was prevalent throughout all the interviews I conducted: the ways bi+ people construct their varied sexual identities in the face of pervasive social stigma.

Respondents spoke at length about using specific terms to define their sexualities and many had strong feelings about why they used certain terms over others. When discussing these differences, respondents often pointed to stigmas associated with non-monosexuality to explain their language choices and highlighted that many of them first heard of these stigmas in school settings. In addition to more well-known stigmas about bi+ people (disease carriers, indecisive, promiscuous), respondents also highlighted a debate between using the identity term “bisexual” and other identity terms such as “pansexual,” “queer,” or “fluid,” in an effort to avoid newer stigmas around the label “bisexual” specifically. These debates, as respondents show, mostly emerged in conversation with other LGBTQ people. No matter how they talked about their self-identification, the “splintering” Inez refers to is a dynamic all too familiar to the vast majority of interviewees. With this in mind, this chapter focuses specifically on the ways in which bi+ people do “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987) to signify positive sexual selves in the face of negative stereotypes and stigmas about bisexuality. In so doing, I show how bi+ people’s

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<sup>5</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

identity construction and negotiation are reflective of the ways in which they navigate a monosexual imaginary.

### IDENTITY WORK AND BI+ STIGMA

The term “identity work” refers to the actions people take to signify their identity(ies) to others (Snow and Anderson 1987). In order to signify a unique personal identity, those in a given group or society need to have a shared understanding of the meaning of the identity in question, and, as scholars have noted, individuals have to work together to create shared meanings for a given identity (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). These shared meanings entail both the literal things people need to do or have to be included in a given identity group (e.g. “bisexual people are people who experience attraction to people of multiple genders”) as well as widely held views on the morality of individuals who may be included in a given group (e.g. “bisexuals are untrustworthy and promiscuous”) (Barringer et al. 2017). As such, identity work is both a process on the part of the person asserting a given identity, as well as others who may place them in an identity category based on certain information about a person.

People may distance themselves from or embrace a given identity based upon how they feel about the widely recognized meanings assigned to a certain identity. Put simply, stigma factors greatly into the construction of personal identity. As such, members of marginalized communities may do identity work to redefine the terms they use to describe themselves in a positive light, even when this view isn’t shared by others. Whether one seeks to distance themselves from the stigma associated with a certain group they may be affiliated with or embrace such stigmas, identity work is the process of constructing a positive sense of self in relation to these shared, sometimes stigmatized, meanings. When individuals of a given group

don't necessarily share the same meanings for a term, there can be contestations over what is actually meant by said term (McQueeney 2009).

Stigmas against bi+ people are well documented. For example, scholars have revealed widespread beliefs that bi+ individuals are untrustworthy (Hertlein, Hartwell, and Munns 2016) and that bi+ existence is just a phase on the way to becoming “really” heterosexual or “really” gay (Alarie and Gaudet 2013). Additionally, bi+ people are thought to be more likely to cheat on their partners, especially with a person or people of “the opposite” gender (Eisner 2013), and, in connection to this belief, bi+ people are perceived as especially prone to contracting and spreading STIs to their “unsuspecting” monosexual (usually heterosexual) partners (Garber 1995). Furthermore, many of the stereotypes assigned to bi+ people are heavily gendered, with the assumption that bi+ women and feminine people will really “settle down” with a man (Hartman 2013), while bi+ men and masculine people are believed to be truly gay (Brewster and Moradi 2010).

The implications of these stigmas are also well documented in survey research about monosexual people's attitudes towards bi+ people. For example, using a thermometer scale to gauge respondents' feelings of “warmth” toward various racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and other social groups, Herek (2002) found that heterosexual people ranked bi+ people less favorably than *all* other social groups with the exception of intravenous drug users. Hertlein and colleagues (2016) also found that heterosexual individuals tend express negative views of bi+ people based on the abovementioned stigmas. Furthering this research, Cragun and Sumerau (2015) found that these negative attitudes are not only prevalent among heterosexual people, but also among lesbian and gay people (see also Cragun and Sumerau 2017).

Additionally, some stigmas are applied unevenly to different individuals who fall under the bi+ umbrella. For example, some bi+ scholars have pointed to the fact that not only are the most prevalent stigmas against bi+ people associated strongly with “bisexual,” but also there is a specific stigma against *bisexuality*, as opposed to other bi+ identities like pansexual, queer, or fluid. This is particularly the case within LGBTQ communities; the foundation of this stigma is that the term bisexual, and by extension those who use it, problematically reproduce a gender binary and thus exclude those who identify as transgender and/or nonbinary (Eisner 2013; Nutter-Pridgen 2015; Serano 2012). As such, this stigma suggests that by using the term “bisexual,” individuals are marginalizing transgender, particularly nonbinary, people (Eisner 2013). While bisexual activists have been fighting the notion that bisexuality is a “binary” sexual identity since at least the 1990s (Bay Area Bisexual Network 1990), this stigma has re-emerged among LGBTQ groups in the wake of greater heterosexual acceptance of lesbian and gay people, and limited transgender visibility within and beyond LGBTQ spaces (Eisner 2013). Given that not all members of the bi+ community view bisexuality in exactly the same way, the term bisexual is a kind of contested ground, the meaning of which is constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated among bi+ people. While all bi+ people have to navigate stigma associated with being bi+, the ways in which they negotiate this stigma may vary and inform the ways in which they construct their sexual identities, particularly in relation to the term “bisexual.”

Given these social dynamics, how do bi+ people reconcile their sense of self with persistent stigmas? How does this reconciliation revolve around disputes over the meaning of bisexuality? In this chapter, I explicate this process by focusing on how bi+ people do “identity work” to counteract the negative messages they receive about themselves from others and, through this process, work to reassert a positive sexual identity.

“PROMISCUOUS, CONFUSED, AND UNABLE TO DECIDE”:

NON-MONOSEXUALITY AND STIGMA

Respondents spoke at length about their awareness of stigmas around non-monosexuality, particularly negative ideas about non-monosexual actions dating back to the 1980s and 90s (Eisner 2013; Garber 1995). Regardless of their sexual identities, respondents noted that they had confronted stereotypes of bi+ people as promiscuous, diseased, indecisive, as well as others. Often, as some of the quotes below highlight, they encountered these messages before they began to identify as bi+. As such, this section demonstrates the awareness that respondents had about bi+ stigma related to the *action* of being non-monosexual and the stigmas associated with it.

One of the main stigmas respondents discussed was the notion that bi+ people are promiscuous and hyper sexual. For example, Harriet, a 22-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, said, “I feel like there’s this idea that bisexual women are ready to go at all times. And like, hyper sexuality.” Similarly, Addison, a 25-year-old pansexual queer bisexual cisgender woman, said, “Sluts, are just experimenting and confused, the same thing, they’re either actually straight or actually gay...I’ve heard it from friends when I was younger, maybe more like acquaintances, or I guess they were friends...I remember a friend saying, ‘oh she’s bisexual, she’ll sleep with anybody.’”

Like Harriet and Addison, Agatha, a 25-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, noted that she heard bi+ people were, “Promiscuous, confused, and unable to decide,” from people in her high school. In recounting stigmas he heard about bi+ people, Davey, a 24-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, further expanded on this stereotype when he said, “not that being bisexual means that you’re a lustful person or whatever, but that’s like what people associate with

bisexuality, is being uncontrollably lustful.” Matilda, a 25-year-old queer transgender woman, noted that she heard, “bisexual women are like incapable of monogamy, bisexual women are always up for threesomes, things like that. Like really unfortunate gross things.” Yvette, a 26-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, said, “[bi+ people] for one reason or another don’t accept themselves or they have...they’re like extra promiscuous.”

While these quotes highlight the fact that many respondents were aware of stereotypes of bi+ people as promiscuous (Eisner 2013; Garber 1995), they also show the ways multiple stigmas overlap with one another, such as bi+ people being indecisive. Delilah, a 30-year-old queer cisgender woman, shared a story of hearing that bi+ people, particularly those who openly identify as bisexual, are indecisive in a college class on queer theory, and that hearing these comments delayed her coming out:

I would be in groups [in a college queer theory class] and we’d be talking about bisexuality and reading research by really great authors and people in my group would make comments like, “Bi, just can’t pick one.” You know? Um, that’s it’s not a real thing...It was more of the same rhetoric of like...people being curious but not being real...[I knew] if I were to come out there would be stigma associated with me for being indecisive, being greedy, being frivolous experimenting, and that’s not real.

Similarly, Bridget, a 30-year-old queer cisgender woman, said:

I feel like one of the more notable things directly to me that I experienced was when my high school sweetheart and me broke up, we had mutual friends from high school that we had both been friends with throughout the several years of our relationship who were like, “well, what do you expect? Obviously, it was just a phase,” which was very hurtful. And also, I was like, a two-year relationship is not a phase.

Bridget’s statement about her interaction with high school friends highlights the stereotype of bisexual people as indecisive, unable to pick whether they really want to be with women or men. As such, these quotes highlight the ways respondents encountered the longstanding stigma that bi+ people are indecisive (Eisner 2013).

Respondents also highlighted the ways that stereotypes about bi+ people overlap with gendered expectations of appropriate masculinity and femininity. For example, a common trope about bi+ women is that they engage in non-monosexual actions to get attention from or please men. Elsewhere in the interview, Bridget said that she heard bi+ women:

[Are] doing it for male attention, that they are—I think there is that stereotype of women of experimenting like straight women experimenting with women but they're actually straight. And then I think there's also, maybe even to a lesser extent, the like experimenting with women as a step towards identifying as lesbian.

Penelope, a 28-year-old queer panromantic demisexual cisgender woman, expands on this when she talks about what she has heard about bi+ women in her life: “I think about when I hear bi women is it seems—that term is often used when talking about women’s sexuality passively. So, like a phase. Like they are bi only in the sense that they will sleep with other women only because men like it or because it’s sexy or whatever, for porn or something. It’s more passive.”

Quinn, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, provides another example:

The only women who say they’re bi are like 16-year-old girls who want people to look at their blog or whatever. Like, still that sort of thing of only doing it for attention. Like, you know, women who make out with women in bars just to get men’s attention and stuff like that. I still feel that a lot... one time on reddit a guy called me a “barsexual,” which was a new one. I assume he means like I’m only bi in bars when I make out with women?

Sebastian, a 25-year-old pansexual queer cisgender man, also acknowledged this stereotype about bi+ women as “barsexuals” who engage in same-sex activity for men’s attention when he noted, “You know, the stereotypical like unicorn of a single woman looking for a couple to have threesomes, or the ‘barsexual,’ like oh she’ll make out with a girl in the bar but doesn’t actually want a relationship.”

Sociologists have documented how the stereotype of bi+ woman as “barsexuals” or performing same-sex sexuality for the pleasure of men emerges from and reproduces a

heteronormative, patriarchal social context (Hamilton 2007). Specifically, women who identify as heterosexual are capable of using sexualized interactions with other women to reinforce sexist and heterosexist understandings of sexuality (Hamilton 2007). Such dynamics can be especially problematic because they can potentially lead to diminished spaces where lesbian women feel safe expressing same-sex desire and affection. However, even though the actions of women in Hamilton's study can be damaging to lesbian women, the assumption that *all* woman who are not lesbians and express desire for other women are heterosexual and performing same-sex sexuality for the pleasure of men reflects the persistence of the monosexual imaginary; one can either be truly lesbian *or* heterosexual and acting as a queer "tourist" for men's attention. As I highlight in the next chapter, these assumptions undergird many of the ways in which bi+ people, but especially women, are excluded from LGBTQ spaces because of their assumed proximity to heterosexuality.

While these examples highlight general bi+ stigma commonly associated with women, respondents also noted stereotypes that particularly impact men. For instance, Olivia, a 27-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, said, "They are just gay men trying to be straight. Kind of with anything, that they're just confused at they need to be redirected. They just need to meet the right person. They need to choose a side." Matilda noted stereotypes she heard about bi+ men, "It's a gateway to being gay, um, and I think there's a lot more shame and fear associated with men exploring their sexuality with different genders than there is for women. Um, but that's because society sexualizes women, so...I dunno, like the whole 'no homo' culture, right, that a lot of cis-het dudes have going on."



Jane, a 29-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, emphasized that when she first learned the word “bisexual,” it was associated with bi+ people being carriers of disease because a friend of hers in high school was teased for being a bisexual man:

I learned [the word bisexual] at school because people were making fun of one of my male friends for being bisexual and saying that he had AIDS. And, I deduced from the conversation what bisexual meant. And at that time, like, being attracted to men and women, because again that’s what I thought at the time...I’ve also heard a different version of that from straight women. Like, “I would never date a bisexual man because he’ll give me AIDS.” And these are people who think they are progressive, or they live in a college co-ed house...I didn’t even know that word until I was fifteen. From that guy who was going to get his girlfriend AIDS, right?

Similarly, Penelope shared what her mother said when she mentioned she would be open to dating a bisexual man, “I said, ‘I would date a bi guy,’ and my mom [said] something about, ‘oh, that’s so dangerous,’ something about STDs, like stereotypical shit that comes to your mind.”

Elliot, a 23-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, shared a similar example:

There was this fucking quote from Amber Rose where she was like, “I’m very open sexually,” and she became a figure for the Slut Walk, and I think it was like on the Slut Walk, or something particularly insulting like that, where she said, “I would never date a bisexual man, that’s disgusting.” And like, anyways, the Guardian wrote a story about it and included all these statistics about how bisexual men are less attractive to women. Anyway, that’s the most prominent thing I’ve read about bisexual men.

These quotes highlight the fact that widespread stereotypes about bi+ people are gendered in specific ways that align with heteronormative expectations about gender and sexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). While women are permitted a degree of flexibility in their sexuality (under the guise of appealing men), men are not given the same freedom. This is because of dominant conceptualizations of masculinity being directly tied to heterosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009) and that any deviation from these expectations reflects that one is “truly” gay and thus violating the assumed (heterosexual, cisgender, monosexual) alignment between sex,

gender, and sexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Thus, any sexual interactions between men, or even people assumed to be men, represents a failure of masculinity in this social context. However, in the post gay era (Ghaziani 2011) men who identify as gay are given a degree of social acceptance from heterosexual people for their sexuality so long as they adhere to white, middle class norms (Dean 2014). Despite this “conditional acceptance” from heterosexual others (Sumerau and Mathers 2019), men’s enactment of same-*and*-different sex sexuality still presents a unique threat to monosexuality and is, thus, regulated harshly in the context of a monosexual imaginary where no such sexuality can *truly* exist. Furthermore, the control over men’s sexual fluidity is very much tied to stigmas that emerged in the 1980s when bi+ men were seen as particularly likely to spread disease, specifically AIDS, because of their sexual involvement with gay men and the fact that AIDS was viewed as a specifically gay men’s disease (Garber 1995).

Inez summarized the gendered nature of bi+ stigma this way:

Women are fetishized for being bisexual. I think bi men are just really...there’s lots of hostility towards bi men, and no matter which way you slice it, people just assume preferences for penises for bi men. Like it’s like, well, you’re just waiting to be gay. Or for bi women, you’re just waiting to get the right man, like *always* phallocentric. (emphasis original)

In talking about the gendered dynamics of bi+ stereotypes and stigma, respondents like Inez reveal how monosexist inequality is deeply intertwined with patriarchy and heteronormativity. While both bi+ women and men are perceived to be disingenuous in their sexuality, bi+ women are assumed to be heterosexual performing for men’s pleasure and bi+ men are assumed to be gay, in denial about it, and carriers of disease. Although bi+ men and women are held accountable to these stigmas in different ways based on gender, both of these stereotypes rely on a shared logic that, in order to do gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and do sexuality (Pfeffer 2014) appropriately, *everyone* must really be monosexual and attracted to men. As such, these

gendered stereotypes, as well as the others respondents mentioned, reflect the persistence of a monosexual imaginary where bi+ existence is explained away through gender and (hetero)sexual failure (in the case of men) or a hyper-feminine heterosexual gender performance (in the case of women). In both instances, bi+ people are perpetually rendered invisible.

Another prominent stereotype that bi+ respondents noted was that bi+ people are greedy. For example, Vivienne, a 28-year-old pansexual queer cisgender woman, said, “I really don’t know anybody that identifies as bisexual. But...I think that there’s still that stigma that it’s selfish, that it’s greedy.” Similarly, Luna, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, said, “There was this one friend I had who was saying all these stereotypes about what he thought [bisexuality] meant. You know just your typical run of the mill ‘oh you’re just greedy or you want to sleep with everybody’...it comes off almost as a disgust kind of thing.” Tegan, a 27-year-old pansexual queer cisgender woman, shared a similar example:

Bi, in particular, I’ve heard a lot of people say it doesn’t exist or it’s not a thing. It’s usually directed at bi, but I guess it applies to pan as well... mainly bi erasure and pansexual erasure, and also the general like greedy type thing... like want to make out with everyone all the time. But like...you know, when you hear that you’re attracted to more than one gender, people automatically say, “oh, you just want everything, you’re greedy.”

In this section, I demonstrated the ways that bi+ people, regardless of their professed identity label, were keenly aware of the stigmas associated with non-monosexual *behavior*. Furthermore, many respondents discussed hearing or personally encountering these stigmas from heterosexual, lesbian, and gay people, and often in a school setting. While sociologists have documented that gender and sexual policing is not uncommon in schools (Pascoe 2007) the stigmas respondents encountered in school settings tell us something important about the ways that interviewees encountered sexuality in educational settings. Specifically, in the era when respondents were growing up, lesbian and gay identities were becoming more acceptable (Robertson 2018) and,

like the boys in Pascoe's (2007) study, respondents and their peers perhaps understood that bullying "real" gay kids wasn't okay. However, because bi+ people have not been as visible in dominant discourses about normalizing and accepting non-heterosexualities (Mathers et al. 2018a), much of the policing about sexuality that happened in their youth points to the specific discomforts around the fluidity of bi+ existence. As such, while youth may be more accepting and accustomed to peers' existence as lesbian or gay, this acceptance hasn't necessarily translated into acceptance of bi+ others in these contexts. Such experiences early in their lives clearly informed how bi+ respondents thought about their sexualities and learned to navigate monosexist stigma, even after leaving a particular school. As such, these quotes reflect how ever-present these stigmas are in the broader societal imagination of what bi+ existence entails.

While these stigmas are connected with non-monosexual action and can thus be levied against anyone who violates mononormative (Barringer et al. 2017; Schippers 2016; Sumerau and Mathers 2019) expectations about sex and sexuality, respondents also revealed that these stigmas are commonly associated with bisexual people in particular. As Tegan notes, these stigmas are "*usually* directed at bi, but I guess *it applies to pan as well*." Thus, while the stigmas respondents talked about here are broadly about non-monosexual behavior, they are still attached to the label bisexual more commonly than other bi+ identity terms. This may be because, as Whitney, a 26-year-old bisexual pansexual cisgender woman, notes, "bisexual is, I think, more in the cultural consciousness of a legitimate thing that exists" compared to other identity terms bi+ people use. Thus, although these stigmas are applied to people who are not monosexual in general, they are typically enforced through the language of bisexuality.

### “BISEXUALITY SOUNDS KIND OF TRANSPHOBIC”: BISEXUAL LABEL STIGMA

In addition to the stigmas I note above, bi+ people also spent significant time talking about a newer stigma (Eisner 2013; Nutter-Pridgen 2015), more explicitly associated with the label “bisexual,” namely that the label bisexual erases the existence of transgender and nonbinary people. Importantly, the stigma specifically surrounding the label bisexual more commonly emerged in conversations with other bi+ people and LGBTQ people more broadly. Interviewees did not as commonly associate this particular stigma with experiences interacting with heterosexual people. Like the stereotypes they noted above, bi+ people, regardless of personal identity, were very aware of these debates about the label “bisexual.” Although transgender and bi+ people have historically had many alliances (Eisner 2013), and transgender people (particularly women) are more likely to identify as bisexual (Movement Advancement Project 2017), the notion that bisexuality excludes transgender people emerged recently in the wake of relative gains for others in the LGBTQ community (Nutter-Pridgen 2015). Importantly, both bisexual and other respondents were aware of this stigma, even if they had divergent views on it.

Pansexual, queer, and fluid respondents engaged in forms of identity talk that relied on how they made sense of themselves in relation to the seemingly exclusionary label of bisexuality. While bisexual respondents shared the view that bisexuality comprises a gender-inclusive form of sexuality, those who did not identify as bisexual generally shared an understanding that bisexuality was, in fact, a binary mode of sexual existence and defined it as such when they explained why they use other sexual identity labels instead. For example, in response to a question about why she doesn’t use the term bisexual, Cassidy, a 27-year-old queer cisgender woman, explains, “I mean, strictly speaking, I’m just not attracted to either— to both men and women. I’m attracted to other genders as well.” Similarly, Delilah said, “I think that

sometimes the word bi to me could maybe... not be indicative of people of different gender identities... Like, bi, it's men or women and not recognizing the fluidity between all of the gender representations of what that means. And um, not allowing for that within the term bisexual." Additionally, Penelope noted that, "I think, to me, it feels like it is—and I dunno, it could be wrong. But I think it feels—bi means two. So, you're either one way or the other."

Tabitha, a 30-year-old pansexual queer cisgender woman, mirrors these claims when she conceptualizes bisexuality as "transphobic": "I identify as pansexual cause that's what feels best for me...the way that I use it is kind of regardless of gender. Um. Just falling for people...For me, to be honest, bisexuality sounds kind of transphobic...because the way that I think about my sexuality is not about people's gender or what's between their legs, like it's about falling for people." By juxtaposing her identity as pansexual, "just falling for people" regardless of their "gender or what's between their legs," and bisexuality, which she deems "transphobic," Tabitha demonstrates the ways in which some bi+ individuals draw on newer understandings of bisexuality as problematic to frame bisexuality as a less moral way to identify because it, presumably, excludes transgender people. In so doing, Tabitha and other respondents who claim that bisexuality is binary are asserting their definition of bisexuality as correct. In the case of those who do not identify as bisexual, however, this assertion allows them to construct another sexual identity against bisexuality, thus distancing themselves from the stigmas associated with bisexuality, particularly the idea that bisexuality is binary. Tegan provides another example:

Bisexual like, I've run into problems of like that excludes trans people and stuff like that. Like...personally the name is just automatically both, two things, which implies that there are two things and you like both of these two things. Um, which excludes any trans people or people outside of the gender binary and stuff like that...like, to get into semantics and stuff, bi means two. And it's hard for me to separate bisexual from binary.

In this quote, Tegan echoes others who were aware of the bisexual label stigma. Ava, a 24-year-old pansexual queer cisgender woman, noted that if she were to identify as bisexual, her friends would point that out as “problematic”:

I feel like it is really disrespectful [to identify as bisexual]... It just doesn't really make sense, and it just kinda made me feel stupid when I thought about it. I was just like yeah, okay, this makes sense. Like, I know probably one of my friends, she's like on the same tip as well. [If I identified as bisexual] she would just be like, “girl, are you sure? Like really?” I feel like she'd probably be the one to be like, “let's talk about it, like what's your definition of what this is?” and do like red flags and shit...like waving the red flag like this is problematic.

Faye, a 24-year-old bisexual, pansexual panromantic asexual cisgender woman, summarized the debate about bisexual versus other identity labels this way:

I think that the premise is that at some point, somebody looked at the word bisexual and said, “bi means two, and there are more than two genders. We're establishing this as a queer community that there are billions and billions of genders and different ways that people think about themselves. So, saying bisexual reverts back to that old idea that there are only two genders and so we need a new word that doesn't subscribe to that kind of problematic language thing.” And then I think some other people were pushing back and saying like, “well, language evolves, and as our understanding of gender evolves, our understanding of this word bisexual can also evolve because for a lot of people I think that bisexual meant something, and having someone tell you that your identity is problematic is like inherently shitty.” So, um, I think it was some push back because there is a long history associated with bisexual as an identity.

Faye's assessment reflects what many bisexual respondents shared in their interviews. Most of the bisexual people in this sample were also very aware of the debates about whether or not bisexuality is a binary sexual identity, and often vehemently opposed this understanding of bisexuality. For instance, Yvette states:

I say bisexual...so, I like people who are the same as me and I like people who are different from me. And pan[sexual], I view as having the ability to like anybody and any kind of range of things. And I think in a lot of ways it's two ways of saying a very, very similar thing...I came out as pan[sexual] and then I was like, that's not quite right, and I don't know what it is because it's mostly—this is not nice, but I almost feel like that concept almost comes out of a fear of bisexuals. Like, at least that's how it has been used, or how it was used, especially

in that time like with me and my friend group. It was like, “Oh, well, I’m not like *those* people. I’m this *new* thing that you’ve never heard of before.” (emphasis original)

Additionally, in this response, Yvette, like Ava, highlights how her friend networks shaped her understanding of bisexuality, though for Yvette she did identity work by rejecting her peers’ belief that bisexuality is binary and problematic.

Other bisexual respondents noted that they found the debate about whether bisexuality is binary and inclusive of transgender people odd or misinformed. Cole, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, explains:

I occasionally run across the person who insists on some sort of big prefigurative difference between bi and pan, but from what I can tell, it’s just sort of, they encompass, they describe the same thing, and it’s just a question of like which one works better for you...it’s like pan people who are particularly insistent upon maintaining that distinction seem to also be working from this sort of flawed conception of bisexuality as requiring that you—like defining it basically as only attracted to binary men and women...And so, there’s an argument that I see advanced that like the idea of identifying as bisexual is somehow inherently transphobic or cisnormative because they think it presupposes interest in very strictly men and women...I don’t know. It’s weird, I’ve never actually seen a bi person use this allegedly transphobic—or it is transphobic—but this alleged formulation of bisexuality.

Noting that he’s “never actually seen a bi person use this...alleged formulation of bisexuality,” Cole implicitly shows that those who claim that bisexuality is a uniquely problematic sexual identity are out of touch with how bisexual people “actually” define their sexual identity. In this way, Cole both asserts his understanding of bisexuality as inclusive, and that those who think of it otherwise are misinformed based on what actual bisexual people say. As such, he seeks to “define” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) what it means to be in the category bisexual, namely against the definitions others use that don’t resonate with his experience. Similarly, Quinn says this of the notion that bisexuality excludes transgender people:



I hear that all the time. (guffaws) It seems like kind of a concern troll, like people throw that up just to kind of start shit. I don't want to be like assuming I know what nonbinary people think, but I've never heard a nonbinary person raise that issue. And I know a lot of nonbinary people who identify as bi, and I also know a lot of people who say that bi just means my gender and other genders, that's the bi in bisexual. And I'm sure that's not what it means originally, but I don't mind like retrofitting it to mean that, like other than just men and women, because I get it.

Jane similarly explains how she sees framing bisexuality as binary as “biphobic and not accurate,” and learning “a better working definition” of bisexuality led her back to using that identity label:

I realized that a lot of the reason I had stopped [using bisexual] were biphobic and not accurate...that the word means things it doesn't mean about how you conceptualize gender...Being a feminine woman who is also bisexual, a lot of queer women would question that I was queer at all. And so, I think I stayed away from using bisexual because of that too...I think being able to reflect on that, you know, I was probably 24 or 25 when I started using that word again. Being a more established person, I felt more comfortable using that word to describe myself... sometimes other queer people have asked me, “But doesn't that reinforce the gender binary?” and for a while I was like, “Oh shit, maybe it does”...With a better working definition sometimes I'll just say “Go fuck yourself. Google it. I'm done.”

Note that Jane didn't start using bisexual until she felt like she was “a more established person” with more tools to respond to the questions she encountered about the validity of her sexuality. Thus, one of the ways in which Jane, and other bisexual people with similar identity trajectories, did identity work involved educating themselves on more expansive definitions of bisexuality so they would be prepared to rebuke any questions and “justify” (Scott and Lyman 1968) their existence as bisexual. However, Jane also exhibits, perhaps more explicitly than others quoted here, the frustration that many bisexual respondents expressed of fighting an uphill battle to re-establish a more expansive shared understanding of bisexuality *in addition* to countering other stigmas about non-monosexuality more broadly (i.e., slutty, indecisive, untrustworthy).

The quotes in this section highlight that bi+ people, regardless of identity label, were keenly aware of emerging stigmas associated with the *label* bisexual and how this particular stigma, along with the ones I highlighted in the previous section, significantly impacted the ways in which bi+ people opted to identify themselves. Additionally, as Jane's quote shows, these stigmas, particularly the notion that bisexuality reinforces a gender binary, most commonly came from other LGBTQ people. As I will elaborate more in the following chapter, these stigmas, both about non-monosexual action (being diseased, indecisive, really heterosexual) and the label bisexual, inform how lesbian and gay people draw boundaries around who is permitted in LGBTQ communities.

Taken together, these illustrations from the bi+ people I spoke to reveal the prevailing stigmas bi+ people navigate when constructing a positive sexual identity. On the one hand, most bi+ people encounter stigmas associated with their sexual practices (lustful, promiscuous) and, by extension, their personhood (unreliable, indecisive, diseased). Despite the fact that these stigmas are applied to bi+ people broadly, they are also commonly associated with the specific identity "bisexual." In this way, outside of LGBTQ communities (and sometimes within them, see Chapter 5), bisexual becomes a stand in term for all bi+ people. In addition, within bi+ and LGBTQ communities more broadly, there is significant contestation over the appropriate and most inclusive identity labels that people should use, namely that "bisexual," because of the prefix "bi," seemingly excludes transgender and nonbinary people and indicates one's attraction to exclusively cisgender men and women. In the following section, I highlight how bi+ people do identity work in the face of these stigmas to reflect a positive sexual self.

## MANAGING MULTIPLE STIGMAS THROUGH IDENTITY WORK

### *Distancing from Stigma Through Other Bi+ Identities*

One of the main ways bi+ people negotiated stigma was by distancing themselves from the label bisexual. This was both because of the identity label debates as well as the general stigmas associated with non-monosexuality that are tied specifically to bisexuality. Bi+ people who do not identify as bisexual defined the sexual identity labels they used as moral and empowering in comparison to a “problematic” formulation of bisexuality. Sometimes they framed the problematic nature of bisexuality through the lens of excluding transgender people. For example, Sebastian explains:

I’ve never felt completely comfortable using [bisexual]...mostly because of the connotation of the, you know, prefix “bi” relating to just two, and I mean I’ve been attracted to multiple different, you know, perceived genders...I feel like bisexual tends to be limiting in its gender presentations, *for me*. It’s fine for other people, but ,for me, I’ve always found it to be kind of limiting.

Responses like Sebastian’s reflect that those who do not identify as bisexual not only see bisexual as a binary term but also that, because of this presumed definition, it is limiting. Other respondents similarly drew on the understanding that bisexuality felt limiting to them. For example, Ava says:

I would define [pansexuality] as like you’re attracted to whomever. Like it’s just an attraction between a person and a person...It really allows for fluidity and just like flexible openness...It allows me to not feel limited...I feel like [bisexuality] just, it’s just so limiting. Like that’s just really how I feel about it. Like, you’re putting yourself in another box, and, at first, I thought that being bisexual means that you’re out of the box, but regardless it’s all a box...Identifying as pan would definitely take out the super gendered aspect of it and really reflect how I feel in terms of being attracted to different people.

Similarly, Vivienne explains:

I didn’t really feel bisexual because it felt really limiting, and I didn’t like that language. Um, but I didn’t know another word to replace it, so I stuck with it...I knew that there were more than two genders...Um, that...it wasn’t binary, and

that I had to—I loved and was attracted to *people* as a *person*. And not just as how they identified. And so, when I learned the word pansexual, I was like, “this is how I’ve been feeling. This is exactly how my brain works and my heart feels.” ... In my brain, [pansexual] just feels like a gentler word...than bisexual. Because it’s not limiting. Because it doesn’t feel discriminatory, for me, it doesn’t have that...negative connotation that was so prominent in so much of my life...I’ve had less instances, fewer instances, of argument or being told I was wrong or that’s not how I should feel or whatever with identifying as pansexual than I have [when identifying as bisexual].

Responses like these portray bisexuality as a “box,” “limiting,” “transphobic,” and “discriminatory,” and, by extension, that other bi+ identities are not these things. This pattern highlights the ways in which non-bisexual respondents did identity work. They used other terms to distance themselves from the negative connotations they learned about bisexuality, specifically, and instead asserted other identities, such as pansexual and queer, to explain their attraction. Furthermore, respondents like Vivienne pointed to the fact that it was *both* negative ideas about bisexuality as a binary *and* deleterious connotations that she heard about bisexuality in her youth that led her to opt for other identity labels to avoid stigma. The same way that past gay and lesbian groups built moral standing in heterosexual society by distancing themselves from the specter of bisexuality, non-bisexual people who identify as bi+ with other terms use stigma against the word bisexual to define their own identities as “not that kind of sexual minority” (Warner 1999).

Additionally, as I illustrated above, many non-bisexual identifying respondents were aware of the stigmas specifically associated with non-monosexual actions, and, although these stigmas are associated with bi+ people generally, since the term bisexual is more widely recognizable outside of LGBTQ spaces, some respondents distanced themselves from that because these stigmas are often associated with bisexuality specifically. When Vivienne mentions that she opts to use pansexual instead of bisexual both because of the fact that it seems

more expansive as well as “it doesn’t have that...negative connotation that was so prominent in so much of my life,” she highlights the ways that bi+ people who avoid the label bisexual do so because of the stigma attached to non-monosexual actions *and* the label bisexual. For example, Bridget, referencing the same high-school relationship she discussed above, says:

When I was in high school, I had a very formative long-term relationship with another girl. And I never really knew how to describe myself then...I never really liked the word bisexual...I felt like the word bisexual was mostly like either you’re a lesbian and you just don’t want to admit it, or you are, you know, doing stuff with girls for male attention, and neither of those was true. But I always felt uncomfortable using that word for those reasons, um, and so I think like, as I became more politically engaged as I got to be an older teenager and in college, the word queer, you know, started being something that more of my peers were using and I felt that represented me a lot better.

While Ava mentioned above that she uses pansexual because it is more expansive, she also highlighted how stereotypes she heard about actions associated with bisexuality impact her decision to identify as pansexual and queer:

I feel like it’s easier to be like “I’m pan”...I feel like bisexuality or the idea of bisexual or being bisexual is so convoluted with like this whole unicorn shit, or I don’t know, when I say unicorn shit I mean you know when couples try to find their sexual partner or sorts and are really attracted to bisexual women, it’s really on that tip. So, I really just rebuke all of that shit (laughing).

Delilah also noted that because of the stigmas she encountered about actions associated with bisexuality before coming out, she opted to use queer because it allowed her to distance herself from the negative stigmas and queer allowed her to define her sexuality for herself:

I don’t think I really called myself anything or identified as anything until about junior year of college. I took a queer theory class and some sexualities classes, and those were very helpful (laughs). And um, I started kind of thinking, “well, maybe I’m bi.” Around those times, but I think I got a lot of um...just like stigma associated with the term bi, like even from people within my queer theory class, and so was kind of not sure I want to own that identity at that point in time. And then learned more and more and kind of settled on queer as an umbrella of like, I can define how I want this to be for me.

In this way, respondents who used other labels besides bisexual found empowerment in distancing themselves from these stigmas instead of embracing them and trying to challenge them like the bisexual-identifying respondents. Vivienne highlights this process succinctly when she says she had “fewer instances of argument or being told I was wrong” when she stopped identifying as bisexual and started using pansexual.

### *Embracing Bisexual Identity to Challenge Stigma*

Despite the numerous stigmas levied against them, bisexual respondents defined bisexuality as a moral, political, and empowering identity. In so doing, they echoed previous populations of gay and lesbian people (Warner 1999) and transgender people (Serano 2007) who have sought to reclaim bisexual by using their lived experience to counter negative narratives about bisexual people. All of the bisexual respondents I spoke to were aware of the myriad of negative stigmas associated with bisexuality. Thus, through their identity talk, they “embraced” (Snow and Anderson 1987) the stigmatized identity in order to challenge widely recognized stigmas against bisexual people. In these instances, bisexual respondents explain that using bisexual is not problematic and that those who think it is misconstrue what bisexuality means.

For example, Cole explains:

[T]he understanding of it that I see from actual bi people who try to use it and sort of take a term that used to be a medical diagnosis and make it into a functioning identity...I think the assumption that bi is more of a strict label or like sort of requires your sexuality to be structured more in a certain way, I think that's not really true...so at the point where people are saying that it's a bad way to identify or like that people get shitty about it for whatever reason, then I'm going to identify that way partially out of stubbornness.

Cole's “stubbornness” reflects the ways in which bisexual respondents refused to yield to competing definitions of bisexuality they see as myopic and inaccurate. Self-identifying as

bisexual allows them to lead by example and form a positive sense of self since they are using their existence and identity to challenge the stigmas they encounter. For instance, Luna explains:

I'd say mostly I use bisexual. For the reasons that I feel like a lot of people have fucked up notions about it, so I like want to be there to explain why I chose that word...Honestly, it was the term that I used and became attached to it because I think of it in the potential to be attracted to more than one gender...And I felt like it was broad enough already, so why should I change? Even though pansexual means the same way that I use bisexual I was like, "why am I going to use this different term?" And I think again, there's history of how it came to be the term within creations of different sexualities. [That] was really interesting to me. I think I wanted to be a part of that history, if that make sense. So, kind of like continuing this legacy.

Luna, mirroring Cole's unwillingness to cede to definitions of bisexuality that don't match her understanding of herself, also uses her bisexual identity to challenge misconceptions people have about bisexuality. As she notes, it also allows her to push back against "fucked up notions" people have about bisexuality.

In a similar vein, Yvette explains that, in using bisexuality instead of other identity terms, she is fulfilling a moral obligation to "protect" her under- or misrepresented identity group: "I just wanted to be a good example, I guess. I had a lot of friends who were lesbians who hated bi girls, and I was just like, 'Well, I'm one. Do you hate me?' And then now, that's just a firmly attached part of my identity...gotta protect the bisexuals. The little tiny, tiny 'B' in LGBT." Like Luna, Yvette uses her identity as bisexual among her friend networks to challenge people when they privilege stigmatized views of bisexuality.

Olivia found the term bisexuality in an online chat room when she was feeling isolated because she lacked a framework through which to make sense of her sexuality in her youth. She explains the reason why she still opts to use bisexual over other sexual identity terms: "Like [bisexual] is actually what I feel like, and this is a way that I can actually explain it, which is why I kind of stuck to that. Just to keep that and remind myself how I felt. [Bisexual] is this word that

kind of gave me that power back.” As such, to respondents like Olivia, the label of bisexual reflects a pathway to personal empowerment, especially in a social context where there is a dearth of positive representations of bi+ people.

These responses reveal how bisexual respondents engaged in identity work strategies to reconcile the negative stereotypes about bisexuality with their positive sense of sexual identity. By defining bisexuality as a form of attraction that includes all genders, and thus a nonproblematic sexual identity, bisexual individuals engaged in subcultural identity work in the face of both the stigmas against non-monosexuality in general as well as specifically around the label bisexual. This work involved defining what “actual bi” people, as Cole states, think about this language. Furthermore, through explaining that bisexuality was an identity that allowed them to feel empowered both on a personal level and to challenge negative stigmas about bisexuality more broadly, bisexual people constructed a positive sexual identity despite the myriad of stigmas associated with bisexuality. As such, bisexual respondents reframe identifying as bisexual as a moral action, not an outmoded or problematic one, and thus, seek to redefine what being bisexual means.

### *Everyone's Queer*

While there were some ways in which bisexual-identifying and non-bisexual identifying respondents diverged in their identity work strategies, they came together in one important way: by identifying as “queer” either on its own or in addition to other sexual identity labels. To interviewees, queer functioned both similarly and differently than other sexual identity labels. For some people, they used it to talk about being attracted to people of multiple genders. However, it was also distinct in that it could either be used on its own or in conjunction with others (bisexual, pansexual) to demonstrate one’s membership in the LGBTQ community.



Scholars have noted that drawing on multiple identity labels is not uncommon for members of the bi+ community (Rust 2000), and the respondents in this sample were not different in that regard. Even people who used bisexuality in an effort to align themselves with bisexual history and politics tended to also state that they were queer. For example, Luna, who noted that she most commonly identifies with bisexual to challenge people's negative stigmas about bisexual individuals, states, "I would use bisexual, or I would use queer...I feel like queer is my way of being more connected to a broader LGBTQI community." Similarly, Rory, a 30-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, explains: "I tend to use the word queer when I'm talking about...hmm...that's a good question. I'm not sure. I think I use it a little more when I'm just talking in passing, it's less about who I'm attracted to and more just about the fact that I am part of the LGBTQ community." Quotes like these exhibit that, even for respondents who use other terms to explain their sexualities, they might also use queer to signify membership within a broader community of non-heterosexual people.

Respondents who only used terms like "queer" or "fluid" to describe their sexualities also narrated a similar reasoning. For example, Inez, who is "vacillating between fluid and queer" to describe her sexuality, says, "I think I'm finding myself wanting to have a label that is still is ambiguous on purpose but also aligns myself with the community." Many respondents were drawn to the ambiguity of queer. Similarly, Tabitha, who identifies as pansexual and queer, states that, "I'll use the term queer as like an umbrella term. Um, to kind of best describe me without having to explain to people exactly what my sexuality is." Thus, respondents also found comfort in the vagueness of the definition queer.

The notion of queer as an umbrella term to signify their membership with community resonated strongly among participants. For example, Jackson, a 21-year-old bisexual queer

cisgender man, says, “queer I feel is like a broader project. It kind of links into a community.” Similarly, Matilda succinctly explains, “at least my friend group, we already use queer as just a catch all slang for the LGBT community. We say like the queer community.” Additionally, Bridget explains, “I guess I would kind of define it as, like, being not straight. Like it’s the opposite of straight, but, and I think it can be useful as just an all-purpose catch-all, like LGBT, but also, I guess, for me, it does at the same time have this sort of like, small p political association too.” And Jane notes that before she returned to using the label “bisexual,” she started identifying as queer “because I felt like that was a good catch-all, and it got around the issue of the word bisexual sometimes sounding too binary.” Cassidy sums up what many respondents felt about the term queer when she explains why she identifies as queer instead of using other terms to talk about her sexuality:

I feel like those [other sexual identity] terms just feel so cold and robotic sometimes. So...you know? I like something that sounds a little warmer, I guess... I dunno, it makes me feel more part of a community of people, you know, and it’s not...I feel like it means something different to every person but at the same time kind of envelops everyone, and I dunno, I really appreciate that about the word... I feel like queer is just so all-encompassing. You know, it just has a very...sense of community to me.

These responses show that even in the face of intra-community “splintering,” among bi+ people as Inez states, bi+ people find common ground in the fact that the majority of them not only feel a degree of closeness with the term “queer,” but also share similar definitions of it, definitions that allow them to feel connected to a broader LGBTQ community. Importantly, this usage also allows them, thanks to the vague nature of the term, to avoid potential biphobia and other forms of stigma tied to the word “bisexual” within and beyond bi+ communities.

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I have shown how the bi+ people I interviewed engaged in identity work to assert positive sexual identities in the face of pervasive stigma against the bi+ community. For some, this involves asserting an expansive understanding of the word bisexual and embracing the stigma that comes along with identifying as bisexual in order to challenge others' negative views about bisexual people. Others opt to distance themselves from the label bisexual and instead use other identity terms like pansexual, queer, or fluid to construct positive sexual identities. Regardless of what language they use, the bi+ people in this sample described their sexualities in very similar ways. Thus, the findings in this chapter all point to the question of why bi+ people have such strong conflicts over language when, in practice, they are effectively describing the same forms of desire and attraction regardless of the labels they use.

In this chapter, I also highlight the two overarching types of stigma bi+ people negotiated in their identity construction. The first of these stigmas are negative constructions of bi+ people broadly. These stigmas include negative ideas about bi+ people related to the fact that they *do* things that exist beyond the realm of acceptable monosexuality. For instance, the idea that bi+ people are indecisive because they don't choose partners based on one gender, are promiscuous because if they don't choose partners based on gender, then they could (and implicitly, as the logic of these stereotypes suggest, do) have sex with everyone. Additionally, as the quotes from respondents show, many of these stereotypes stigmatize bi+ people in gendered ways where bi+ women as perceived as truly heterosexual and performing same-sex actions for men's pleasure while bi+ men are truly gay and are vectors of disease. Many respondents noted that they first encountered these stigmas when they were in school, which also illuminates the ways in which the growing positive ideas about gay and lesbian individuals, particularly among youth

(Robertson 2018), doesn't necessarily translate nearly for bi+ people. Furthermore, these conceptualizations of bi+ existence have been around for decades (Garber 1995), which suggests that although negative ideas about gay and lesbian existence may be on the decline in the post-gay era, the same can't be said for dominant cultural conceptualizations of bi+ people (see, Mathers et al. 2018a).

In addition to these broader societal stigmas, respondents also talked at length about stigmas that are particular to queer or LGBTQ communities, namely that the term "bisexual" is a uniquely problematic label for people to use when talking about their sexual identities. Each time this stigma came up in conversation, it was clear that respondents heard this from other queer people. As such, this newer stigma (Eisner 2013; Nutter-Pridgen 2015) suggests that bi+ people negotiate stigmas from society at large as well as LGBTQ-specific stigmas. However, as I reveal in the chapter that follows, many lesbian and gay people may draw on broader stigmas about bi+ people to enforce boundaries about who "counts" as LGBTQ.

Ultimately, no matter what identity labels they used, the ways in which bi+ people "accounted" (Scott and Lyman 1968) for their sexual identities was about how they positioned themselves in relation to stigma. Bisexual people sought to contest stigma through identifying as bisexual while pansexual, queer, and fluid respondents sought to distance themselves from stigma by avoiding the term bisexual and framing it as too myopic and problematic to use. Thus, no matter how bi+ people talk about their sexualities, they do so in relation to bisexual stigma. The different ways in which they police the boundaries of who is and is not a member of a given identity category is informed by their own understanding of bisexuality as well as the definitions that circulate throughout their social networks and friendship circles. All these people are

stigmatized for their experience of sexuality, they just talk about it differently based on the pathway of stigma avoidance that feels most comfortable to them.

On the other hand, the vast majority of them agree that the term “queer” allows connection to community when others assume you don’t belong in that community, a dynamic I expand on in the following chapter. Queer, to these respondents, was a broad and vague signifier that allowed them to indicate non-heterosexuality in the face of potentially contradictory information (such as a different gender partner or partners) or beliefs from other LGBTQ people that bi+ people aren’t really queer (Eisner 2013). In this way, the broad, vague, malleable connotation of queer was appealing to respondents of all sexual identities because it is perhaps the identity key to LGBTQ community when explicit bisexual or pansexual identification may be grounds for expulsion from these communities.

If all these people talk about how they *experience* sexuality in a similar way, yet label it differently, and all of them are aware of the disputes that happen within bi+ communities about the “best” language to use to refer to one’s sexuality, using queer seems like it may have the potential to unite bi+ people to recognize their common experience. But bi+ scholars have questioned the utility of queer’s ability to serve this function, particularly as it relates to shared consciousness about issues that disproportionately impact bi+ people. What does queer really do for *bi+* people, communities, and politics?

It is clear that the labels respondents use to signify positive sexual identities in the face of monosexist stigma is an important and complicated process for respondents, and the naming practices they employ have ramifications for thinking through the ways the monosexual imaginary both structures and is structured by the ways in which bi+ people select their identity labels. For example, one of the most prevalent characteristics of the monosexual imaginary is to

render bi+ existence inconceivable. As Inez points out at the opening of this chapter, it is possible that sometimes the different identity labels bi+ people use to talk about their sexual identities could lead to greater fracturing among bi+ people. Given, as I illustrate in Chapter 5, bi+ people struggle to find bi+ community, the divisions that exist between those who identify as bisexual and those who use other identity labels may make it harder for bi+ people to connect with others who share their experiences. This may, as I discuss in Chapter 6, impact the degree to which bi+ people conceptualize themselves as a unified group with shared political concerns.

Furthermore, this may be even more complicated when bi+ people forego terms like bisexual and pansexual and default to terms like queer. Though useful for signifying a theoretical connection with the broader LGBTQ community, bi+ people's acceptance into these spaces is delicate at best. Additionally, although it has been debated by scholars and activists (Gamson 1995), constructing a shared collective identity might allow bi+ people to more easily identify political issues that directly impact them, something that, so far, the term queer hasn't done for bi+ people. In fact, Marjorie Garber (1995) suggests that the broadness of queer may actually be detrimental to forming a more solidified bi+ community, and that, in its broadness, it ceases to mean anything concrete. Serano (2012) similarly points to the ways in which enveloping everyone under the label of "queer" has the potential to obfuscate the specific issues that bi+ communities face. Thus, while queer as a label may allow bi+ people to be "in the community" vaguely, without having to evoke the specific, and often stigmatized and misunderstood terms of bisexuality or pansexuality, it may do a disservice to the potential to form a bi+ shared consciousness. As I show in the next chapter, it is worth questioning to what extent other members of the LGBTQ community see bi+ people as truly possessing membership in said community in the first place. In Chapter 6, I elucidate how the complicated relationship to

community impacts how bi+ people conceptualize what a political agenda might look like for them and others like them.

To conclude, in this chapter, I highlighted the ways in which bi+ people construct their identities in relation to pervasive bi+ stigma. In so doing, I highlight how monosexism and the monosexual imaginary impact this process. All of the stigmas bi+ people encounter are rooted in monosexism (as well as patriarchy and heterosexism), however, because bi+ existence is rendered inconceivable by these stereotypes in the context of the monosexual imaginary, bi+ people have to do identity work to signify moral sexual selves. Importantly, though bi+ people work to construct positive identities, these stigmas are still levied against them to position bi+ existence as a phase, unreal, disgusting, and wrong. This happens even in a social context where there is, supposedly, greater acceptance of non-heterosexual people. However, what these identity construction processes reveal is that such acceptance of sexual minorities is only truly extended to lesbian and gay people. In this way, the monosexual imaginary remains intact, stereotypes about bi+ people are allowed to persist, and bi+ people dedicate significant attention to building positive identities instead of, as I discuss in Chapter 6, forming political alliances to pinpoint and challenge structural inequalities they experience. Thus, while the process of naming their experiences through the construction of identity is important, it is part of the reason why the monosexual imaginary and thus monosexism is allowed to persist.

## CHAPTER 5: GENERIC PROCESSES IN THE REPRODUCTION OF MONOSEXISM

During my interview with Quinn, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, we spent a significant amount of time discussing her experiences with and thoughts on biphobia. However, Quinn had a particularly strong reaction when our conversation moved from biphobia in general to instances of exclusion within the LGBTQ community. In response to one of my questions on this issue, Quinn crossed her arms and said:

I feel like biphobia from queer people is almost more disappointing because it's like a betrayal. Like, don't you get this? Any time somebody in the LGBT umbrella leaves one of the other letters behind I'm like, what the hell is wrong with you...I think it comes from this sort of zero-sum game idea of like, there's only so much support and advocacy to go around. Like, not everybody can care about this or help. And also, just biphobic ideas about bi privilege and so, if there's only so much support and advocacy and solidarity to go around, um, people who can pass as straight shouldn't have the same...should be at the back of the line for that.

Quinn's statement highlights a pattern that emerged in my interviews: although respondents could talk about both biphobia from heterosexual cisgender people and LGBTQ people, this exclusion felt particularly hurtful when, as Quinn says, it comes from "other queer people."

As discussed in the previous chapter, bi+ people diverge significantly on the terms they use to talk about their sexual identities, and that this divergence is strongly related to stigma around non-monosexuality in general, and bisexuality specifically. Additionally, many respondents, like Quinn, rely on "queer" as a general signifier of non-heterosexuality and belonging in LGBTQ community. Despite the fact that respondents are members of said community, at least in name, they detail numerous examples of the ways in which they are excluded, predominantly by lesbian and gay others, from queer or LGBTQ spaces.

In this chapter, I explore how the people I interviewed both experienced and internalized these exclusions and, as a result, preemptively removed themselves from LGBTQ spaces for fear



of encountering the “othering” and boundary maintenance they mentioned. Additionally, I highlight how many of them lack connections to other bi+ people, and when they do have some connections, do not envision a bi+ community beyond their immediate networks. Through analyzing their experiences interacting with lesbian and gay others, I illustrate how the processes of exclusion from LGBTQ spaces play out for some bi+ people and draw out some of the implications of bi+ people struggling to find a welcoming community that validates their experiences. To do this, I draw on interactionist formulations of “generic processes in the reproduction of inequality” (Schwalbe et al. 2000). In so doing, I highlight how some of the stigmas I addressed in the previous chapter serve as the scaffolding for boundary maintenance practices against bi+ people when they seek community with other LGBTQ people.

#### BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE, OTHERING, AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Sociologists have outlined ways people, intentionally or otherwise, maintain inequalities in a myriad of settings. One of the main ways that any given group or society sustains systems of inequality involves defining some people as moral and others as immoral. Moreover, inequality is further enforced in various social contexts by those who are defined as moral mitigating the access certain “less respectable” others have to social, economic, and political resources (Schwalbe et al. 2000). These processes of “othering” and “boundary maintenance” are two of the bedrock foundations (Collins 2005; Ridgeway 2011) or “generic processes of social interaction” that certain social actors use to persistently maintain power at the expense of others (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Sumerau and Cragun 2014). Importantly, the credentials to access such networks, as Schwalbe and colleagues point out (2000; see also Dunn and Creek 2015 for patterns between minority groups), are often tied to categorization schemes created through the

process of othering. As such, if a group is defined as inferior by people within a given social network, then this group will not be afforded the appropriate credentials to benefit from networks where cultural capital and resources are transmitted.

In recent years, scholars have expanded on Schwalbe and colleagues' original formulation of generic processes in the reproduction of inequality (2000) to identify a new form of boundary maintenance called "conditional acceptance," (Sumerau and Cragun 2018; Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun 2018; Sumerau and Mathers 2019). In their study of college educated Christian women's views on sexual and gender minorities, Sumerau and colleagues identify conditional acceptance as, "the process whereby people respond to increased social tolerance of minority groups by expressing acceptance of such groups in limited or partial ways" (2018: 63). Expanding on this analysis, Sumerau and Mathers (2019) explore the ways that processes of conditional acceptance emerge within LGBTQ communities, specifically as it relates to the incorporation of transgender people into those networks. Sumerau and Mathers (2019) find that transgender people, especially those who occupy other minority positions, navigate dynamics of conditional acceptance in their efforts to be a part of LGBTQ groups. Building on these studies, I explore the ways that respondents encountered monosexist othering and boundary maintenance in LGBTQ spaces.

Monosexist othering and boundary maintenance within LGBTQ spaces relies on one of the most pervasive narratives about sexuality at present: that one possesses a natural, inborn sexual nature as heterosexual, lesbian, or gay (i.e., monosexuality). Commonly referred to as the "born this way" narrative, this framing of sexuality positions lesbian and gay people helpless to change themselves (Duggan 2004; Samuels 2014), and thus deserving of conditional acceptance from heterosexual others (Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun 2018). This narrative emerged at a

particular historical moment in response to the rhetoric of the Religious Right in the 1980s (Duggan 2004), and was, at the time, a strategy used by activists to fight against claims that sexual minorities deserved harm because they were an abomination of God's true (heterosexual) plan. Continuing to use "born this way" narratives allows lesbian and gay people to illustrate that they are a sympathetic population that is just like heterosexual people except for this minor difference that they can't change (but, implicitly, could if they would) (Duggan 2004; Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun 2018). Although the "born this way" narrative emerged as a situational, strategic response to the very real injury that was being inflicted upon LGBTQ people at the time, it has morphed into a taken-for-granted aspect of LGBTQ (but mostly lesbian and gay) existence.

This shift, from political strategy to "fact" of LGBTQ life, reflects what scholars have referred to as the movement towards homonormativity (Duggan 2004). Homonormativity refers to the ways in which some LGBTQ people, predominantly cisgender lesbian and gay individuals, are considered acceptable by the broader heterosexual public so long as they adhere to existing norms of whiteness, middle-class status, and gender conformity (Duggan 2004; Sumerau et al. 2019). Importantly, homonormativity relies very heavily on the narrative that one is truly born lesbian or gay, and so they are not only helpless to change their "deviant" sexuality, but also that they are just like heterosexual people with the exception of this one component of their existence (being attracted to people of the same gender).

As such, much of the rhetoric in LGBTQ spaces rests upon the idea that to be "really queer," one is necessarily a monosexual lesbian or gay person. Because of this presumption, bi+ people pose a specific problem to the overarching homonormative narrative that dominates many LGBTQ spaces today, and much of the stigma that emerges from within LGBTQ spaces

regarding bi+ existence is rooted in narratives of bi+ people being disingenuous interlopers who betray this taken for granted assumption (Gamson 1995; Nutter-Pridgen 2015). This means bi+ people are not afforded the same ease of connecting to a LGBTQ community as lesbian and gay people and are thus denied access to many of the benefits that come along with finding acceptance among members with shared lived experiences.

In this chapter, I explore the ways bi+ respondents encountered exclusion from LGBTQ spaces. Specifically, I detail the ways that, through recounting their experiences with lesbian and gay people, bi+ people highlight processes of boundary maintenance, specifically controlling network access and conditional acceptance, where they are excluded from LGBTQ spaces and community. Although many respondents spoke of expecting LGBTQ spaces to be the one arena where they wouldn't have to worry about stigma, they quickly learned that, in fact, LGBTQ spaces are not inherently less monosexist than the broader heterosexual society. In fact, even though LGBTQ communities are not necessarily *more* monosexist than other groups, the impact felt by bi+ people are often more painful because of the expectation that they will be able to find support in LGBTQ spaces (Eisner 2013).

## “BISEXUAL PEOPLE EXIST! WHY IS THAT SO HARD?”: LESBIAN AND GAY

### OTHERING AND BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE

Respondents spoke in detail about their awareness of and general frustration with bi+ people being excluded from LGBTQ spaces, or being “othered” (Schwalbe et al. 2000), by lesbian and gay people. For example, Neko, a 21-year-old fluid nonbinary person, says:

And you know, there's always that...there has been tension between people who identify as lesbian and bi. And that really bothers me a lot, and it's a serious problem and I don't have an answer for it...Like, I had a friend who identified as bi when I was identifying as lesbian, and we got into very intellectual arguments

where we were just arguing over the definition of what it was to be lesbian versus bi versus queer and all that. Um, and she basically felt that because she was bi, if she was ever seen with someone who identified as male that she was automatically seen as a betrayer to people who were lesbian.

Similarly, Kimber, a 24-year-old queer cisgender woman, says: “Like, we’ve stripped away...the visibility of pan and bi people and created solidarity within a gay rights movement that is about being monosexual, and so like people feel like they get to be angry at you for turning against that movement by being a bi or pansexual person, which is shit.” These responses highlight the ways that bi+ people are othered by being defined as “betrayers” or “turning against” LGBTQ communities. Other respondents, like Davey, a 24-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, discuss the hypocrisy of the othering bi+ people navigate in LGBTQ communities:

Bisexual people exist! Why is that so hard? It always shocks me that gay men who have fought so much to be recognized in this world of dichotomies fall into one once they have been [accepted]...They get their ticket in and then (chuckles) jump right on board to what it was like before...gay men fought to be recognized by straight people as valid. But then fall into the idea that you can only be one or the other, that you have to be *entirely* attracted to men or *entirely* attracted to women. That there is no such thing as being attracted to both, or there’s no such thing as having changing levels of attraction over time...I mean fifty years ago that was probably hand-in-hand with men can only be attracted to women and women can only be attracted to men. So, once they got past that, why’d they stop? Like, they got on, so it didn’t matter anymore...it seems like the idea that heterosexuality is the norm and the idea that sexual attraction is exclusive, you know...match one to one, right? Those seem like those ideas go hand in hand. So, gay men fought a lot to be recognized by straight people and got rid of the first one but just fell in line with the remaining perception that you can only be attracted to one gender...Which seems like a hop skip and a jump away from you can only be attracted to the opposite gender. (emphasis original)

Agatha, a 25-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, summarizes these dynamics in a similar way:

For gay people, if you’re feeling the pressure from straight people and feeling the homophobia, who are they going to put that off on? Who are they going to find to be the marginalized beneath them? And that’s where bisexual or queer people fall into, just this idea of like, you don’t fit. It’s a hierarchy and you’re below me now...They still want to be like, “okay, I might be gay, or I might be a lesbian but

I'm still better than if I were to be confused or to be in this limbo, at least I have an identity." So, it makes their identity feel more valid because then they're able to say, "well, I may be this but at least I'm not *that*..." So, biphobia really comes from this idea of like, "if I can make them think they're a little more confused, I can feel more solid in myself."

The quotes from Davey and Agatha reveal that monosexist othering in LGBTQ communities may, in fact, be a form of "defensive othering," or the ways in which marginalized groups do things to reinforce oppression of other marginalized groups (Schwalbe et al. 2000), on the part of lesbian and gay individuals. In order to maintain what respectability they have been able to achieve, lesbian and gay people may perpetuate harmful narratives about bi+ people to protect their status as somewhat respectable and more proximal to heteronormative and mononormative expectations.

This is not the first example of LGBTQ people seeking to approximate respectable, heteronormative standards (Warner 1999). For example, Ward (2008) found a similar example of respectability in her analysis of LGBT organizations—specifically, leaders of these organizations sought to approximate standards of whiteness as much as possible, leaving LGBTQ people of color out of these organizations. Similarly, Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock (2015) found that gay Christian men engaged in respectability relating to gender when they sought to present admirable masculine and cisgender selves and, in so doing, excluded cisgender women and transgender people from their church setting. Like the people in Ward's (2008) and Sumerau and colleagues' (2015) studies, the examples bi+ interview participants provided highlight the ways in which lesbian and gay others may seek to achieve a similar form of respectability as it relates to monosexuality. While these quotes reveal the ways in which bi+ people talked generally about dynamics of othering in LGBTQ communities, two other overarching narratives about boundary maintenance were connected with this othering, which I will focus on below.

Maintaining Boundaries through Controlling Network Access

One of the main ways in which respondents talked about how lesbian and gay people enforced boundaries about who gets to be a member of LGBTQ communities involved controlling bi+ access to these communities. According to Schwalbe and colleagues (2000), “controlling network access” is a process whereby members of a group determine who is permitted to join based on a set of credentials that are seen as required for membership. In this case, lesbian and gay people engage in what I call “withholding queer credentials” as a form of controlling network access. What I mean by this is that lesbian and gay others define bi+ people as “not the right kind of queer,” generally as really straight people who benefit from heterosexual privilege and are thus undeserving of admittance into LGBTQ spaces and communities. For example, Cassidy, a 27-year-old queer cisgender woman, illustrates this dynamic clearly:

A lot of people don't necessarily believe you. Especially if you're in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, there's a lot of *(in mocking tone)* “Are you really queer?” You know, a lot of questioning. That's something specific that I think I've been struggling with recently because most of my relationships have been with men and, for like whatever reason that is, it's like dawned on me over the past year or so that I don't think my community necessarily sees me as queer.

Harriet, a 22-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, also says, “I feel like there's this idea within the gay community that if you have an opposite sex partner that you have all the privilege of being straight, so you don't need to be in the gay space.” Highlighting this pattern, Elliot, a 23-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, shares, “Last year, I went with [out with a] friend of mine who is a bi cis woman, we went to [a gay bar]...I didn't realize anything about it, but you go in there with a cis girl and they do not respond positively. We kind of felt like we...they thought we were on a straight date...We were clearly excluded from the fun being had that

night.” Quotes like these demonstrate the ways that when bi+ people are read by lesbian and gay others as heterosexual, they are treated as suspect in LGBTQ spaces.

In this way, because bi+ people do not subscribe to mononormativity (Barringer et al. 2017; Schippers 2016), they may at times *appear* to others as heterosexual (as in Elliot’s example). Since even the *potential* for heterosexuality is impossible within dominant discourses of lesbian and gay people being “born this way” (Eisner 2013; Samuels 2014), bi+ people are treated as fraudulent in their sexuality and claim to membership in LGBTQ spaces because it is possible for them to be in a relationship or relationships that are read as straight. Olivia, a 27-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, underlines this presumption of bi+ people as fraudulent: “I feel like that’s part of why bi people are afraid to say that they’re bi, to be a part of the community, because of judgments like that. Like they’re not really a part of the community, they’re not really gay, they were just straight the whole time. Like its some sort of masquerade or some sort of deceptive spy work, you know?” Matilda, a 25-year-old queer transgender woman, shares how she and her partner encountered lesbian and gay others withholding queer credentials and, in response, overcompensated to be seen as worthy of belonging in LGBTQ spaces:

So, we would like aggressively wear pins and scarves and things that were the colors of the bisexual flag, just to kind of be like “hey, we belong here, too.” You know?... [People at Pride] They would loudly talk about how they hate that straight couples come and participate in PRIDE and things like that, which like, I get it, but we were not a straight couple.

Matilda’s quote also highlights the ways in which some lesbian and gay others may view bi+ people as appropriating queer culture. Even though bi+ people are members, at least in name, of the LGBTQ community, through withholding queer credentials lesbian and gay others are able to enforce the notion that bi+ people are encroaching upon a space and culture that is not rightfully theirs.



Cole, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, shares a slightly different example of how boundary maintenance bi+ people experience is rooted in a “born this way” conceptualization of sexuality when he says, “There is a sense, generally, that if you’re a bi person going from dating one gender to another, *particularly* if you go from dating the same gender to dating a different gender, people might accuse you of going back in the closet or something when it’s just like no, I just switched partners...my reaction is mostly, ‘Ughhh.’” Cole’s quote reveals two important components of withholding queer credentials: 1) that not only is monosexuality, but also outness, seen as key to being considered a “true” member of the LGBTQ community. Given that bi+ people navigate complicated processes when coming out (McLean 2007; Scherrer et al. 2015), and are less likely to be out than lesbian and gay people, (Barringer et al. 2017), this impetus to proclaim one’s existence as a sexual minority doesn’t necessarily fit with the lived experiences of many bi+ people, even if it is a popular contemporary discourse among LGBTQ people. Furthermore, the fact that Cole’s experiences reflect others assuming he is going *back in the closet*, not necessarily that he is *heterosexual*, reveals how the process of withholding queer credentials is gendered. In fact, in my sample, very few men spoke of others assuming their heterosexuality and instead, as I will highlight in the section below, recounted experiences of others assuming they were really gay. This pattern likely emerges because of the “one act rule” I discussed in Chapter 4 (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), or the assumption that, when it comes to men’s sexuality in a patriarchal, hetero-, and cisnormative society, if men engage in any sexual contact with another man, they are more commonly assumed to be gay rather than heterosexual and experimenting with sexual fluidity (see also, Garber 1995; see Ward 2015, and Diamond 2008 for examples of this assumption in the study of sexual fluidity).

Study participants' accounts of some of their interactions with others in the LGBTQ community show one of the ways in which gay and lesbian people engage in boundary maintenance to LGBTQ spaces: by defining bi+ people, particularly women, as heterosexual and thus undeserving of the support and benefits that come along with getting access to these networks. In doing so, they withhold queer credentials necessary to be accepted fully within LGBTQ spaces. Through these interactions that bi+ respondents detailed, it is evident that, even though bi+ people comprise the majority of the LGBTQ population, they are not granted the authority to determine who should be allowed into such spaces. In this way, lesbian and gay people serve as gatekeepers to queer communities and enforce a hierarchy of acceptance based on presumptions that everyone is really monosexual. If bi+ people do not "do sexuality" (Pfeffer 2014) in a way that monosexual sexual minorities read as appropriate, they are deemed "truly heterosexual." In this way, the monosexual imaginary is perpetuated because there is no space for "truly bi+" people, even though they are often included in LGBTQ communities in name. In the next section I highlight how lesbian and gay people engage in conditional acceptance of bi+ people to continue enforcing the monosexual boundaries around the LGBTQ community.

#### *Maintaining Boundaries through Conditional Acceptance*

Interviewees' responses also indicate the ways that lesbian and gay people permit them a degree of acceptance into LGBTQ spaces based upon conditional information about their sexual histories, presumed identities, or coming out journey. For instance, Ava, a 24-year-old pansexual cisgender woman, notes the ways that a previous partner sought to verify her credentials as a queer person by inquiring about her sexual history before agreeing to date her:

I was dating this one person. I asked them out and they identify as like this hard stud and she asked me whether or not—like, if I was bi or if I just like women. And I'm like "no, I like both, I like men and women," and she was just like "oh, so have you ever had sex with a woman before?" And I'm like, "I mean, yeah, but

like...what does that matter? I didn't know I was going to be tested on my sexual experience."

In cases like Ava's, gaining acceptance from lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer others was conditional upon demonstrated sexual experience with woman. Inez, a 28-year-old fluid queer cisgender woman, identifies her frustration with this dynamic in the following manner: "Like, do I need to have sex with a woman in front of you? Is that enough, even? So, yeah...because of the messages I've gotten from some people that were pretty negative and then my own kind of fear of being rejected from people or community...so I continue to feel kind of insecure about it." Thus, experiences like this reflect the fact that one condition of acceptance into LGBTQ spaces may involve emphasizing sexual histories with people of the same gender. These responses reveal that lesbian and gay people, potentially due to their recent acceptance in a homonormative post gay social context, feel they are in a position to withhold queer credentials from bi+ people who do not appropriately demonstrate their non-heterosexualities. The other side of this dynamic is that lesbian and gay people also position themselves to selectively permit bi+ people a degree of acceptance once they have "proven" themselves worthy of membership in LGBTQ communities. In so doing, bi+ people are granted conditional acceptance to LGBTQ spaces if they can "account" (Scott and Lyman 1968) for their sexual histories through explaining their attraction or experiences with people of the same gender, even if doing so is uncomfortable.

Sebastian, a 25-year-old pansexual cisgender man, reflected on how obtaining such conditional acceptance from lesbian and gay people is challenging and potentially isolating for bi+ people:

You know, the incredible isolation that's felt in going into LGBT spaces and not being completely welcomed and celebrated...I feel like when I'm in LGBT spaces—well, initially...I felt like it was very freeing to be able to finally talk about how cute some guys were. But after a while, I felt like it would be uncomfortable for me to talk about how cute some women were, or female

identified people, etcetera. Because I feel that that's not (sighs) what would be expected of me in that community.

Sebastian's example shows that gaining acceptance in LGBTQ communities necessarily requires him to mute his attraction to women and emphasize his attraction to men. These examples show the ways that bi+ people were given some degree of acceptance in LGBTQ spaces so long as they played up or down certain parts of their attraction or lived experiences in order to be perceived as monosexual and non-heterosexual. In doing this, bi+ people are pushed to "foreclose fluidity" (Sumerau et al. 2019) in terms of their sexuality in order to be conditionally accepted in these spaces.

Sometimes respondents noted instances where they were granted conditional acceptance to LGBTQ communities because lesbian and gay others made assumptions about their sexuality before the respondents themselves could say anything. For example, Luna, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, illustrates this pattern when talking about her experience at a Pride event: "We went to some Latino Pride event and I was kind of talking to this girl at the time and one of my friends...he's like 'oh, I thought you were [gay] because you were talking to that girl.' Well, that's not the only option." Harriet provided an example of what she hears from others in queer spaces about why they grant her conditional acceptance into LGBTQ spaces:

I was looking up meetup.com...There was some LGBTQ organization that was for women. And it was like, "Oh! All straight women and bisexual women welcome *except* bisexual women in relationships with men." So, I feel that that's a consistent thing as well. Where you count—or I feel that my sexuality is more accepted in a gay community but only because I'm dating a female partner. I feel like I would be significantly less welcome in spaces if I had a male partner...I hear a lot, "You count as gay because you have a female partner," but my identity would not change if I did not.

Similarly, Rory, a 30-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, gives an example:

People who would see me with [Amelia, her wife] would just refer to us as lesbians, or refer to me as a lesbian, or make jokes about me not being interested

in men, so on and so forth. And I was like “well, no, that’s not true either.” So, it was both sides, you know. It was like, “she was just this straight girl until she met Amelia and now, she’s a lesbian.” And I’m like, “no! it’s neither of those things!”

Examples like these reveal that lesbian and gay people reproduce monosexism and continue to uphold the monosexual imaginary through coding bi+ people as “really gay” if they are in partnerships that can be read as such. Like people who “determine gender” (Westbrook and Schilt 2014) in the case of transgender people, lesbian and gay individuals “determine sexuality” when it comes to bi+ people, and use these determinations to permit bi+ people conditional acceptance in LGBTQ communities even when bi+ people point out such determinations are incorrect.

Importantly, conditional acceptance of bi+ people is often rooted in what Nicholas Guittar (2013) refers to as “the queer apologetic.” In his analysis of coming out experiences of bisexual, lesbian, and gay individuals, Guittar identifies the queer apologetic as a process whereby some lesbian and gay people initially come out as bisexual in order to reduce “disapproval of, and disappointment over, their sexuality by disclosing a public identity they feel will be more easily accepted by family and friends—or even by themselves,” (2013: 170). Although recent research has revealed that coming out as bisexual is not necessarily more acceptable, and, in fact, coming out as lesbian or gay may be more palatable to heterosexual others (Scherrer et al. 2015), the notion of the queer apologetic continues to exist as a dominant narrative about bi+ existence in queer communities. Put simply, if some lesbian and gay people initially came out as bisexual in an attempt to mitigate heterosexist stigma, the assumption is that *all* bi+ people are on a similar journey and will eventually fully accept themselves as *really* gay or lesbian.

Respondents shared multiple experiences of conditional acceptance rooted in the queer apologetic. For example, Elliot provides a succinct example of this dynamic when he says, “We talked about it before and he [a guy he was dating] kind of annoyed me because he jokingly prodded at the idea of bi men are only figuring things out as gay men.” Similarly, Cassidy says:

Hearing gay people saying that its...you know, like “for a while I identified as bisexual, and then I was like, oh, no, that was just me trying to figure out I was gay.” Like, hearing stories like that, I dunno if I can name them specifically, but mostly that. Or, like, hearing them talk about people who are bisexual like, “oh, that just means that they’re trying to figure out how to be gay.”

Cassidy illustrates that, even though she can’t recall a specific person who said this to her, conditional acceptance based on the narrative of the queer apologetic is so ubiquitous that she’s aware of its existence even without necessarily having someone say it directly to her. Davey shares an interaction he had with a friend who, he noted elsewhere in the interview, was “the first person” he “ever had a sexual encounter with”:

I haven’t talked to him in a few years but the last time I saw him he goes, “so, still telling yourself you’re bi?” (laughs). He’s one of the gay men who pretty much embodies the “I was once on that train” mentality... Like, in my experience, if you tell a gay man that you’re bisexual they say, “oh, I was bisexual once, too. We’ve all been at that train stop on the way to being gay.”

Faye, a 24-year-old bisexual, pansexual, panromantic asexual cisgender woman, gives the following example of an experience she had with a lesbian friend in college:

To have her [a lesbian friend in college] be like “that’s not what I experienced and therefore wrong,” like...I told her about being conflicted about this relationship I was thinking about, and she was like “Oh, that’s internalized homophobia, that’s what that is, I felt it. Just plow through it.” So, for a while it made me really determined, like I just have to plow through this super uncomfortable feeling I get right now because she says its internalized homophobia and I just need to eradicate that from myself.

Faye notes how she tried to fight through what her friend referred to as “internalized homophobia” because she wasn’t provided a framework to work through what may have actually

been her non-monosexual romantic feelings, and that working through said “internalized homophobia” would lead Faye to recognizing her experiences as a lesbian. Zoey, a 23-year-old pansexual queer bisexual cisgender woman, shares the following example of conditional acceptance based on the queer apologetic that has appeared both in the lives of her friend and herself:

Other bisexuals I know and other, like, queer people I know talk about this a lot, just that there’s a lot of like disrespect for it in general from gay people. Like, my best friend is bi, and he had like—he was in a relationship with a guy who like pressured him to come out as gay because he was uncomfortable with him being bisexual. And like—actually he dated two guys that did that to him. And I personally haven’t experienced anyone like that I’ve dated not being affirming of it, but there’s been people in my life that have just been like...more like sure earlier on of their sexuality just thinking that it doesn’t make sense to be bi to them.

Jane, a 29-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, shares a similar experience:

I lived in this co-op house in college and my first sort of friend in my house was this lesbian woman...and she’s like, “I’m a lesbian. I could never date a bisexual because I know they would cheat on me and maybe they would even give me a disease... And like...ugh, like those women are—” and she’s like, “I don’t think you count because I think you’re really a lesbian.” And I’m like, “Oh, alright.”

Zoey and Jane’s quotes elucidate both examples of conditional acceptance based on the queer apologetic (being pressured to come out as gay) and dominant coming out narratives that, 1) since sexuality is assumed to be inborn, one naturally knows their sexuality at an early age and 2) proudly discloses it at said early age in a grand announcement (McLean 2007). Since many bi+ people diverge from these expectations (Barringer 2017; McLean 2007; Scherrer et al. 2015), lesbian and gay others rely on narratives like the queer apologetic to force bi+ experience to monosexuality and conditionally accept bi+ people into LGBTQ communities by rewriting bi+ experiences. In so doing, they also “determine sexuality” based on their experiences as

monosexual people, like Jane's friend who asserted that Jane was different and more acceptable than bisexual people because she was "really a lesbian."

Jackson, a 21-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, summarizes the annoyance many respondents feel when they encounter the queer apologetic as their pathway to conditional acceptance to LGBTQ communities:

We exist (laughs), please respect us (laughs). Stop gaslighting people. Stop hurting people. Um, stop excluding people from communities or trying to get—trying to figure out why they're not a part of your community and maybe in the future they will be or something like that, with the phase language, like you're just in a phase. You'll eventually be gay.

Thus, the examples above exhibit the ways in which bi+ people may be granted conditional acceptance into LGBTQ communities if they can 1) provide documentation of a sexual history with people of the same gender and downplay their "heterosexual" attractions, 2) when lesbian and gay others presume they know bi+ people's sexualities, or enforce monosexual "classification schemes" (Schwalbe et al. 2000) on bi+ people despite conflicting evidence, and 3) when lesbian and gay people rewrite bi+ people's stories to fit within the narrative of the queer apologetic. In this way, lesbian and gay people grant conditional acceptance to bi+ people through determining sexuality and in so doing maintain the monosexist boundaries of the LGBTQ community. Furthermore, this form of conditional acceptance perpetuates the existence of the monosexual imaginary because the assumptions lesbian and gay people use to exclude bi+ people are rooted in the assumption that the only "real" sexual minorities are "born this way" and monosexual.

In both the case of controlling network access by assuming bi+ people are heterosexual and conditionally accepting bi+ people so long as lesbian and gay others can find ways to



re-categorize them as gay, the process of boundary maintenance to LGBTQ communities relies on what scholars have recently identified as the process of foreclosing fluidity (Sumerau et al. 2019). Foreclosing fluidity refers to the ways in which fluidity, in this case bi+ experience specifically, is removed as an acceptable mode of existence by classifying people based on “static, binary conceptions of gender and sexuality” (2019: 1). In this way, all othering and boundary maintenance lesbian and gay people do to eliminate bi+ people from LGBTQ spaces relies first and foremost on the process of foreclosing fluidity; either bi+ people are classified as heterosexual and undeserving of LGBTQ community because they do not possess the appropriate queer credentials or they are conditionally accepted into these communities based on the premise that they are “really” gay or lesbian. In both cases, bi+ existence is rendered inconceivable and thus invisible. Thus, the ways in which lesbian and gay others engage in these exclusions further reinforce the existence of a monosexual imaginary where bi+ people do not exist.

#### “STEPPING THROUGH A MINEFIELD OF INVALIDATION”:

#### JUSTIFYING EXCLUSION AND SEARCHING FOR COMMUNITY

While the sections above highlight the processes whereby lesbian and gay others exclude bi+ people from LGBTQ community, the analysis that follows shows the ways in which bi+ people internalize monosexist narratives about themselves and, as a result, remove themselves from LGBTQ spaces. In so doing bi+ people often feel a sense of isolation since, though some of them report having friendships with other people who share their experiences, they don’t necessarily coalesce into a sense of community beyond their smaller networks.

### Justifying Exclusion

While respondents shared many stories about the ways they had been excluded from LGBTQ spaces and the frustrations they felt navigating those exclusions, their answers also reflected that, on some level, they had also internalized the monosexist narratives lesbian and gay others used to reject them. Many bi+ people preemptively removed themselves from LGBTQ spaces in an effort to avoid “intruding” on communities that they didn’t feel were rightfully their spaces. This generally meant avoiding locations that they identified as “LGBTQ” or “queer,” not claiming certain identity terms (or sharing why it took them so long to claim them) and discussing the guilt they felt for desiring recognition in LGBTQ communities. In so doing, they provided numerous accounts, specifically justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968), for why monosexist exclusions were reasonable. According to Scott and Lyman (1968), accounts are “statements people make to explain untoward behavior and bridge the gap between actions and expectations” (46). Justifications refer to a specific type of account where people frame behavior that might seem strange or negative as reasonable and good. As such, the following section focuses on the ways bi+ people internalized and implicitly supported their own exclusion, and how they explained such behavior as sensible, even moral. For example, Davey provides an example about why not going to Pride would be a reasonable choice for him to make since he would likely be read as heterosexual in such a space:

(inhales and sucks teeth) If I were to go to Pride as a bisexual person, I would want to go with my partner [a woman], and we’d probably be welcomed, but no one would know that I was there as a bisexual person...People would assume that I was a well-intended heterosexual person, which misses the point of me being there. Um, so I dunno. But would bisexual people be—I dunno how you’d be able to tell who they were. So, what’s the point of going other than to be part of the mass?... There is a B in [LGBT], but I think there will be an assumption about who everyone is. You’re either the L, the G, or the T. ‘Cause people don’t think to think of bisexual people.

Davey justifies not going to pride because if he were to go in the way that he would want to, with his partner, he would be misread as a heterosexual person, and thus not a member of the community, which “misses the point” of him going to an LGBTQ event in the first place.

The belief that bi+ people are really heterosexual informed many of the justifications respondents used for avoiding LGBTQ community spaces. One of the main ways bi+ people justified their exclusion was through explaining that because they could theoretically possess heterosexual privilege, they didn’t want to “take up space” that “didn’t belong to them,” Inez provides an example:

Um, in the LGBTQ community, I mean B is one of the letters. But I don’t think because of my own insecurities and because of how I think I present, and because I have a male partner, I think it’s difficult to fight for visibility with that, and I also don’t want to take up space either when I have so much privilege, too...I definitely like...have absorbed messages of if you don’t have a girlfriend then you really can’t say that you’re bi. Or, if you haven’t had sex with a woman you can’t say that you’re bi...You don’t fit the part. And I think that I’ve really, as much as I try to fight against those messages, I’ve definitely internalized them.

Similarly, Harriet shares a revealing example of this dynamic when she explains how she was searching for resources when she started to discover her sexual identity but avoided LGBTQ spaces largely because of the monosexist othering and boundary maintenance outlined above:

I was just walking home, and I just started crying and I was like “I think that I’m gay”...And then I talked with somebody from our LGBTQ center from our college, and that was helpful. But I had a lot of reservations because I didn’t...I really didn’t want to like use anyone to figure out my sexual orientation. I didn’t want to like...sleep with a woman then be like “welp, great now I’ve figured out this is something that I don’t want to do” and so, it was really important to me both to not take up space that didn’t really belong to me and also really not to like, hurt anyone in my sexual exploration...the [LGBTQ group representative] was like “OH! You should start going to like LGBTQ events!” And, I’m sure that I could have, but I knew that people stereotyped people who identify as bisexual a lot as being either straight people who are like gay people who are figuring it out. So, I didn’t wanna go into a space when I wasn’t really sure what my identity was. And I also didn’t want to go into a space that was intended for LGBTQ folks if I was straight...and so just really trying to be respectful of the fact that people deserve space. And, I didn’t know if I belonged to them.

Harriet's quote touches on a number of the ways in which lesbian and gay people engage in boundary maintenance around LGBTQ communities. Notably, her reference to not wanting to "use" anyone to figure out her sexuality and her awareness of the stereotypes of bi people "really" being straight highlight the process of withholding queer credentials to control access to LGBTQ networks. Furthermore, she discusses how the queer apologetic factored into her avoidance, and justification of said avoidance, of LGBTQ communities: if she hadn't figured out her sexual identity as lesbian or gay, then she should not "take up space that really didn't belong" to her. It is also notable that Harriet avoided LGBTQ spaces because she internalized these narratives *before* she identified as or came out as bisexual. This suggests messages about the lack of acceptance for bi+ people in LGBTQ communities are so widespread that, at least in some cases, bi+ people are aware of them before they ever interact with LGBTQ others. Kimber shares a similar example and, in so doing, explains that she feels the need to apologize for seeking support and validation in LGBTQ communities and that she is "bad" at being queer because she hasn't demonstrated the necessary qualifications that would theoretically warrant full acceptance into LGBTQ spaces:

There are a lot of times when I feel apologetic and like I don't belong to the queer or polyamorous community...I feel like if someone called me out, I'd be like, "you're right. I'm bad at this and maybe I don't belong here" kind of thing... I feel like having had not that many queer relationships and also having come out at 23, I just feel like...um, I don't...I dunno, I haven't earned my stars or something like that. I just feel like I've noticed that I've been gatekept before and sometimes I'm like "that's fair, who the fuck am I? I don't have a lot of experience in this realm and I'm new, and maybe I don't belong here..." I always feel like I'm stepping through a minefield of invalidation. Like I'm always anticipating it whether it's there or not. I'm always feeling apologetic, feeling like I have to justify myself...I almost feel like I talk too much about my identity because I have to assert it to make sure people don't forget, which they're not going to do. But I internalize a lot of like need for validation of my sexuality.

Kimber justifies the exclusion she feels as “fair” because she “has not had that many queer relationships,” came out later in young adulthood, and thus, hasn’t “earned [her] stars” to claim membership in the LGBTQ community. In this way, like other study participants, Kimber tacitly acknowledges that she has internalized the narrative that lesbian and gay people are in a position to withhold queer credentials from her and other bi+ people. Similar to Kimber, Luna shares that she felt that she wasn’t “queer enough” because she didn’t feel that her attraction to women was significant enough and her coming out trajectory didn’t match dominant narratives associated with youth:

I guess I thought that I was like not allowed to be queer because I date guys, I’m attracted to guys. Like I wasn’t queer enough to be justifiably a part of that...And then a part of it was that I was already older. I wasn’t in high school or an adolescent. That I realized this later in life. Later compared to everyone else that I knew. I felt that they already knew forever, and I felt like mine was smaller tendencies that I shoved under the rug and never really thought of anything because I just assumed I’m straight. I just assumed that because I didn’t really have a frame of reference. So, I think that that was a big part of it. That I was already in my twenties and I was in college, and I didn’t follow that specific trajectory that was more common.

Zoey provides another example of this dynamic. In so doing, she explains that since she didn’t follow dominant coming out narratives, it was acceptable for lesbian and gay people to both exclude her from LGBTQ spaces and dictate how she should feel about her sexuality:

So, other people, especially [queer] people we [bi+ people] are in relationships with, like on top that, telling us we’re wrong, it makes it really confusing for us to figure it out...Like...it’s just a hard thing to figure out. And other people telling you—other people that you *think* would know, I guess. Like, if it was a straight person saying those things, it would be like “alright, you don’t have a clue what it’s like to be queer at all, so whatever.” But when it’s other queer people saying things like that like, maybe I don’t know how I’m really feeling...I think because it took me so long to come out and figure it out that I still like kind of feel unwelcome in the community in general. And so, I feel like I’m in someone else’s space still. And so, it’s like the people who have been in the space for longer, I think, have a right to tell me how to feel about things.

Drawing on the “born this way” logic, Elliot justifies his exclusion from LGBTQ spaces by noting that he feels it was “perfectly fine” because lesbian and gay people don’t have a choice in their sexualities, and presumably bi+ people do:

I mean, in reality, no one’s ever been like, “oh, you’re bi, you’re not allowed here.” But...at the same time I don’t feel as welcome in particular gay spaces. Because...um...partially because of being bi I feel like...I feel like having a sense of choice or whatever, feels like I often am separated in a way from people who are constantly in the gay community. I feel like they’re insiders and cannot have another choice but to be part of this community, whereas I can often dip in and dip out and um...be in other spaces...I’m not particularly defensive of the idea...that they should be allowed to, you know, exclude me or whatever. I guess I just had accepted it as like...a perfectly fine exclusion. Or like, rather, one that I just didn’t have a right to complain about.

Tegan, a 27-year-old pansexual queer cisgender woman, shares a similar justification about people who “cannot change” and how since she, hypothetically, could, her exclusion is not only understandable, but she feels guilty about desiring to be recognized by others in the LGBTQ community:

It’s more me making myself feel that way, just because I operate in a lot of spaces where people are very like...visually queer. like, you would look at my girlfriend and be like, “yeah, she’s totally gay.” Um, and I just...I feel like I can’t get recognized by my community in that same sort of way...And it’s kind of seeing all this stuff happen around me that makes me think about my own situation and feel kind of guilty...about being annoyed that I’m invisible I guess. Because I know a lot of people who they cannot change it and sometimes they might wish they were invisible and there’s nothing they can fucking do about it. So, it’s a weird feeling and place to be...Feeling guilty because I’m very lucky and not just appreciating it.

Tegan justifies her exclusion from LGBTQ spaces by saying she’s “very lucky and just not appreciating it” despite the fact that she lacks what many refer to as the marker of heterosexual privilege for bi+ people: a heterosexual-appearing relationship. Penelope, a 28-year-old queer panromantic demisexual cisgender woman, notes that she felt she was “appropriating” the term queer because of her lack of ability to explore her sexuality and thus didn’t have the experiences

necessary to truly claim queerness: “I was talking to Kai [a friend] that I felt like an imposter using the title of queer when I’m in a hetero relationship, and I’ve never had the opportunity to fully explore my queerness, I guess, outside of that...I just felt like that was appropriating that word almost.” Tabitha, a 30-year-old pansexual queer cisgender woman, shares this:

I just felt like I didn't belong, that my identity fit within the LGBTQ. Like I didn't have enough experience, like I didn't have an equal number of male and female partners. Or, I just I didn't feel like I was actually part of that community. Whether that was self-imposed or whether like I had gotten enough subtle or overt back lash [to] being pansexual or bisexual...I don't know if it's from subtle backlash or lesbian women or if it was just internalized. Like, I am not good enough to be in these spaces, I haven't proved myself, I am not like totally queer you know whatever it was...but yeah, I definitely for a long time felt like I didn't belong.

These responses reflect the ways that 1) bi+ people avoid LGBTQ spaces for fear of invading a space that they feel doesn't rightfully belong to them, and 2) the justifications they use to explain why it's okay for lesbian and gay people to exclude them from these spaces. Importantly the reasoning behind avoiding LGBTQ spaces, and the justifications bi+ people provide rely on the same scripts as the othering and boundary maintenance that lesbian and gay people do: bi+ people are really heterosexual and are thus not queer enough, do not possess the appropriate credentials to truly claim queerness, and are actually just on their way to discovering that they're gay and thus shouldn't come into LGBTQ spaces until they've figured things out. Bi+ respondents also drew on broader narratives about coming out and being “born this way,” and how their experiences do not fit contemporary monosexual expectations about sexuality, in order to justify lesbian and gay people excluding them. In these ways, the bi+ people I interviewed respond to monosexism in LGBTQ communities by avoiding them. Although such avoidance is understandable, it is also part of the way that the monosexual imaginary is allowed to persist. If bi+ people don't take up space that is rightfully theirs, then it becomes easier for

lesbian and gay people to suggest they don't really belong in LGBTQ spaces (even if bi+ people outnumber lesbian and gay people combined, [Gates 2011]). In this way, bi+ experience continues to be rendered invisible, and lesbian and gay experience is placed at the center of what true queerness supposedly looks like.

The stories respondents shared with me make it clear that the ways lesbian and gay people reproduce monosexism in LGBTQ communities has a strong impact on them. This influence is particularly troubling when considering the fact that many bi+ people are not able to easily access another broader community of bi+ people. As Whitney, a 26-year-old bisexual pansexual cisgender woman, notes:

It's a tough place to be, feeling like I'm part of the community but like not really part of the community, too. The queer community is supposed to be a safe place for people who don't—their sexuality doesn't align with what the normalized heterosexual experience is. But when your experience and desires don't match what that community values...where are you left to turn?

Implicitly, Whitney's quote exposes the foundation for excluding bi+ people: that "what the [queer] community values" is *not* support and validation for non-heterosexual people who are shunned in so many other realms of society, but rather that the "right" way to be queer is to be monosexual. In the next section, I explore the question of where bi+ people are left to go when they are excluded from LGBTQ spaces and illustrate the difficulties they navigate in forming community with other bi+ people.

### *Bi+ Community*

Most respondents spoke of wanting to be able to find community with other people who share their experiences as bi+ people, but when I asked them what their bi+ communities looked like, they provided varied answers. Some of them spoke about not really having a bi+ community in their lives. For instance, Addison, a 25-year-old bisexual pansexual queer



cisgender woman, says, “I guess right now there’s not a lot. I don’t really have [a bi+ community]. I’m part of a support group [for bisexual people], but I don’t really connect with it. So...I don’t think I really have one right now.” And Davey says, “I don’t have many friends in Chicago really. So, I guess that’s step one, make friends...I have yet to meet another bisexual man in Chicago that I know of. Um, I find that difficult.” Jackson, though noting that he is friends with other bisexual people, says the following about finding bisexual community:

I don’t feel like there’s some community out there—like there’s some bisexual community out there that I haven’t discovered...I don’t think, for myself and from my experiences, I don’t think there’s like a bisexual space necessarily. There may be chat rooms online or threads or Facebook groups, but...I don’t really have that much of a social media presence. So, I don’t really connect into them that often. But I don’t feel like there’s a geographical place where you can go and it’s like “bi-town” or something (laughs). As opposed to something like Andersonville and Boystown... places where people who identify as lesbian can go and feel safe and have a kind of bar setting. I don’t know of any place that’s like that for bi folks... [If a bi+ community existed] it will help people understand like...it will go beyond the gaslighting of you’re not—what you experience in yourself is wrong. People can relate to each other and people can realize “no, what I’m feeling the way that I desire people is perfectly fine. And it’s true. And I don’t have to fix it in a way that’s either like ignore desire for one group or just choose one group and say this is it.” That’s another option people have.

Penelope shares that she doesn’t have a bi+ community even though she wants one, and that when she tried to find a bi+ community and asked one of her partners (Lee) to join her for a local meeting of a bisexual group, her partner refused:

[My community] doesn’t [exist], which is why I was looking forward to the Bi Group Meeting and then my anxiety was so bad that day...I didn’t want to go on my own, like [a friend from school] did end up going, but Lee refused... Lee’s like “well, why don’t you just come hang out with us?” “Because I want to know these people.” “Well, I’m gay, and I don’t need that.” “Good for you. I want this, and it would be nice if you came with me.” Wasn’t interested. So...I dunno, I think for Lee, I think that the Bi Group Meeting came across as kind of a political thing, which, turns out, it kind of is... I’m still navigating what it, for me, means to be queer and building my community. And I would love to know other people who are in hetero relationships that are open or are exploring the idea of being open or something, so I don’t feel so alone. It’s scary...I feel like I need to have a

queer community of people, and I think that getting over my anxiety to find that and like finding that in general is just tough.

Agatha noted a similar dynamic where, even though she knows other bisexual people, she doesn't necessarily feel there is a larger community for her to tap into:

I mean, I know other bisexual people, but we don't have a community...there are gay communities at my school, but they feel really weird. [If I had bisexual community] I would probably guess that...I would just have a deeper connection with other queer people. And, in turn, it would probably allow for me to feel a deeper connection with myself. And I would probably feel a little bit more validated in some ways, too...it would make me feel more validated and that I have other people who've had my experience as well.

Roxanne, a 28-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, shares Agatha's desire for validation and recognition from other bi+ people and highlights how a lack of community negatively influences the way she relates to her sexuality:

It's a problem because it's hard, for the people who are bi and trying to sort of navigate their own relationships, they're not seeing those other bi people, they're seeing the gay people and they're seeing the straight people. They're not connecting with people they can identify with... I think it's um...it's vital to feel like you're part of a community that accepts you and understands you and is maybe going through the same things as you. I think that's the key part to being happy, is having those connections... sometimes I have these moments where I forget that I like women and, in those moments, when I realize again, "Oh, no, I like both." I feel like, yeah, it's just all...it's all because that's how society is like...you know? There's no—I don't have an outlet to express that part of myself. The bisexual part of myself. So...yeah. It's like, stuffed away and undefined.

Harriet shares her desire to have more positive bi+ representation in her immediate networks so that she could envision what a happy life as a bi+ adult could look like:

I wish that I had more personal role models that were bisexual people. Because I think that I know a lot of gay people that are middle aged but I really would like to know somebody who's bisexual and so like see what it looks like to be a bisexual woman and get married to a guy and have kids, or get married to a woman and have kids or not do either of those things. And I just feel like I have no representation of what my life could look like and all my role models that are adults are pretty much straight and I don't really like that...I don't really have that much [bi+ community].

Responses like these highlight the ways that bi+ people sometimes feel disconnected from others who share their experiences, communities where bi+ issues are centralized, and places where they can feel comfortable talking openly and receiving validation about their existence.

However, other bi+ respondents noted that they did have some small networks of friends that they connected to. For example, Inez said: “I’ve felt like I have a queer community in my [graduate] program when there were five bisexual women, and we did a project on bisexual women and that was amazing. And I was telling them all these fears and they’re like ‘oh my god like I never tell gay women that I’m bi ‘cause I’m afraid of what they’ll say.’” This example from Inez illustrates the importance of having community: validation of one’s experiences. Inez also reveals the implications for bi+ people being excluded from LGBTQ communities, namely that bi+ people may hold back elements of themselves and internalize negative narratives about being bi+, which can lead to negative mental health outcomes (Bostwick 2012). While reflecting on her youth, before she found a supportive community, Inez notes that:

I felt so alone in it. And I didn’t have any other friends who identified as bisexual or queer or anything. Or, well, not openly I guess because now people are in relationships with women now. But it was important to me then cause I felt like I was the only one dealing with this and it felt like I knew how I felt about other people but I kept having to rationalize it so at that time a community would have been amazing because it wouldn’t have been so isolating.

Jane, like Inez, found a small group of friends who also identify as bisexual:

A significant number of my close friends are bisexual. And I think specifically my best friend from high school, he lives down the street from me now and we both lived in [home state]. Which is really cool, that’s kind of our tiny community. Him, his girlfriend who is also bisexual, and then me and my wife... For me it’s like that. It’s those small groups of friends, I’m not connected with anything, like big gatherings or anything.

Like, Inez, Jane notes that having a small supportive network is more of what her bisexual community looks like. Jane notes that she was happy with her bisexual friend connections now,

but when I asked her what it would have meant for her to have a supportive community when she was younger, she said, “I probably would have thought about suicide a lot less. I probably, I think I would have—I don’t know it’s really hard to imagine what that would have been like.”

Like Inez and Jane, Summer, a 28-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, notes that her bisexual community is comprised mostly of a few friends but also goes on to reflect on what it would have meant to her to have a bisexual community in her youth:

You know, I don’t know that I have a specifically bisexual community. I have more friends who identify one way or the other, like straight or gay, and the only people that I really know of who are bisexual is myself, my girlfriend, and then I have two other friends, both women, identify as bisexual, but it’s really just the four or five of us that I know. Everybody else identifies as straight or gay... It would be nice to have other friends who have had the same experience. But I don’t think it would be as impactful to my life now as it would have been when I was younger... [if I had that in youth] I would have known it was okay earlier. And I think that maybe I would have dated more if I had known that it was a thing that happened, it wasn’t a myth. People were happy and it was an option, like a real thing. Um...I think knowing that as a young adult would have been more impactful and I would have come out sooner or I would have had a little less stress about my sexuality.

Like the respondents mentioned above, Vivienne, a 28-year-old pansexual queer cisgender woman, mentions a small network (of one) that she leans on for support but highlights how her very close friend validates her: “Marlena’s my first really close queer friend, not straight friend...who, you know, supports me and offers opportunities for us to go out and be queer. Um, it’s just, it’s a really—I think powerful connection. I feel challenged by her, in the sense that I want to be a better person and like find who I am.” Elliot similarly mentions that he has a close friend who supports him: “I have a friend at work who has been really important because she has kind of been bi for a long time and is more comfortable in it, and her politics are similar to mine, so she has been very important for kind of working through it.” These examples reveal that some bi+ people experience challenges in finding community when they want it, while others are able

to find a few close friends to connect to who can share in their experiences. For respondents who were able to connect with other bi+ people, they were often in small groups, not necessarily connected to any broader bi+ community.

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I demonstrated the ways that lesbian and gay people exclude bi+ people from LGBTQ spaces, and how bi+ people respond to such exclusion. While they express frustration, they also ultimately draw on similar logics to the ones lesbian and gay people use to exclude them to remove themselves from LGBTQ communities. When they do this, they are often left in a situation where they do not find support among other bi+ people, or when they do, they are smaller groups that are not necessarily connected to any broader sense of bi+ community.

Importantly, this is not the first example of the ways in which LGBTQ communities are exclusionary. For example, scholars have noted that often LGBTQ spaces are dominated by whiteness and exclude queer people of color from getting the same community support as white people (Ferguson 2005; Ward 2008). Furthermore, these patterns of racist exclusion in LGBTQ spaces also leave queer people of color out of major conversations of LGBTQ politics. A similar pattern of exclusion occurs with transgender people, particularly transgender women of color (Sumerau and Mathers 2019). Although my sample is mostly white and cisgender<sup>6</sup>, and, thus, I cannot analyze the dynamics of racist and cissexist exclusion in LGBTQ communities more in depth or explore how these dynamics overlap with monosexist exclusion interviewees experienced, it is important to point out that the patterns of exclusion I illuminate here show that LGBTQ communities are not necessarily the beacons of support they are believed by many to be.

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<sup>6</sup> See Table V in the Methodological Appendix for full details on sample demographics.

Through discussing the ways in which respondents were excluded from LGBTQ spaces, the findings in this chapter illustrate how pervasive patterns of monosexism are in LGBTQ spaces. At a time where many LGBTQ people (particularly cisgender lesbian and gay people who fit homonormative expectations of whiteness and middle class status) are hailing recent victories such as same sex marriage and embracing the supposedly “post gay” era we are now in, bi+ people are perhaps facing the same, if not more, exclusion than in previous generations. Although bi+ people have always been central to LGBTQ activism and community support (Eisner 2013), the fact that bi+ existence presents a potential threat to the acceptability of the “born this way” homonormative narrative means that lesbian and gay people may have increased incentives to enforce the boundaries around LGBTQ spaces and who “counts” as a true sexual minority.

Bi+ people’s desire to be welcomed into LGBTQ community spaces is understandable. It is under this supposed umbrella of shared experience that they expected to find support and validation as they navigated the experiences of recognizing their sexuality and (for some) coming out. It is because of this expectation of support that they would get in LGBTQ spaces that respondents said exclusion from lesbian and gay people felt so hurtful. Like Davey said earlier in this chapter, “They [gay people] get their ticket in and then (chuckles) jump right on board to what it was like before.” In so doing, Davey highlights the undercurrent of much of this exclusion: that homonormativity, while certainly a project of whiteness, cisgender existence, and capitalism, is also firmly rooted in monosexism. It thus relies on keeping bi+ people out of LGBTQ spaces where they could potentially disrupt these homonormative patterns.

Homonormativity, and the tentative acceptance of certain “respectable” lesbian and gay people can only persist so long as they can prove their similarity to white, middle class,

heterosexual, people. The unspoken bridge of acceptance that allows gay and lesbian people to receive a degree of support from heterosexual people is their shared investment in monosexuality (Yoshino 2000). Bi+ people, and their ability to express a broader range of desire than monosexuality, threaten this respectability some lesbian and gay people have achieved. As such, lesbian and gay people do the work of perpetuating the monosexual imaginary and pushing bi+ people to the margins of who can be truly seen as LGBTQ in an effort to preserve the relative advantages they've attained.

It is because of these recent achievements that lesbian and gay people feel even more empowered to solidify these boundaries around LGBTQ spaces. Though these patterns of exclusion are not completely new (Gamson 1995), the fact that they are still continuing, largely unchecked, reveals that lesbian and gay people at least feel that they are in a relative position of power to enforce said boundaries and determine the credentials one needs to truly claim queerness. In this way, the ways in which lesbian and gay people engage in monosexist exclusion reinforces hierarchies among LGBTQ people. Such hierarchies can be understood in relation to Rubin's "charmed circle" (1992) where monosexuality is seen as a type of "good, normal, natural, blessed" sexuality and bi+ existence is pushed to the outer limits and framed as a "bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned" form of sexuality (Rubin 1992: 13).

Also, it is important to recognize that many of the strategies bi+ respondents noted about the processes of exclusion they encountered rely on the stereotypes and stigmas I highlighted in Chapter 4. As such, the ways in which bi+ people come to select their identity terms may reflect a strategy bi+ people use to gain acceptance in LGBTQ communities. As I highlighted in the previous chapter, bi+ people often stated they used the identity label "queer," on its own or in conjunction with other terms, to describe their sexuality in an effort to signify their position in a

community of non-heterosexual people. Doing so, as I suggested, may shield them from some of the stigma that is specifically attached to identity labels such as bisexual. However, as I noted above, regardless of the identity labels they use, bi+ people still face pervasive exclusion from LGBTQ spaces. Even if they did not speak of experiencing this exclusion firsthand, they, to borrow from Kimber, were constantly navigating “a minefield of invalidation” when it came to interactions with lesbian and gay others. The experiences I highlight here raise questions about the utility of using an identity label like “queer” to signify membership in a community from which bi+ people are excluded, both by others and themselves. It may be because doing so allows them a degree of conditional acceptance, even if it requires muting parts of their identity and experiences.

In addition, it is clear that in the face of exclusion from LGBTQ spaces, bi+ people face difficulties finding community among other bi+ people. Even when they connect to smaller groups of friends, they didn’t significantly connect those networks to any broader bi+ groups, organizations, or political causes, things that *are* often done in LGBTQ community spaces. Instead, they understood these connections as important because it helped them feel less alone and more validated in their individual existence. These things are important considering the high rates of mental health issues bi+ people experience (Movement Advancement Project 2014). Were bi+ people able to more able to plug into LGBTQ communities and networks, some of these negative mental health outcomes could potentially diminish. In fact, having connection to other bi+ people allows them to recognize their existence as valid and is a mediating factor in lessening negative mental health outcomes (Kertzner et al. 2009).

However, given 1) the exclusion bi+ people navigate in LGBTQ spaces, 2) the ways in which they remove themselves from said spaces because of patterns of exclusion, and 3) no



broader sense of community to other bi+ people *beyond* their close friendships, bi+ community at present seems to look like tiny islands with no connection to broader concerns about or notions of structural monosexist inequality. This means that bi+ people, though they may receive support on an individual level, do not necessarily have spaces where they can convene and come up with shared political concerns. Additionally, even if bi+ respondents did note that they were plugged into a broader bi+ community that centered on support and activism, bi+ groups receive significantly less funding than lesbian and gay groups (San Francisco Human Rights Commission 2011). Given that bi+ people are the largest sexual minority group in the U.S. (Gates 2011), it is striking that they are so pervasively excluded from LGBTQ community spaces. It is because of this exclusion that bi+ political issues or concerns about structural inequality are hardly ever centered in conversations about LGBTQ politics. In the next chapter, I interrogate how this lack of broader community connection may inform the ways that bi+ people think about major political issues they face.

## CHAPTER 6: FRAMING BI+ POLITICAL ISSUES

When I asked Faye, a 24-year-old bisexual pansexual panromantic asexual cisgender woman, what she would name as the biggest political issue for bi+ people today—something on the same level as same-sex marriage or bathroom bills—she was taken aback. She raised her eyebrows and sat back in her chair then said, “Woah. Such a good question,” before taking a brief pause. After the pause, she continued:

I think...it's like the lack of an issue of that magnitude, if that makes sense. I think there's a conspicuous lack of something that has that kind of visibility outside people who explicitly experience that identity...I think the visibility is the first thing that comes to mind, I think being able to see yourself reflected and hear stories like yours reflected is probably the biggest thing I can put my finger on and the biggest thing I feel like I'm hearing from those Tumblr circles. But yeah, I don't know. I'm trying to think of a specific policy thing.

Faye's response speaks to a common dynamic that emerged in my interviews: the lack of a coherent framework, beyond visibility, for what the future of bi+ activism should look like to people who were not necessarily embedded in bisexual activist organizations.

As I mentioned in the previous chapters, many of the people I interviewed were able to talk extensively about the identity divisions among bi+ people (Chapter 4) and the ways in which bi+ people are excluded from LGBTQ communities (Chapter 5). Yet, when I asked them to think through pathways for social change that would directly impact them and other bi+ people, they struggled to directly answer these questions. When they did answer, increasing visibility was often the main focus they mentioned. Although these conversations were enlightening and correspond with what many bi activists name as a central issue for bi+ people (Nutter-Pridgen 2015), I also sought to understand what *beyond* visibility respondents saw as ways to lessen the inequalities bi+ people experience. Ultimately, their responses reveal a conflict many bi+ people, organizations, activists, and scholars contend with today: connection to the mainstream,

homonormative LGBT movement (Eisner 2013; Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016) and imagining a more coalitional (Cohen 1997) approach to lessening inequalities bi+ and others experience (Eisner 2013; Holthaus 2015). In this chapter, I discuss the various ways respondents framed what the most pressing issues for bi+ people are and, at times, how we should approach lessening these inequalities.

As I've discussed throughout this dissertation, we are currently in an era that some scholars have dubbed "the post gay era" (Ghaziani 2011). Such an era is characterized by increased acceptance and visibility of LGBTQ people and a broader recognition of political issues that impact LGBTQ populations. As such, we are currently in an era where, for the people I interviewed, LGBTQ politics have been a central component of U.S. politics more broadly (Puar 2007) and, at least in theory, (some) LGBTQ people are garnering more societal acceptance than in decades past.

Despite the centrality of LGBTQ politics over the course of respondents' lives, these efforts have been limited. For example, much of the mainstream LGBTQ movement, until recently (and even still), did not meaningfully incorporate issues impacting transgender people (Eisner 2013; Sumerau and Mathers 2019), even though much of what we recognize as the modern LGBTQ movement emerged from the efforts of transgender women (Stryker 2017). Transgender people, like bi+ people, have often been left behind by cisgender lesbian and gay people in the wake of homonormativity's stronghold on dominant discourses on LGBTQ issues (Stryker 2017). Despite this exclusion, transgender politics have garnered greater attention in recent years (Mathers 2017; Spade 2011; Sumerau and Mathers 2019) and issues such as bathroom access, changes to birth certificates, and inclusion in educational settings for transgender people have become a more centralized focus of LGBTQ politics (Davis 2017).

Thus, despite the myriad of ways that transgender people were, and continue to be, marginalized within LGBTQ spaces, issues that directly impact transgender people are becoming more widely recognized in contemporary LGBTQ politics. While these shifts might signal a move towards “transnormativity” (Ruin 2016; Sumerau et al. 2019), or a type of trans politics that also focuses on “born this way” narratives of trans existence and focuses on medical transition, the attention to trans issues at least reflects that inequalities beyond marriage are starting to become more centralized in LGBTQ political discourse. This shift beyond the central focus of homonormative efforts on marriage, to issues that impact people who were historically excluded from the benefits of homonormative acceptance (Stryker 2017; Sumerau and Mathers 2019) may reflect a broader shift towards an LGBTQ politics that makes more space for those that didn’t benefit from homonormativity.

Based on this social context, I sought to understand how bi+ people, another group that has historically been excluded from LGBTQ spaces and politics, conceptualized issues that would impact them directly. This is an especially important topic because there *are* issues that disproportionately impact bi+ people, particularly related to health (Gorman et al. 2015) and economic inequalities (Badgett et al. 2013), yet these issues still have yet to garner as much attention as same-sex marriage, or even bathroom bills levied against transgender people. Through asking these questions, I sought to grasp how bi+ people’s experiences navigating stigma and facing exclusion from LGBTQ others may have shaped the ways they frame major bi+ social issues.

If we are in an era where LGBTQ politics are garnering more and more attention, even groups that have been left out of homonormative politics such as trans people, then potentially bi+ people may be starting to think more about *their* present and future political battlegrounds.

Like for transgender people, there *are* structural inequalities that specifically harm bi+ people that are different than issues impacting lesbian and gay people. These dynamics lead to the central question of this chapter: how do bi+ people construct the most significant political issues to them and what do these constructions tell us about the persistence of monosexism and the monosexual imaginary? This chapter continues my analysis to focus on the ways that the stigmas and exclusions I discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively might inform the ways that bi+ people frame their major political concerns.

### MAINSTREAM LGBTQ ACTIVISM, FRAMING, AND BI+ POLITICS

Scholars have noted that recent LGBTQ activism in the U.S. is characterized by homonormativity, or the desire for predominantly white, cisgender, monogamous, middle- and upper-class lesbian and gay people, to be assimilated to and accepted within dominant heterosexual society (Duggan 2004; Ward 2008). The emphases of these efforts often rely on issues that allow LGBTQ people to participate seamlessly in heteronormative institutions such as monogamous marriage and the military (Eisner 2013; Ghaziani et al. 2016). The move toward a homonormative approach to LGBTQ politics has been so pervasive that it dictates much of the cultural narratives in LGBTQ spaces (Duggan 2004; Mathers, Sumerau, and Ueno 2018b; Ward 2008). Although gains in same sex marriage and admittance to the military have benefitted a small number of LGBTQ people, particularly those who are middle class and can afford to get married or cisgender lesbian and gay people who have sought to join the armed forces, this homonormative approach to LGBTQ politics does not necessarily benefit bi+ (or transgender) people (Kampler and Connell 2018; Mathers et al. 2018a).

In fact, many of the disparities in health, economics, and intimate partner violence have persisted alongside the homonormative push for “marriage equality” (Badgett et al. 2013; Gorman et al. 2015; Mize 2016; Walters et al. 2013). These issues have barely, if at all, crept into the broader consciousness of mainstream LGBT activism. Although these conversations sometimes emerge among bi+ activist circles (Eisner 2013), many beyond these networks are unaware that there even *are* specific issues that disproportionately impact bi+ people, such as poverty (Badgett et al. 2013), and worse health outcomes than lesbian and gay people (Gorman et al. 2015), and difficulty navigating mental health (Bostwick 2012). Additionally, bi+ people tend to earn less than monosexual others (Mize 2016).

Although some bi+ organizations dedicate time and attention to these issues, much current (and previous) bi+ activism focuses on efforts to increase visibility for bisexual people (Eisner 2013; Holthaus 2015; Nutter-Pridgen 2015). While sociologists have largely neglected bi+ specific activism and social movements, one of the only studies on contemporary bi+ activism documents this trend. In her analysis of contemporary bi+ activism, Kathryn Nutter-Pridgen highlights the ways current bi+ activists engage in efforts to better the world for bi+ people. Drawing on interactionist tenants of framing (Benford and Snow 2000), or the ways in which people—collectively or individually—assign meaning to social situations and events (Goffman 1974), she notes that bi+ activists engage in multiple forms of diagnostic framing, or defining “the problem or issue,” and prognostic framing, or identifying “the solution to a given problem” that bi+ people face (Nutter-Pridgen 2015: 393).

It is through this analysis that she illuminates the fact that many bi+ activists are still fighting the same fight that those in the 1980s and 90s were fighting: convincing monosexual others that bisexual people are real, refuting assumptions that bi people are greedy or vectors of

disease, and working to reconstruct what it means to be bisexual in the face of these continual misunderstandings. Nutter-Pridgen also illustrates how movement toward homonormativity has brought some new issues to the surface for bi+ activism, namely that bi+ activists feel pressure from mainstream LGBT groups to minimize representations of those less palatable to heteronormative society (bisexual and transgender people) (2015). In response to these issues, this study reveals that one of the main emphases of bi+ activists is educating the public on what it means to be bisexual with the goal of ultimately raising visibility and de-stigmatizing bi+ existence.

While these issues are important, others have cautioned against surface-level claims to visibility as a central focus of the bisexual movement and instead suggest attention to visibility is only useful if it allows activists to emphasize the structural issues that impact bi+ people (Eisner 2013). According to bisexual activist, writer, and scholar, Shiri Eisner, visibility and acceptance in and of themselves, and bi+ activists' desire for tolerance in the "GGGG Movement" (Eisner's term for the homonormative LGBT movement due to its focus on *GAY* existence), are shortsighted goals. Instead, Eisner presents a different frame for bi+ activism, advocating for a more critical approach to bi+ politics:

A radical bi politics would be aware of monosexism and biphobia, their structural character and their enormous influence on everyone's lives...such a movement would embrace the inauthenticity, impurity, and hybridity that comes along with bisexuality...would be committed to feminism...acknowledge the way patriarchy privileges and hurts men...deconstruct the binaries of gender along with sexuality...such a movement would also remember the many ways in which bisexuality intersects with issues of race. (2013: 316-17).

As such, like many LGBTQ people who are critical of homonormative politics (Cisneros 2018; Ferguson 2005; Spade 2011), Eisner frames the future of bi+ activism as one based upon

intersectionality and coalitional politics (Cohen 1997; Crenshaw 1991, see also Holthaus 2015 on coalitional bi politics).

Though these few texts are important for understanding contemporary bi+ politics, activism, and social change, there is currently a dearth of research on people who *do not* identify themselves as bi+ activists and what they have to say about these issues and/or how much these frames of visibility, homonormativity, and radical bi+ politics, resonate with people outside of active bi+ political circles. As I noted in the previous chapter, many of the people I interviewed did not speak of any specifically bi+ communities to which they belong, and the ones who did referred mostly to small groups of friends, neighbors, or roommates who also identify as bi+. Given the void of many close bi+ connections, alongside their sometimes-tenuous relationship with the LGBTQ community and the pervasiveness of homonormative LGBTQ politics, I sought to understand how respondents make sense of the most pressing political issues for bi+ people. In the following analysis, I highlight the main frames respondents used to explain what they see as most central to bi+ politics. While *all* of the people I interviewed spoke at length on the importance of visibility (more often than not before I asked them about it directly), their responses to what *beyond* visibility might be most impactful to bi+ people were fragmented, sometimes contradictory, and reflected that many of them had never seriously considered this question before.

#### “IT’S THAT SORT OF DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD”: VISIBILITY AS *THE* ISSUE

As I highlighted above, bi+ visibility emerges as a central frame for much bi+ activism (Eisner 2013; Holthaus 2015; Nutter-Pridgen 2015). This was true for the people I interviewed as well. However, even though all of them talked about visibility as a central issue for bi+ people,



there were variations in the ways they framed the importance of visibility. Three main patterns emerged related to visibility as a frame for bi+ politics: 1) The fact that visibility is important and why, 2) the downsides to visibility, and 3) that visibility should only be a starting place for the rest of bi+ activism.

### *Visibility is Important*

Many respondents highlighted the importance of visibility in a similar way to Summer, a 28-year-old bisexual cisgender woman:

I think there's still a lot of people who don't think it's real, that bisexuality is real... You either are or you aren't, and that thing is *gay*. You either are gay or you aren't gay, you can't be both, you can't be everything, you can't be in the middle... I think that's the primary issue that bisexual people deal with and the stigma surrounding that. Just the stereotypes of like bisexual people being sexually promiscuous, or all these other antiquated ideas of what they think... So, I would say visibility and understanding what it means to be bisexual is probably the biggest battle for bisexual people with the society at large.

Summer's quote illustrates a pattern that some scholars have previously discussed where bi+ and transgender people do not necessarily benefit from greater visibility resulting from homonormative politics (Kampler and Connell 2018; Mathers et al. 2018a). Furthermore, Summer highlights the importance of using increased visibility to break down potentially harmful stereotypes about bi+ people, such as the notion that they are sexually promiscuous. However, according to some bi+ activists (Eisner 2013) Summer, and other respondents who narrated the importance of using visibility to lessen stereotypes, frames the fight for visibility as one for the normalization and assimilation to heteronormative and mononormative (Barringer et al. 2017; Moss 2012) expectations for appropriate behavior. In this way, the fight for visibility could lead to bi+ people who fit notions of what it means to be "respectably queer" (Ward 2008). Others framed the importance of validation and recognition tied to visibility in a parallel way. For example, Davey a 24-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man said:

[G]etting bisexuality to be recognized and validated in every circle... I mean, in the immediate change we'd see in my life, but that's not the same for everybody, is if it were as widely accepted and appreciated as everyone else it would be no interactions that gay men tell me bi men don't exist, it would be no interactions that end with people thinking bisexual people are sexual deviants or like lustful running amok people...No one's mind would jump to stereotypes, which is what I think would immediately affect me in my life, not saying this is for everyone else. But that's the only bisexual specific thing that I can think of, because everything else is tied to something else or intersects with something else that I don't have to deal with in my life.

While Davey's ideas for increased visibility also rely on what some would frame as moving toward a more respectable form of bi+ existence by seeking to be "validated" and "widely accepted" though lessening negative stereotypes (Eisner 2013), Davey's quote also highlights one of the main elements that the people in this sample mentioned about importance of bi+ political issues: that visibility is the only "bisexual specific" thing he can think of because "everything else...intersects with something else," hinting at part of the reason that, contrary to homonormative single-issue politics (Cisneros 2018; Duggan 2004; Spade 2011), it was difficult for respondents to name *one* specific identity-based political issue for bi+ people.

While respondents like Summer and Davey talked about visibility being important to lessening stereotypes in a somewhat abstract way, other respondents connected increased calls for visibility to their own lived experiences. For instance, Ava, a 24-year-old pansexual cisgender woman, elaborated on why she felt that increasing visibility was important for bi+ people by connecting her experiences in youth to the impact bi+ visibility (and a lack thereof) has on other people:

Visibility matters because (sighs) I feel like if I saw a person who was like me when I was younger, I would be like "holy shit! I can just be myself!" That's so easy like, I think also having—even if you don't feel that way, just having an understanding about like people who are different from you, and not having it framed as something wrong...I'm really excited to see more people who identify as being pan or whatever language that they use. And I think it's important for, not only kids, just anybody to really see life for what it is. Because I feel like we

always have this concept or alternate reality that we live in, and it's not real. And I think we try to force ourselves into it, and it just makes you unhappy and miserable. And then you end up hating yourself and other people and then you just end up dying, miserable.

Ava's identification of an "alternate reality" illustrates one of the ways that the monosexual imaginary operates in contemporary society. It only renders legitimate myopic, unrealistic options for bi+ people that lead to stress about where they fit in the social world. Given that research demonstrates that negative (or nonexistent) examples of positive bi+ representation can lead to negative mental health (Johnson 2016) as can the perpetuation of monosexist stigma (Bostwick 2012), Ava's call for visibility based on her lived experiences could, as Eisner (2013) suggests, be an illustration of what using visibility to talk about other structural issues bi+ experience looks like. As Ava's quote illustrates, having representation could mean that other bi+ people could see "life for what it really is," namely that bi+ people live full, enriching lives. Like Ava, Elliot, a 23-year-old bisexual cisgender man, considers how his mental health might look differently if he had access to positive bi+ representation in his youth:

I mean...I think a lot of the anxiety I had growing up was borne from [thinking] "I'm either gay or straight." And like people seem to think I'm gay, so maybe I'm gay. Whereas that third option of like what if I'm both, uh, was never taken seriously in my mind. I think if I had more, you know, examples, narratives, representations, to recognize myself I think perhaps that would have played out differently.

Like both Ava and Elliot, Harriet, a 22-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, expressed what the impact of having more bi+ representation would mean to her: "I think for me honestly [visibility] matters less [for] media representation than it does like people in my own life. And I wish I had more people that I could kind of look up to that share my identity." Harriet's quote illustrates that the importance of visibility for respondents is not simply tied to media, but also community connections and support. Respondents' perspectives speak to not only the fact that

visibility emerged as the most salient bi+ political frame among respondents, but also, following Eisner's (2013) suggestion, many noted specifically *how* visibility would matter to them and others in terms of lessening structural monosexism.

### *The Other Side of More Visibility*

While all respondents spoke of the importance of increasing bi+ visibility, another visibility frame emerged through my interviews has received less attention in existing literature to date: the negative aspects of increased bi+ visibility. For example, Jenny, a 26-year-old pansexual queer transgender woman, said the following:

I think it's [visibility] that sort of double-edged sword because of there's no real lime light or spotlight on it right now there's really no...like bathroom bills never became an issue until people became aware of it: "oh my God, trans people exist!" Then it turned into this major issue. So, I think there's this...not even this awareness yet [that] bi people exist. Without an awareness there's really no fight against it...because there's no acknowledgement.

Olivia, a 27-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, used a similar frame of visibility as a "double-edged sword" to highlight the potential downsides to increased visibility:

It could become a joke again. It could be used as a punchline or as a cautionary tale. So, it's—it's like, yes, I would like visibility but also what does that look like exactly? In a perfect world, it would look like how I feel like, but it might not be that way. I dunno, if I could just call up a TV studio and be like "this is exactly what I think you should do," and that would happen, that would be awesome. But I also know that a lot of things, although they're changing, they're still the same. So, I feel like it's a double-edged sword.

Considering that backlash has been an issue for various racial, gender, and sexual minority groups seeking more egalitarian treatment (Dragiewicz 2008; Dudas 2005; Sumerau and Mathers 2019), these concerns are not unfounded. Roxanne, a 28-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, said the following about her concerns over increased visibility:

There's always a downside, I think. There's always two sides to everything. I dunno...I mean, I'm trying to think of downsides to gay visibility, lesbian visibility...I can't think of anything...Maybe misrepresentation of what a bi

person...I think it goes back to that feeling of like me being afraid that people would think that I'm wishy washy. Um, yeah, misrepresentation in that way, like, "oh, these people can't make up their minds," or something.

Roxanne's quote illustrates her concern that increasing narratives to counter negative stereotypes about bi+ people might, in fact, lead to more people becoming aware of said stereotypes and thus using them to judge her and potentially other bi+ people. Rory, a 30-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, similarly said:

I think there's a possibility that with more visibility that could make us more vulnerable to hatred and, you know, who knows what else people would come back and say about us? I can't predict that, but I think once people acknowledge that we exist, then it does open the door to prejudice and bias. Specifically, against bisexual people, even though that already exists now. So, it could take place in another form. I don't know what that form would be.

Echoing Rory's difficulty identifying what exactly backlash to increased visibility would look like (since bi+ people have such limited visibility now), Sebastian, a 25-year-old pansexual cisgender man, said: "[P]otentially you put yourself up to more hurt and more violence... I don't know because we don't have a lot of visibility right now. So, I don't know what it would be like to have a spotlight shining on us. It might be wonderful and there might be downsides, but I can't imagine what they are because the spotlight's never gotten close, you know?"

Although respondents like the ones mentioned above identified the "double-edged sword" of visibility, they also revealed that it was difficult to pinpoint what the backlash to more visibility would look like. Following what sociologists have long documented regarding how we collectively identify reality (Thomas and Thomas 1928; Goffman 1974), if bisexuality is not identified as a legitimate form of existence, as is the case in the context of the monosexual imaginary, it is hard for respondents to conceptualize *what specifically* the backlash and violence would look like, even if they understand that backlash is possible (even likely) based on historical patterns in the United States. Jenny, in her comparison to transgender issues that have

garnered more attention recently since cisgender people realized “Oh my god, transgender people exist!” highlighted this dynamic: fighting for visibility could be beneficial for bi+ people, but could also, like interviewees discussed, lead to a more severe backlash than what bi+ people experience right now.

### *Visibility is the Starting Place*

In addition to highlighting the significance and potential pitfalls of increased visibility, respondents noted that, following Eisner (2013), visibility in and of itself shouldn't be the only thing bi+ activism seeks to address. Instead, they discussed the ways that visibility should serve as a starting place for talking about other material inequalities that bi+ people have to navigate. For example, Bridget, a 30-year-old queer cisgender woman, said, “I don't think visibility is like the most important issue. I guess like...I would be more interested in hearing more people talking about more measurable things...like visibility can lead to tolerance or acceptance, which can lead to better outcomes for people, but I think that it's also not like the end goal in and of itself.” Similarly, Jackson, a 21-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, said:

[Visibility is] sort of like damn, just not present. Or just—we don't have the microphone. Like, gay marriage was number one for the longest time. And now I feel like another huge issue that needs to be attended to are bathrooms...you asked me what's the bisexual issue, and it's like it's sad if the only thing we say is we exist (laughs) like please recognize us. We have the mic now! ...like “we're here! We exist!” (laughs) fireworks! That shouldn't be the central issue...It [visibility] should be the *starting* issue...It's the first step. It's the first kind of refusal of other people refusing to acknowledge us. It's the first kind of, “no, sorry, we're important and we're here. And you need to recognize us, and you need to stop saying oh yeah, we don't exist, it's a phase, we're just like you.” ... because if it doesn't exist it can't do anything. (emphasis original)

Noting that it is “sad” if the only issue bi+ people have to fight for is that fact that “we exist,” Jackson articulates the significance of visibility specifically within the frame of visibility as a jumping off point for addressing more concrete inequalities that bi+ people experience.

Furthermore, Jackson's statement that "gay marriage was number one for the longest time" demonstrates the dynamics that much bi+ activism has to contend with, namely where, how, or if it should fit within the mainstream LGBTQ movement (Eisner 2013; Nutter-Pridgen 2015). Like Jackson and Bridget, Luna, a 26-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, assessed the situation for bi+ people and the reasons why visibility is a crucial starting place for bi+ activism:

It seems like we are at a point where representation and erasure and what bisexuality is and how our life outcomes are different and a lot of times worse than for monosexual people, I think there is so much lack of understanding, invisibility, to the point that it almost seems like it's the most pressing thing. Because once you have visibility, you can start talking about other things.

Immediately before sharing this quote, Luna was discussing the ways that she experiences discrimination at the hands of doctors because she is bisexual. Thus, Luna illustrates that increasing visibility is useful *because* it allows others to tap into a framework for recognizing and challenging the structural monosexist inequality bi+ people experience. As these quotes reveal, in addition to conceptualizing visibility as important simply for the sake of lessening stereotypes, some respondents more clearly articulated *how* eradicating stereotypes is deeply connected to gaining more traction to discuss other material issues that impact bi+ people (such as experiences with doctors).

These responses reveal that respondents framed visibility as a massively important political issue for bi+ people. Through articulating the ways that visibility is not existent, and how it would have positively impacted their lives if it were, they show that, like larger networks of bi+ activists, the people in this study drew on existing "diagnostic frames" from bi+ activism (Benford and Snow 2000; Nutter-Pridgen 2015; Snow et al. 1986) to identify visibility as a major issue. They also extended this diagnostic frame a step further to note that another concern for bi+ people may be the backlash they experience to gaining more visibility, and that the hypothetical

backlash could become an issue in and of itself. Furthermore, they engaged in “prognostic framing” (Benford and Snow 2000; Nutter-Pridgen 2015) when they noted that stopping at visibility is a shortsighted goal for bi+ activism in the future, and that increasing visibility should be a vehicle for addressing other structural issues. As such, based on these responses, it appears that existing frames around bi+ visibility resonated (Goffman 1974) strongly for respondents in this sample.

Although I had questions about visibility in my interview guide, interviewees often brought up these issues before I had the chance to ask these questions. Furthermore, that this was the most salient response to the question of political issues for bi+ people is telling. First, it reveals that the frames of the few larger bi+ organizations that exist match with what respondents, none of whom identified as bi+ activists, are naming as the most pressing issue for bi+ people. Although I cannot necessarily say that respondents got their ideas for increasing visibility from bi+ organizations, it does point to the fact that visibility is an important enough issue that it seems to dominate the rhetoric on bi+ activism, both for the people I interviewed and broader bi+ activist organizations. As such, visibility is a potentially useful frame for energizing more bi+ people to get involved in fighting for social change that would positively impact bi+ people. However, the fact that visibility is *still* the most salient issue, not only for bi+ activists (Nutter-Pridgen 2015), but also the people I interviewed (who, again, were usually not connected to major bi+ organizations or activists) speaks volumes about the lack of progress bi+ communities have experienced in the wake of homonormative politics. Despite claims of sexual freedom and advancement of LGBTQ issues, bi+ people are having very similar conversations now as they did in the 1990s regarding where their collective political energies should be (Eisner 2013; Garber 1995; Holthaus 2015).



Informed by Eisner's (2013) suggestion that visibility is only one goal and shouldn't be the sole focus of bi+ activism, I probed respondents to articulate what, besides visibility, would be a tangible political goal for bi+ people to pursue. In the next two sections, I analyze their responses to these questions and illustrate how the dominance of single-issue homonormative approaches to LGBT politics has made it both difficult for bi+ people to recognize that there is anything specific that impacts bi+ people differently than other LGBTQ groups, and identify anything beyond visibility as an issue.

“I FEEL LIKE I HAVE NOT REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT THIS AT ALL. DAMN”:

#### WHAT BEYOND VISIBILITY?

Faye's quote at the opening of this chapter reveals one of the main responses people had when I asked them to articulate concrete issues beyond general notions of increased bi+ visibility. Respondents often got noticeably uncomfortable when I asked this question and had fragmented and wandering responses before ultimately landing on saying they didn't know what that issue would be, or that there weren't any issues other than what mainstream LGBTQ activism was already pursuing that they could think of. In this section I outline these two responses.

#### *I Don't Know*

Like the respondents quoted above, many people started by saying that visibility was an extremely pressing issue for bi+ people. Whether it was media representation, more representation in personal networks, better representation within the LGBTQ community, or another form of increased visibility, this was a major theme that emerged. It was after that when they began to have trouble stating any particular issue clearly. For instance, Inez, a 28-year-old

queer fluid cisgender woman laughed out loud before responding to my question: “(laughs) yeah, I feel like I have not really thought about this at all. Damn.” It is notable that throughout the interview, Inez was able to identify the ways that bi+ people experienced inequality and exclusion in ways that are different than lesbian and gay people, but when she was asked to conceptualize these things within a frame of bi+ political action, she struggled to do so.

Similarly, Quinn, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, said the following, “Hmm...probably...I don’t know (laughs)... I don’t know if there’s specifically a bi thing.”

Cassidy, a 27-year-old queer cisgender woman, illustrates both the difficulty many respondents felt trying to identify a specific concrete issue as well as the discomfort they expressed while answering the question:

Ohh, my god. Oh, no...what major issue...that’s a really good question. Um...(chuckles) I don’t know, I’m not sure...Oh, god. Um...is this a question I can email you about?... I guess I’m trying to think of what is specifically unique about it that could be dealt with politically and not personally. Hmm...I mean, I think we have like, first thing I think about is in regards to gender fluidity. But, that’s not very specific to sexuality...to bisexuality? Um... I don’t know, maybe it’s not. I mean, I guess it would be...I dunno... I mean, god, I dunno. Help, Jesus! I think maybe, um, I’m trying to think in regards to healthcare, maybe. Even economic issues... I dunno, this really— this is a good question, it’s a hard one to answer (laughs) I’m gonna think about that.

The entire time Cassidy tried to answer this question she shifted in her seat and avoided eye contact with me until right after she said “I’m gonna think about that.” This was notably different than her demeanor throughout the rest of the interview, where she primarily looked at me when answering a question. Additionally, it is notable that Cassidy *does* very briefly mention “healthcare” and “economic issues,” two arenas where bi+ people do experience significant inequality, worse than lesbian, gay, or heterosexual individuals (Badgett et al. 2013; Gorman et al. 2015; Mize 2016). As such, these would have made sense as two frames to explore in terms of identifying a concrete approach for bi+ politics and activism. However, Cassidy moves

quickly past those subjects and returns to her wavering and ultimate inability to pin down an issue.

Jackson, who noted above that visibility should be a starting place for bi+ activism, expressed a similar unsureness: “It’s also hard for me to imagine what would be the big issue in the future *after* saying we exist because we still have to exist and we still have to start bulldozing down stereotypes, that’s like phase two.” And Yvette, a 26-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, shared thoughts similar to Jackson’s:

Maybe that’s the problem. We don’t have a big issue. We need the big issue to rally behind to get our media campaign going so people know that we’re there... I guess my mind has sort of been invaded by the whole like general overwhelming discourse... Because I think immediately about gay marriage and how much that incorporates financial resources and adoption stuff that like, is not solved by having that ability. Like, specifically...I dunno... I dunno, I can’t think of something that like...is a banner to rally under.

When Yvette notes that her “mind has been...invaded by the...overwhelming discourse” and that she “immediately [thinks] of gay marriage,” she shows how homonormative issues have continued to exist at center stage for LGBTQ activism, even after the Supreme Court ruling on marriage was declared a “success,” one that would lead us into a “post gay era” (Ghaziani 2011). She struggles to identify an issue that would specifically impact bi+ people beyond this and concluded by saying that she can’t “think of anything” that bi+ people could use to specifically unify and use as a way to challenge monosexist inequalities.

Perhaps Kimber, a 24-year-old queer cisgender woman, captured this type of response best when she said: “Um...uh...(sighs) you totally stumped me. I really don’t know. I feel like it’s a test and I don’t know the answer (laughing).” Kimber’s statement is telling for understanding how respondents framed issues that would specifically impact them and other bi+ people: it is an afterthought, or completely inconceivable, to the point that many of them were

caught so off guard they literally could not answer the question. These examples show how homonormativity within the context of a monosexual imaginary has removed, for some bi+ people, the possibility for a framework through which to recognize how their lives are shaped by forms of inequality beyond visibility. In the next section I interrogate a slightly different kind of “don’t know” from respondents: that they didn’t see any issues outside of mainstream or other LGBTQ activism that would specifically impact bi+ people.

*Same as LGT*

While some respondents struggled at all to come up with an answer to the biggest issue facing bi+ people beyond visibility, others arrived at a different conclusion (though often engaging in the same unsure, fluctuating answer style). Instead of simply saying they didn’t know or couldn’t think of anything, they instead framed activism around other LGBT causes as the thing that would help bi+ people the most. One of the most common threads in these answers was the way that same-sex marriage came up. For example, Agatha, a 25-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, said the following:

I guess this is more gay than bisexual. I always struggle...it’s also like, gay marriage and adoption are the two things that like structured in a gay versus straight dichotomy, but really affect bisexual people in the same regards...all of my examples don’t fit bisexual people because I think that the framework in which it operates is that once you’ve been with a same sex, in a same sex relationship or an all gender loving relationship, you like...broke your dichotomy from being straight. So, you’re not straight anymore, you’re gay.

Agatha continued to elaborate on how the issues she was thinking of were more framed around gay experience, even if they also affect bi+ people. Becca, a 27-year-old not straight transgender woman succinctly said the following: “In regards to orientation there isn’t [an issue] because it would be...any ruling on marriage equality would be inherently applicable to people who are

bi... A lot of it just happens as a natural consequence of anything that happens for gay lesbian stuff.” Similarly, Roxanne, who reflected on some of the downsides of visibility above, said: “Umm... I mean... the gay marriage goes with it, right? It’s hand in hand. If a bi person is in a relationship with the same sex, um, and they want to get married, that’s hand in hand there”

Davey, who also talked about the importance of visibility in the previous section said this when I asked him what he would name as the biggest issue besides visibility facing bi+ people:

(10 second pause) I’m not sure there will ever be one. Specific. Because it seems tied to so many other things. Like, same sex marriage was the fight of bisexual people, too, even though it was called gay marriage, but we were tied to it because it affected our lives in that way. Same with the bathroom bill, if there’s a bisexual person who is transgender it will affect them in that way.

Davey’s quote illustrates the ways that respondents framed bi+ political concerns not only as part of homonormative causes like marriage but also issues that, to them, felt relatively new in LGBTQ activism, such as the fight against bathroom bills. This is relevant to note because in this framing of bi+ issues as overlapping with other LGBTQ issues respondents position bi+ people as passive beneficiaries of other LGBTQ political issues. For example, Faye, who was quoted at the beginning of this chapter said, “I guess I’m wondering if there’s a specific type of policy that would affect bi people in particular, and I can’t necessarily imagine such a policy. But I think that the fact that the same-sex marriage ruling did affect a lot of bi people was under-discussed, maybe. Or the fact that the trans bathroom bans are probably affecting some bi people.” Cole, a 26-year-old bisexual queer cisgender man, connected his answer about the overlap between other LGT issues and the difficulty bi+ people navigate in trying to demonstrate their existence:

It’s interesting, I think that might be part of why it might be so hard to carve out a space for bi as an identity is because I can’t think of any particular substantive legal or structural problem that impacts bi people very specifically. You know, with all the bathroom discrimination, that’s a direct assault on trans people, and bans on same sex marriage definitely do affect any bi person that wants to marry

someone of the same sex. Um, but I don't think there is...I don't think there's as much that directly cuts and is *our* issue. (emphasis original)

Respondents' answers to my questions about bi+ politics show that one of the ways they framed bi+ issues beyond visibility involved the implicit connection between bi+ existence and other issues in the LGBTQ community. Although a few respondents drew connections to bathroom bills, they predominantly linked their experiences to issues like same-sex marriage. As many of them said, bi+ people *are* impacted by same sex marriage, and there *are* transgender bi+ people who are harmed by bathroom bills, but as Cole notes above, it was difficult for them to say with confidence that a certain issue on the level of these things was a bi+ issue. This pattern is both reflective of the pervasive nature of the monosexual imaginary *as well as* the ways in which homonormative single-issue politics has dominated LGBTQ social consciousness; within this social context, bi+ people are both nonexistent to the point where *even they* have trouble naming issues that would impact them (even though said issues exist), and they assume that progress for (mostly) lesbian and gay people will necessarily benefit them despite patterns suggesting this isn't the case (Mathers et al. 2018a).

This pattern is not necessarily surprising, in fact, it is fitting that respondents said these things given the pervasive extent to which their experiences are rendered unintelligible. Drawing heavily on the frame of visibility is a logical starting place for bi+ people to focus, particularly since, as I illustrate in the previous chapter, their existence is excluded from the community spaces they desire to be a part of. What my analysis does reveal is the power of the monosexual imaginary. For example, most of the people I interviewed demonstrated little to no knowledge of major structural issues impacting bi+ people. In fact, many of them, as I showed in Chapter 4, felt they were privileged in relation to lesbian and gay people even though this is not generally

the case<sup>7</sup>. However, in a social context where the only times bi+ existence is acknowledged is through the lens of stigma (as I reveal in Chapter 4), and bi+ people are unable to connect with others who share their experiences (as I show in Chapter 5), bi+ people are pushed to dedicate significant energy to rebuking the negative stereotypes they hear about themselves and construct identities that allow them, hopefully, some degree of acceptance in LGBTQ spaces. Thus, it makes sense that many of them either struggled to name a concrete issue besides visibility or lumped their concerns in with other LGBTQ people in a passive way. However, this is precisely how the monosexual imaginary persists: bi+ people are kept so preoccupied with trying to get monosexual others to accept them, and are so excluded from community spaces where shared political agendas might be set, that there are no solid organized efforts to attack structural health, economic, and violence disparities that bi+ people experience.

That said, there were a few exceptions to this, and in the next part of this chapter, I elaborate on what people *did* say when they named concrete issues, and the ways that these things overlap with what others have said about the potential for coalitional politics, as well as what it would mean to frame the following issues as *bi+ specific* issues, since all of them do significantly impact bi+ people. The ways the respondents talk about bi+ political issues in the next section may seem to overlap with respondents quoted here, however there is one major difference between their answers, namely that the bi+ respondents quoted below *did not* frame these matters as something from which bi+ people would passively benefit. Instead, they framed them as active things that would be important for bi+ people *and also* would impact other communities as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Importantly, respondents did often experience privileges in terms of race, gender (being cisgender particularly), and class. While they touched on the ways these privileges shaped their lives in interviews, they also frequently framed their experiences with privilege as something they got *because* they were bi+ and could thus benefit from the potential to be seen as heterosexual.

“MASS INCARCERATION IS MORE OF A QUEER ISSUE THAN SAME-SEX  
MARRIAGE”: NAMING CONCRETE ISSUES BEYOND VISIBILITY

Fewer patterns emerged regarding the specific concerns interviewees mentioned, but what ties these answers together is that they draw on what scholars have noted about the importance of intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) and coalitional (Cohen 1997) approaches to social change. Therefore, while the problems respondents named *do* disproportionately affect bi+ people, they also impact other racially, gendered, and class marginalized groups. As such, the responses in this section highlight what a “radical bi politics” (Eisner 2013) frame could look like.

Healthcare

If there was a concrete bi+ issue respondents mentioned, it was healthcare. Whether respondents referred to better education for doctors, more health care access for bi+ people (and others), or more resources for sexual health education, this was the most prevalent response in this category. For example, Olivia said:

I feel like the big thing is health care...because I feel like with safe sex it is not talked about how to have same sex. Like sex with a person of the same gender. Or people who don't have like the penis and the vagina. What do you do if you have two vaginas? What do you do if there's whatever? How do you talk about things like HIV? In those ways the information about STDs and safe sex and STIs and then you worry about health care. If there's going to be any stigma or judgment if you say, “I do have sex with men *and* women,” you know what does that mean about that person? I guess that's the closest thing I can think of.

Rory voiced a similar concern about the lack of sexual health information available to bi+ people: “We need to advocate for sexual health. Um, I think that's a huge thing. Like, what does it mean for people who has sex with multiple genders and their health? Like, how does that affect them, what do they need to be worried about?” Yvette similarly asserted that producing better sexual health resources would be a crucial intervention for bi+ people:



Sexual health education is huge, because if you are bi, it is likely that you are straight passing, so you're missing out on a whole lot of information that you need to be safe. Like, if you are a bi dude and you have only ever been taught about safe sex with women, you don't know what you need to do if you're with a guy...I can't even tell you the amount of times I've had a conversation with somebody who thinks that condoms are just for straight sex. And I'm just like fuck...no. How do I fix this? I mean, a lot of it just has to do with our terrible terrible sexual and gender education in schools.

While better access to health education resources was important for respondents, so was better access to healthcare itself. For example, Delilah, a 30-year-old queer cisgender woman, said: "I think for me, something that I think a lot is healthcare... I feel like everybody should have access to healthcare regardless of your sexual or gender identity and I think most people get limited from that for various identities and disability." Jane, a 29-year-old bisexual queer cisgender woman, also discussed the reasons healthcare was particularly important for bi+ people, while simultaneously drawing connections between healthcare and other inequalities bi+ people experience:

The rates of mental health and substance abuse issues are so high [among bisexual people]. And the rates of sexual domestic violence against bisexual people is so high. I think it's the highest out of the sexual orientation groups—the way they group them. So, I think those are huge. I think it just depends on too on what other identities you have that intersect with that. I think men and women have different experiences; I think non-binary people have different experiences. I think people of color and white people have different experiences. So, I think that depending on what those other things are you might identify something else as being more pressing. Or it might depend on the situation.

Jane's awareness of the structural issues bi+ people navigate, such as health disparities and intimate partner violence, was unusual for the people in my sample. However, Jane's assertions are correct (Green and Feinstein 2012; Johnson 2016; Walters et al. 2013), bi+ people do experience much higher rates of these forms of inequalities, while also having less social support to navigate these inequalities (Sigurvinsdottir and Ullman 2016). Thus, if one were to conceptualize what a frame for "radical bi politics" (Eisner 2013) might look like, centering

issues related to healthcare could serve as an important starting place. This is particularly so because health disparities are also prevalent among poor and working-class people (Quadagno 2005), and people of color (Washington 2006). Furthermore, although poor and working-class people and people of color are underrepresented in this sample, people of color are more likely to identify as bi+ (Movement Advancement Project 2016a), and bi+ people are more likely to live in poverty than other LGBTQ groups (Badgett et al. 2013). Therefore, focusing on healthcare issues, where economically disadvantaged bi+ people and bi+ people of color may be even more impacted due to their social location, would make sense for a radical bi+ political agenda. Furthermore, other LGBTQ groups experience health disparities compared to heterosexual cisgender people, even if the rates of these disparities are not always as stark as for bi+ people (Green and Feinstein 2012). Thus, centering bi+ political action on using visibility to improve healthcare could be a monumental step toward lessening monosexist, racist, classist, cissexist, and heterosexist inequalities, according to both the empirical literature and the respondents in this sample.

### *Other Concrete Issues*

Although no other clear patterns emerged regarding what respondents mentioned in terms of specific things bi+ activism could focus on, they did mention an array of concrete issues that do significantly impact bi+ people, as well as transgender people, people of color, and economically disadvantaged people. In this section I will highlight the problems respondents mentioned to show other ways that a “radical” (Eisner 2013) framing of bi+ politics could focus on intersectional issues that would significantly impact bi+ people as well as other systematically marginalized groups.

One of the issues that two respondents mentioned was increased police presence and police harassment of people of color, particularly queer people of color. Although these two respondents tied their articulation of this issue particularly to Pride events and the mostly white, middle class neighborhood where Chicago Pride takes place, these issues are significant, particularly for bi+ and trans people of color, even beyond these contexts (Movement Advancement Project 2016b; Steele et al. 2018). Ava discussed how, because she is a black cisgender woman, she didn't feel safe in the neighborhood where Pride took place, particularly because the LGBTQ center in that area was kicking trans youth of color off the premises:

[B]lack brown people. They were missing. And there's so much police at the pride parties its fucking crazy. Like, and that was around the time when the [LGBTQ Center] was kicking—they still kick them out, but like there were a lot of, I think they were black and brown homeless trans youth. Or, they were queer, and they would stand on the corner and just kick it or whatever. And they would still be kicked out, and I would see it because I lived right across the street. And um, it was just a lot of the same shit on that. Like really just focusing on black and brown people, especially at night, who were in groups, and it felt like I really wasn't safe.

Ava's response reflects that places that are deemed safe for white LGBTQ people are not always safe for LGBTQ people of color due to high police presence and hostility toward queer people of color in these spaces (Movement Advancement Project 2016b). Although he does not have the same lived experiences with the threat of police violence as a white cisgender man (though some research does point to unique experiences for white bisexual people and police contact, see Steele et al. 2018), Cole also vocalized his issues with police presence at Pride events and in LGBTQ spaces in general:

I don't want fucking cops in my pride parade...last year there was a die in for Black Lives Matter and it disrupted the parade and like, I don't know, Pride began as a very...the history of pride is very radical, um and now you've got racist white gay guys getting mad at like Black Lives Matter protesters... Rather than acknowledging that queer people of color are at particular risk for brutality at the hands of police and so this is—like not making the connection that this is an issue

that queers have always had a big interest in and that there should be solidarity there.

Given that bi+ people experience more interactions with police (Steele et al. 2018), working to lessen the presence of police in LGBTQ communities could be a beneficial frame to have in future bi+ activism. This is particularly the case because LGBTQ people of color and working class LGBTQ (Steele et al. 2018) people also experience higher interactions with police, which can lead to harmful outcomes (Movement Advancement Project 2016b), as do heterosexual and cisgender people of color (Alexander 2012), and heterosexual cisgender working class and poor people (South and Messner 2000), thus fighting against these issues could be solid ground for more concrete, intersectional bi+ coalitions with other movement groups fighting patterns of sexualized and racialized police harassment and movement toward a more radical bi+ politics (Eisner 2013).

Although she did not mention police brutality specifically, Faye also touched on another issue of state violence that disproportionately impacts bi+ people, other LGBTQ people, and people of color: mass incarceration (Meyer et al. 2017). After the quotes I shared in previous sections of this chapter, Faye said: “I think that my opinion with queer politics is things like mass incarceration are like more of a queer issue than same sex marriage. Not more, but like also a significant issue, even if it doesn’t affect people who specifically because of that identity— let me rephrase, it doesn’t affect *only* people with that identity then it’s not gotten to be a queer issue.” Faye’s quote illustrates both the importance of recognizing the need for intersectionality in bi+ politics, as well as the fact that homonormative, single-issue frameworks have become dominant among much mainstream LGBT activism and social discourse on what “counts” as an LGBTQ issue. She notes that mass incarceration did not immediately occur to her as a valid answer because “it doesn’t *only* affect people who are queer,” and that because of this, it has not

gotten the same attention as something like same-sex marriage (even though it is relevant to note that same-sex marriage didn't benefit *all* queer people either reflecting the ways that whiteness, middle-class norms, mononormativity and cisnormativity impact what we recognize as "an LGBTQ issue," see Cisneros 2018; Ferguson 2005; Spade 2011; Sumerau and Mathers 2019). However, if bi+ communities formed coalitions with other racial, gender, and class marginalized groups working to fight mass incarceration, adding power to those numbers would surely help bi+ people broadly, and specifically bi+ people of color and poor people, as well as monosexual LGT people of color and poor people who are incarcerated at higher rates than heterosexual, white, middle class people (Alexander 2012; Meyer et al. 2017; Movement Advancement Project 2016b).

Another concrete issue that a few respondents mentioned was strengthening employment protections for bi+ people. For instance, when I asked Addison, a 25-year-old bisexual pansexual queer cisgender woman, how she could envision greater visibility being translated into other issues that impact bi+ people, she concisely said "I think a lot of discrimination laws within the workplace." Cole also mentioned discrimination in the workplace, and the shortcomings of current conceptualizations of employment discrimination law:

[O]ne thing you see with that is a lot of the legal analysis that goes into [employment discrimination] has to do with, at least for a long time, had to do with people's professed attraction to the target of their harassment and whether or not something was actionable harassment and how the analysis was done legally, some of that had to do with whether or not the person actually had a sexual interest or could have had a sexual interest in the target, and so that breaks down, like that doesn't account for bi people. So, there is this question of like, if this person is gay and they're making like creepy sexual comments about a male co-worker, sort of conceptualizing that interaction differently if one or both of them were gay, like that might be given different weight in that analysis. So, that framework definitely doesn't account for bi people very well.

Elliot also mentioned the importance of not only tackling monosexist workplace discrimination, but also racist, classist, and gendered discrimination: “I think...stronger employment protections and stuff like that. Like more aggressive institutions to root out institutional oppressions from numerous axes of sexuality, racial, and class oppression, among others, has implications for addressing some of the problems for people.”

Touching on two of the previous issues other respondents mentioned, healthcare and employment discrimination, Bridget also highlights how housing discrimination would be a worthwhile focus for bi+ activism that would benefit others beyond just the bi+ community:

I would be interested in hearing more research about I dunno, housing discrimination or job discrimination or health outcomes or income or whatever...when looking for housing, or you know, there are all these ways where people can be discriminated against without being able to prove that their sexuality was part of that and, or where they are just afraid that they will be even if they wouldn't be... I would say if we improve, like look at what are the changes we could make to our society that benefit people who are like way poorer than I am, and if we improve things that would improve their lives, like access to affordable healthcare or affordable housing or whatever, then those things will also improve for me.

Quinn also framed bi+ politics around concerns for unstable housing among LGBTQ people broadly as well as centering inequalities trans people experience:

Like, things that I think bi people should care most about are like...homeless queer and trans kids. Um, bi people who are trans and so even though a lot of the shit they face is mostly because they're trans, I don't like it when bi cis people leave bi trans people in the dust. That really gets under my skin. So, I don't know, I feel like most of the bi centric issues, or at least the most important ones, are just LGBT issues generally.

Considering that trans people are more likely to identify as bi+ than cisgender people (Movement Advancement Project 2017; Sumerau and Mathers 2019), centering issues that impact trans populations makes sense for a racial bi+ political framework. Harriet similarly draws

connections between inequalities that impact her and other LGBTQ people, particularly transgender people:

I don't feel like my issues are just about bisexual people, I feel like I'm, in many ways, much more concerned about the rights of transgender and gender nonconforming people because I feel like that's so much more up in the air than my own rights. Um, but yeah, I think that really like trying to keep laws that prohibit discrimination against people by gender identity or sexual orientation is important to me.

While these responses do not necessarily coalesce into one core concrete issue beyond visibility that respondents felt bi+ activism should focus on, they do show the ways that some respondents recognized the importance of and potential for building connections across various groups to lessen inequality as a whole. As Rory summarized:

I don't know that we have a unique thing, but I think that's okay. I think we're advocating for many things. Sure, marriage equality was part of it. Gender expression is part of it. I think this is part of the complication of being bisexual people, is that we span and cross over into a lot of different categories and yet we are our own independent category.

Thus, respondents who framed bi+ politics, issues, and activism as work that would necessarily involve ameliorating other forms of inequality that, based on the single-issue focus of much homonormative activism, might not immediately *seem* like a bi+, or LGBTQ, issue may actually be closer to working towards the coalitional politics outlined by queer women of color in previous decades (Cohen 1997). Furthermore, these responses show the potential for achieving Eisner's (2013) conceptualization of a "radical bi politics" that recognizes the ways that bi+ people, while specifically disadvantaged due to monosexist inequalities, can also be disadvantaged in terms of health, racial, gender, class, and other forms of inequality, *and* that these issues will be central to actually eradicating monosexism in the future. Furthermore, it is not only that bi+ people, depending on their social location, experience multiple forms of inequality, but that by framing these issues as the most important ones facing bi+ people, this

could be a new, not necessarily single issue way to think about sexual politics, if we were willing to place bi+ people at the center of what we think of as sexual inequality and how to remedy it.

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter I analyzed the frames respondents in this study used to make sense of what they saw as current issues bi+ activism should focus on. Their responses show that visibility is, by far, the most salient frame, but that even when they talked about visibility, they did so in a more complex manner than just saying there should be more of it. For example, they wrestled with the potential backlash increased visibility could bring. In so doing, they highlighted that gaining increased visibility could be a “double-edged sword” for bi+ people: on the one hand increased visibility could lessen the ubiquitous stigmas that currently exist about bi+ people. On the other hand, increased visibility could mean that bi+ people have to navigate increased backlash to their existence, much like the current pattern for transgender people (Stryker 2017).

In addition to noting the potential downsides to visibility, respondents also pointed out that, while crucial, visibility should not be the final goal of bi+ activism. Through these responses, interviewees revealed that visibility was a necessary “jumping off point” for talking about other serious issues that impact bi+ people. In all of these cases, however, it was clear that, much like the frames of broader bi+ organizations (Nutter-Pridgen 2015), visibility was central to how respondents conceptualized issues that should be important to bi+ people.

Beyond visibility, the frames respondents drew on to make sense of bi+ politics diverged. Some respondents were unable to name any specific issues that disproportionately impact bi+ people or relied on existing conversations about issues that impact other LGBTQ people as the most central issues to bi+ people. These responses reflect the power of homonormative single-



issue frames for LGBTQ politics (Duggan 2004): such single-issue frames make it difficult for bi+ people to recognize other issues that *could* be central to a bi+ political agenda. This is potentially the case even when the single issue isn't necessarily one encapsulated in homonormative politics, such as bathrooms. Since homonormativity has so significantly structured dominant thinking about LGBTQ politics, some respondents struggled to move beyond one or two issues that have received significant attention lately.

In addition to highlighting the ways in which the single-issue logic of homonormativity has structured thinking about LGBTQ politics, this pattern also reveals how the monosexual imaginary continues to operate in the realm of LGBTQ and bi+ politics. Since bi+ people dedicate significant energy to countering negative things they hear about themselves, increasing visibility and positive representations of bi+ existence becomes central to the focus of bi+ politics. Furthermore, they often lumped their issues in with other LGBTQ issues, but not in a way that was specifically framed through the lens of coalitional politics. Rather their responses suggested that interviewees saw themselves as passive beneficiaries of existing fights for LGBTQ equality and recognition. This was the case even though they detailed the myriad of ways they are kept out of LGBTQ communities and spaces as I illustrate in the previous chapter. As such, it may be the case that since bi+ people both desire recognition from other LGBTQ people and also don't have much bi+ community, they default to talking about other LGBTQ issues that are currently garnering more attention. In so doing, however, bi+ existence and the specific ways that bi+ people experience and navigate inequality continues to be put on the backburner in the overall scope of fighting against sexual inequality.

The last section of this analysis illuminates how respondents framed issues that impact bi+ people and others as political concerns that should be central to a bi+ political agenda.

Healthcare emerged as the most salient issue within this framework, but others included state and police violence, employment protections, and housing. It is notable that the minority of individuals in my sample were able to name concrete issues besides visibility, and this pattern (or lack thereof) is yet another way in which respondents' answers illuminate the power and scope of the monosexual imaginary: though they named concrete issues, very few of them conceptualized these issues as things that would impact bi+ people specifically (with the exception of healthcare), even though lessening state violence, workplace discrimination, housing discrimination, and other issues they mentioned would benefit bi+ people.

These final examples of concrete issues highlight what could be the foundation of what Eisner (2013) calls a "radical bi politics" since interviewees explicitly and actively noted that issues that would impact groups *beyond* just bi+ people and thus took a more coalitional approach to their framing of these issues. However, though respondents' answers suggest fruitful ground for cultivating a coalitional approach to bi+ politics, their responses tended to lack acknowledgement of the ways in which bi+ people are impacted by the concrete issues they named. This chapter highlights one of the central dynamics of the monosexual imaginary. That is, through rendering bi+ existence and thus the inequalities that bi+ people experience as so inconceivable that not even bi+ people themselves could necessarily identify them, monosexism is able to persist. If there is no language to identify these issues as things that *do* specifically impact bi+ people, then monosexism as a structure is held firmly in place in part because the monosexual imaginary forecloses the potential to name these issues as such (and subsequently challenge them). The following chapter is a conclusion in which I bring these three chapters together and discuss where sociology can go in terms of more significantly incorporating and centering bi+ experiences in the study of sexualities and inequality.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I highlighted some of the ways bi+ people make sense of identity, community, and bi+ politics in the post gay era. Specifically, I highlighted how bi+ people construct their sexual identities in relation to monosexist stigma, face challenges to finding a supportive community of people who share their experiences as bi+ people, and the differing ways in which they make sense of the priorities for the future of bi+ activism and politics. In so doing, I have followed calls in recent literature to parse apart the experiences of those under the LGBTQ umbrella (Worthen 2013) and expand on existing quantitative literatures on bi+ experiences by lending an in-depth exploration of how bi+ people navigate their existence in day to day life. Through this analysis I have demonstrated that our society, as it is currently organized, exists within and perpetuates a *monosexual imaginary* or understanding of the social world that renders bi+ life inconceivable, and thus questions about bi+ life unasked and unanswered.

My analysis unmaskes the ways in which the monosexual imaginary structures the lives of the bi+ people I interviewed, and how the influence of the monosexual imaginary allows for the persistence of monosexism to continue. As I note in earlier chapters, the monosexual imaginary is a mechanism that structures both the social world and thus how we, as sociologists, study it. The evident absence of bi+ people, and meaningful analysis of monosexism as a structure of inequality, in the sociology of sexualities to date means there are still many questions that we need to ask, and my findings help guide us in those directions. Broadly speaking, the findings I present here lead to numerous implications beyond the immediate study, particularly how acknowledging and interrogating the monosexual imaginary may lead us to a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of how sexual inequalities persist today.

Specifically, my findings point to the ways in which systems like patriarchy and heteronormativity work in tandem with monosexism. For instance, much of the stigma respondents reported was deeply rooted in gendered understandings of appropriate (hetero *and* mono) sexuality. Examples interviewees drew on, such as the “barsexual” woman and the “really gay” man highlight how monosexist stigma is also gendered stigma. For women, bi+ “deviations” from an (implicitly) true heterosexual self is something they do for men’s pleasure and entertainment, while bi+ men’s desire is coded as gay because men deviating from heteronormative expectations reflects a failure of *both* gender and sexuality in a patriarchal and heteronormative social context. Though there are gendered differences in how these stigmas are deployed in contemporary social interactions, they are *all* rooted in the presumption that bi+ sexualities are a phase, and that one has a true, inborn monosexual existence waiting to emerge.

To highlight how the monosexual imaginary structures social life and obfuscates the reproduction of monosexist inequality, I focused on three components of bi+ people’s lives: identity construction, community connections, and framing political issues. To do this, I utilized an interactionist approach to highlight the ways bi+ people negotiated these components of their lives. In so doing, my work here highlights some of the *processes* involved in the reproduction of monosexist inequality.

For example, bi+ people are constantly negotiating their identities against bi+ stigmas that permeate the social world. In so doing, they sometimes engage in distancing from other bi+ people to maintain positive sexual selves. However, it is possible that this could lead to difficulties with bi+ people forming allegiances with one another. If one group of bi+ people is seen by others as more promiscuous, or engaging in transphobia, it may become difficult for bi+ people of multiple identities to find shared ground with each other, even though bi+ people are

all impacted by monosexism. Additionally, given that bi+ people dedicate so much time, understandably so, to constructing a positive sense of self in the face of bi+ stigma and stereotypes, they are perhaps left with fewer emotional resources to collectively work together to identify and challenge monosexist inequality. As I mentioned, most of the bi+ people I interviewed were unaware that there were ways in which bi+ people were harmed by structural inequality differently than other LGBTQ communities. This may be because bi+ people are, to put it simply, worn out from constantly defending their existence.

This may also happen because bi+ people experience difficulty plugging into networks that would allow them to recognize things that they experience as monosexist inequality. Part of the way many bi+ people I interviewed constructed identity involved using “queer” on its own or alongside other identity signifiers and doing this may have allowed them some level of “conditional acceptance” (Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun 2018; Sumerau and Mathers 2019) in LGBTQ communities. However, this conditional acceptance often happened only when lesbian and gay (monosexual) others determined their sexualities were “real” enough to allow them membership in LGBTQ spaces. This often involved bi+ people having to shed any semblance of a heterosexual existence to avoid accusations of experiencing heterosexual privilege and thus being an intruder in LGBTQ spaces. Since the communities that bi+ people tried to be a part of only extended them some modicum of acceptance if they muted parts of themselves, and that they were repeatedly told they were too privileged to rightfully be in LGBTQ spaces, how are bi+ people supposed to have the resources to identify and challenge structural monosexist inequalities? And to what extent could they expect lesbian and gay people to show up for them in the event that such a thing was to happen? These interactional processes of identity and community negotiation reveal the operation of the monosexual imaginary, where bi+ people are

considered unreal, and thus any way in which they may seek to claim a legitimate identity or community connection is dismissed because *true* bi+ existence is inconceivable.

Through illustrating the ways in which bi+ people negotiate identity and community in social interactions, my findings in Chapter 6, that bi+ people strongly desire visibility, and frame this as a major issue is not necessarily surprising, nor is the fact that beyond visibility they shared disparate ideas about what the future of bi+ activism should look like. However, these findings are important because they reveal the ways in which interactions contribute to the reproduction of monosexism. If bi+ people are so engaged with trying to signify positive sexual selves as well as find a community where they will be accepted, framing major political issues beyond visibility are lower on the list of priorities. Because of this, broader structural issues that impact bi+ people are neglected or are not even framed as issues that impact bi+ people and are thus left firmly in place. As such, because we exist in a monosexual imaginary that renders bi+ existence inconceivable, and bi+ people are consequently pushed to negotiate the way this system makes them invisible through navigating identity and community, they may have less energy and access resources or community connections to identify and challenge the inequalities that impact them (whether they are aware of these inequalities or not). It is through highlighting these components of bi+ life, as well as they ways they inform one another, that I illustrate the processes that maintain the monosexual imaginary and thus monosexism.

One of the main implications of this study is highlighting the importance of future work that explores more thoroughly bi+ people's personal narratives. Currently, the work that does exist on bi+ people mostly focuses on large, quantitative datasets. While these studies are undoubtedly useful in helping illustrate the ways that monosexism persists in the post gay era, the interviews I did here allow us to see the texture of how bi+ people navigate these dynamics in

their everyday lives. There are many topics I don't touch on in this dissertation, such as experiences in educational settings, the workplace, the family, and more. Thoroughly exploring qualitative accounts of bi+ people's experiences in these settings would allow us to have a more complete understanding of their contemporary lived experiences and how they approach navigating inequalities in their everyday lives.

As I noted in Chapter 4, bi+ people construct identity in relation to monosexist stigma and draw on various dominant discourses about bi+ people to explain the ways they choose to identify themselves. Furthermore, I highlighted how bi+ people rely on "queer" as a signifier of community allegiance despite the fact that many LGBTQ communities don't necessarily grant them full membership in these spaces. My work expands on existing sexualities literature by illustrating how bi+ people navigate both older and newer stigmas when claiming various non-monosexual identities. A logical next step to follow up my findings would be to investigate what other stigmas may inform bi+ people's identity work. For example, as Rust (1996) notes, bi+ people may feel differently about certain identity labels based on race, class, and religion. How might the monosexual imaginary operate similarly and differently in the lives of bi+ people who occupy various social locations?

Though bi+ people as a group are impacted both by monosexism and the ways in which both the validity of bi+ existence and structural monosexism is rendered inconceivable in the monosexual imaginary, how might these impacts look differently based on other lived experiences and structural locations? My sample was relatively homogenous in terms of race, class, gender, and education demographics<sup>8</sup> and so it would be useful to see how these processes shift and change based on these and other components of bi+ peoples' existence, this is especially the case since our understanding of sexualities exists in a context where systems like

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<sup>8</sup> See the Methodological Appendix for more detail on the sample.

racism, classism, and patriarchy inform how the boundaries of sexuality are regulated (Collins 2005; Espiritu 2001; Garcia 2012). Furthermore, my sample is disproportionately highly educated, and thus many of them were at least aware of student groups or organizations that connected to LGBTQ experiences, even if they didn't feel they could fully be a part of these groups. Thus, a question future scholars should ask is how might bi+ people who haven't been in higher education setting do identity work related to their sexualities? Given that many respondents discussed how they learned about bi+ stereotypes and stigmas in educational settings, it would be important to better understand how various experiences in terms of education might shape the different strategies bi+ people use to navigate such stigmas.

Since my sample is relatively racially homogenous, where most respondents are white, future studies should interrogate how bi+ people of color navigate these stigmas. Current understandings of sexuality are also, even if implicitly, racialized (Collins 2005; Garcia 2012). As such, it may be the case that bi+ people of color note some overlapping and some different stigmas than the ones reported by the mostly white respondents in this sample. For instance, bi+ men of color may be more likely to talk about stereotypes and stigmas associated with "being on the down low" (Ward 2015) and how these notions of a specifically racialized form of bi+ existence impact how they come to their sexual identities. Furthermore, because the sexualities of women of color are often framed as excessive and hyper-reproductive (Garcia 2012), future studies of the experiences of bi+ women of color should attend to the ways these racialized stigmas impact how they navigate monosexist stigmas of bi+ people's sexuality being excessive and greedy. Through these analyses, we can gain an even deeper understanding of how the monosexual imaginary is not only obfuscates the ways in which monosexism is reproduced, but also the potential ways in which racism and classism are also bound up in this process.



I also emphasize how bi+ people navigate exclusion from LGBTQ spaces. These findings highlight precisely why Worthen (2013) and others have suggested that it is time to disaggregate the varied experiences of those who fall under the LGBTQ umbrella. While scholars have pointed to the ways in which people of color (Ward 2008), transgender people (Sumerau and Mathers 2019), and those in more rural areas (Kazyak 2012) are sometimes excluded from or have to create different queer communities, future work should also interrogate the ways that bi+ existence may further impact these exclusionary practices. Bi+ people rarely (if ever) have other spaces to go where they can discuss their shared experiences. If bi+ people, as my respondents demonstrated, could potentially fit in both heterosexual as well as LGBTQ spaces, but don't necessarily feel entirely comfortable in either of them, how might these dynamics of exclusion impact their experiences in the social world more broadly?

This is a particularly important question for further study since much of the exclusion bi+ people experienced in LGBTQ spaces was often predicated on the assumption that bi+ people experience heterosexual privilege and thus are undeserving of membership in LGBTQ spaces. However, given that bi+ people experience significant disparities in terms of health (Gorman et al. 2015), economics (Badgett et al. 2013; Mize 2016), intimate partner violence (Walters et al. 2013), and family (Scherrer et al. 2015) or broader social acceptance (Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Herek 2002), it is worth interrogating what exactly is privileged about bi+ existence? At present, it seems that the presumption that bi+ people experience heterosexual privilege is strongly rooted in the notion that bi+ people have the potential to be perceived as straight in public interactions with strangers (i.e., based on partnership, bi+ people may not receive significant harassment if they are in a partnership that is read as heterosexual). However,

conceptualizing this potential as a privilege obfuscates all the ways in which bi+ people are *structurally* marginalized.

Furthermore, this conceptualization from within LGBTQ communities may contribute to the ways in which bi+ people struggle to identify the structural inequalities that specifically impact them. It would be worthwhile for future analyses to focus on the ways in which community connectedness may impact how bi+ people make sense of inequalities and politics. It was clear throughout my interviews that bi+ people diverged greatly in the ways that they talked about bi+ political issues. I contend that part of the reason why this happened is because bi+ people are not necessarily plugged into broader networks of other bi+ people who could both raise bi+ people's shared consciousness of specific inequalities that disproportionately impact bi+ people as well as conceptualizing ways in which said inequalities can be challenged.

As I highlighted in Chapter 6, bi+ people do not share a coherent frame about what the future of bi+ activism and politics should look like when it came to issues besides increasing visibility. Though these topics of conversation were only a portion of my overall interview schedule, it would be useful to explore these questions more in depth. Also, it is important to note that the concrete issues bi+ people in my sample did note were ones that would impact both bi+ people and other monosexual individuals, and they were issues that might lend particularly fruitful ground to pushing more towards a framework of queer coalitional politics (Cohen 1997). Considering that bi+ people are the largest sexual minority group in the U.S. (Gates 2011), what would it mean to center these issues *as* issues related to sexual inequalities even though they also impact those who are not sexual minorities?

As it stands, many conversations on LGBTQ politics and inequality focus specifically on legal rights and perceptible slights people endure in public places. This framework is particularly

informed by homonormativity and (monosexual) narratives of being “born this way” that exclude bi+ potential from existence. Because this framework is so dominant, many bi+ people I interviewed a) didn’t feel like they experienced any discrimination because of their sexuality and b) didn’t see their concerns as central or important in fights for sexual equality. As it presently stands, bi+ people experience inequalities related to their sexualities but do not have a way to make sense of and talk about these experiences as such. Thus, there is a broader disconnect between the very real experiences with economic, healthcare, and other forms of inequality and how these are specifically tied to sexuality for bi+ people. Another consequence of this study could be encouraging future exploration for the need of awareness raising efforts among bi+ groups. However, following Eisner’s assertion (2013), these forms of awareness raising should be expressly connected to the material ways in which bi+ people are disadvantaged. For instance, how might we connect efforts of increased bi+ visibility with the concrete inequalities bi+ people navigate on a day-to-day basis?

Though sociologists have dedicated little attention to bi+ specific activism, it would be worthwhile to further investigate the patterns of how interviewees made sense of bi+ politics to see how, if they do, hold for other groups of bi+ people. Black and queer scholars have been talking about the importance of coalitional politics for decades (Cohen 1997; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991), and bi+ and transgender communities have historically had coalitions in the face of exclusion from lesbian and gay groups (Eisner 2013). More recently activists and writers like Shiri Eisner (2013) have started to build on these insights to highlight how taking such an approach to bi+ politics could be instrumental in the breakdown of monosexist inequality. Given that bi+ people comprise the majority of the LGBTQ population (Gates 2011), and that transgender and people of color are more likely to identify as bi+ (Movement Advancement

Project 2017), taking an intersectional, coalitional approach to the future of bi+ activism could be an important pathway to disrupting existing homonormative approaches to LGBTQ politics.

Also, since homonormative politics often relies on identity claims to sexuality for causes, what would it mean to frame police harassment, mass incarceration, poor access to healthcare, and poverty *as* LGBTQ issues through a bi+ lens? How could doing so disrupt the persistence of the monosexual imaginary in structuring out understandings of sexual inequality? One of the main ways in which other sociologists could build on this study is more intentionally doing work that aims to shift the center of what we conceptualize as sexual inequality by making these questions the emphasis of their future research endeavors.

Specifically, my findings should lead sociologists to ask, what would it mean to place bi+ experience and inequalities at the center of how we frame sexual inequalities? How would our understanding of sexualities, particularly “queer” sexualities, look different if we began with the assumption that bi+ existence is not the aberrant shameful cousin of lesbian and gay existence, but rather, following Sedgwick’s (1990) assertion about the heterosexual/homosexual boundary, that any understanding of sexualities that *doesn’t* center non-monosexuality is inherently flawed? What if, instead of monosexuality being the “proper object” (Butler 1994) of sexualities studies (as is currently the case), non-monosexuality, and all the challenges that come along with it, was the starting place moving forward?

This suggestion might sound ridiculous to those who are deeply invested in sexualities studies as they currently exist. However, it is important to reiterate that, at present, the largest sexual minority group in the U.S., bi+ people (Gates 2011) is routinely excluded from our scholarship on these issues. This exclusion would be akin to gender scholars suggesting (explicitly, implicitly, or otherwise) that we can understand all we need to know about gender

from studying the experiences of cisgender women and agender people living in the United States. Or, to draw on another example, the way in which bi+ experiences are treated in sexualities literature would be like a religion scholar suggesting that we can understand all we need to know about religion by looking exclusively at Christianity and those in the Church of the Scientology. In both of these cases, most sociologists would suggest that limiting our entire understanding of gender or religion to focusing on these two groups would be a ridiculous thing to do. I agree, this would be a nonsensical way to approach studying gender and/or religion, and it is this pattern in the sexualities literature that I hope to start to disrupt with the work I present here.

Another implication of this work could also be broader campaigns aimed at destigmatizing both bi+ existence and mental health issues. My findings highlight the pervasiveness of stigmas against bi+ people, both in heteronormative society at large and LGBTQ spaces specifically. Furthermore, existing literature points to the fact that bi+ people experience more challenges in terms of emotional and mental health (Bostwick 2012). Issues relating to mental health are already highly stigmatized in U.S. society, and people, particularly those who experience marginalization based on race, class, gender, and/or sexuality, experience challenges getting the mental health resources they need. As such, one area where these findings could be used is in creating campaigns within and beyond LGBTQ spaces to de-stigmatize both bi+ existence and mental health issues. Though some of these efforts may be underway and geared toward LGBTQ people more broadly, creating campaigns that specifically reference some of the stigmas respondents in this study talk about could go a long way toward lessening the stigma around both bi+ existence and mental health/ seeking resources related to mental health. After all, visibility was one of the *most* prevalent things bi+ respondents talked about. As such,

bringing visibility together with health-related issues in LGBTQ communities might be one way to use these findings to start having a positive impact for bi+ people.

Furthermore, given that bi+ people struggle finding bi+ community, one way that LGBTQ groups could help lessen this is by redistributing some of their monetary resources to specifically bi+ causes and groups. As others have pointed out, bi+ organizations and groups get fewer funds than LGBTQ-broadly groups (San Francisco Human Rights Commission 2011). By doing this, other LGBTQ groups could signify 1) solidarity with bi+ people and the recognition that bi+ people may benefit from having community organizations that speak directly to their needs and issues and 2) contribute material resources to the groups that speak to the largest and significantly structurally disadvantaged group within the LGBTQ umbrella. If bi+ organizations were to receive this money, they should then use it to create specific resources that speak to bi+ communities of color, women, survivors of intimate partner violence, poor bi+ people, immigrant bi+ people, and others who are structurally marginalized within the bi+ umbrella. Doing so would build off of what some of my respondents noted as concrete issues that could help bi+ people, as well as burgeoning conceptualizations of what a “radical bi politics” could look like (Eisner 2013)

As I note in Chapter 3 when discussing my research methods, I did not receive funding for this research. While this was not surprising to me at the time, it is notable that conducting research on the largest segment of the LGBTQ community is not deemed worthy of funding in many circumstances. With the exception of a few smaller grants, there is not significant money that is dedicated specifically towards understanding bi+ experiences. As such, it would be beneficial for governmental and other agencies to allocate more money to research like what I

present here. Doing so could be a meaningful step towards better understanding and hopefully lessening monosexist inequalities in the social world today.

While my findings lend significant insights into how bi+ people in a large city context conceptualize issues of identity, community, and politics, it would be worthwhile for future researchers to explore how the experiences of bi+ people in more rural settings may be different. It may be the case that bi+ people feel more community with other LGBTQ people in these spaces because there may not be as visible of spaces that are dedicated to LGBTQ events and gatherings, and thus potentially less monosexist boundary maintenance that happens in these spaces. Furthermore, considering how religion may factor into community experiences of bi+ people in rural settings will be important. Considering most research on LGBTQ issues, this dissertation included, focuses on urban regions on either coast of the U.S. or in “destination cities” such as Chicago (Stone 2018) it would also be useful for future scholars to focus more on the specific nuances and experiences of Southern bi+ people and bi+ people beyond “destination cities.”

Finally, my findings point to the fact that in order to fully grasp the way in which the monosexual imaginary operates, we need to interrogate how monosexual people construct and make sense of their lives in relation to bi+ people. In so doing, future work could lend even more insight into the complexity of the monosexual imaginary and how it works to reproduce monosexist inequality. As such, it would be useful to interview lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals to see how they talk about bi+ people, do identity work in relation to bi+ people, and conceptualize issues that would impact bi+ people. Doing so may lend greater insight into the persistence of monosexist inequality.

In all, this study represents an effort to challenge the overwhelming focus on monosexuality that exists in the social sciences today (Monro et al. 2017). Through this study I illustrated how a way of making sense of the social world which I refer to as “the monosexual imaginary” has structured much thinking, in our discipline and society writ large, when it comes to bi+ experiences. By talking to bi+ people in an era that is supposedly saturated with victories for sexual equality, I aimed to understand how they made sense of themselves in such a social context when there is documented evidence to suggest they haven’t benefitted from these supposed gains (Gorman et al. 2015; Mathers et al. 2018a; Mize 2016; Scherrer et al. 2015; Sumerau and Mathers 2019). While my findings are useful for illustrating this point, it is clear that much more research and advocacy are needed before we can truly claim that we have reached a point of sexual equality.



## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

**TABLE V. RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>9</sup>**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sexual Identity</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Class Now</i>	<i>Education</i>
Addison	25	Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Master's
Agatha	25	Bisexual	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Doctorate in progress
Ava	24	Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	Black	Working	Bachelor's
Becca	27	Not Straight	Transgender Woman	White	Poor	Associate's
Bridget	30	Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower Middle	Bachelor's
Cassidy	27	Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower Middle	Bachelor's
Christie	27	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower Middle	Doctorate in progress
Cole	26	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Man	White	Middle	Bachelor's
Daria	27	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Master's in Progress
Davey	24	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Man	White	Upper Middle	Master's
Delilah	30	Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Master's
Elliot	23	Bisexual	Cisgender Man	White	Middle	Bachelor's
Faye	24	Bisexual, Pansexual, Panromantic Asexual	Cisgender Woman	Multiracial (Asian and White)	Lower Middle	Bachelor's
Griffin	29	Bisexual	Cisgender Man	White	Middle	Bachelor's
Harriet	22	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Master's in progress
Inez	28	Queer, Fluid	Cisgender Woman	Multiracial (Asian and White)	Middle	Doctorate in Progress
Jackson	21	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Man	White	Upper Middle	Bachelor's in Progress
Jane	29	Bisexual	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Master's

<sup>9</sup> All demographic information is based on respondents' self-reports.

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sexual Identity</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Class Now</i>	<i>Education</i>
Jenny	26	Pansexual	Transgender Woman	White	Upper Middle	Doctorate in Progress
Kimber	24	Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Bachelor's
Luna	26	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	Latinx/ Chicana	Middle	Bachelor's
Lynne	26	Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower	Master's
Matilda	25	Queer	Transgender Woman	White	Upper Middle	Bachelor's
Neko	21	Fluid	Nonbinary	Asian	Lower Middle	Bachelor's in Progress
Olivia	27	Bisexual	Cisgender Woman	Latina	Lower Middle	Master's
Parker	24	Queer	Nonbinary	White	Middle	Bachelor's
Penelope	28	Queer, Panromantic Demisexual	Cisgender Woman	White	Upper Middle	Doctorate in Progress
Quinn	26	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Bachelor's
Rory	30	Bisexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Bachelor's
Roxanne	28	Bisexual	Cisgender Woman	Pacific Islander	Middle	Bachelor's
Sebastian	25	Pansexual	Cisgender Man	White	Upper Middle	Master's
Sloane	25	Bisexual, Pansexual	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Master's
Summer	28	Bisexual	Cisgender Woman	Latina and White	Middle	Bachelor's
Tabitha	30	Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower	Doctorate in Progress
Tegan	27	Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Middle	Master's in Progress
Vera	30	Queer	Cisgender Woman	Asian	Middle	Doctorate in progress
Vivienne	28	Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower Middle	Master's in Progress
Whitney	26	Bisexual, Pansexual	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower Middle	Bachelor's
Yvette	26	Bisexual	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower Middle	Bachelor's
Zoey	23	Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer	Cisgender Woman	White	Lower Middle	Bachelor's

**FIGURE II. INTERVIEW GUIDE<sup>10</sup>**

Age

Where did you grow up?

How would you describe your sexuality?  
-when did you first realize?

Religion as a kid

Religion now

Class as a kid

Class now

Education

Job/ work

Race

Ethnicity

Sex assigned at birth

Current gender identity

Relationship status?

Any other important parts of your identity that I didn't mention?

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<sup>10</sup> Questions were not always asked in this exact order, rather my questions and when I asked them depended on the respondent. These were the topics I covered in every interview and is a copy of the paper I would bring with me to each interview.

How did you arrive at that language to describe your sexuality?

What do you think of the term bisexual<sup>11</sup>?

-bi men

-bi women

Coming out

-Family

-Friends

-Work

-school

Race and sexuality

Religion and Sexuality

Social class and sexuality

Gender and sexuality

Healthcare

Dating

-dif S & G?

Pride Events

Straight Gatherings

Visibility

What is the bisexual issue (gay marriage, bathroom bills)?

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<sup>11</sup> I altered these terms in my questioning depending on how respondents defined their sexualities at the start of the interview, then asked follow-up questions about other terms accordingly.

**VIGNETTE 1 – ALTERNATE BETWEEN VERSIONS A & B EVERY OTHER INTERVIEW**

**1a.** Your friend Melissa has been dating a new person, James. She is very excited about the relationship. During a conversation she mentions that James had previously been in a long-term relationship with a man named Kevin.

- a) What are your thoughts about James and Melissa's relationship?
- B) What advice would you give Melissa about her relationship with James?

**1b.** Your friend Alexander has been dating a new person, Samantha. He is very excited about the relationship. During a conversation he mentions that Samantha had previously been in a long-term relationship with a woman named Beth.

- a) What are your thoughts about Alexander and Samantha's relationship?
- B) What advice would you give Alexander about his relationship with Samantha?

**VIGNETTE 2 – ALTERNATE BETWEEN VERSIONS A & B EVERY OTHER INTERVIEW**

**2a.** Vanessa is a woman in her senior year of college. For her sophomore and junior years of college Vanessa was in a serious romantic relationship with another woman, Eileen. Vanessa and Eileen often volunteered at the local LGBTQ center at their university and participated in local activism to support LGBTQ causes beyond their campus. At the start of her senior year, Vanessa ended her relationship with Eileen. Later that year, Vanessa started dating a man, Seth. When Eileen learned about Vanessa's relationship with Seth, she began to call Vanessa a traitor to gay people.

- a) What are your reactions to Eileen's statements toward Vanessa?
- b) What would you say to a friend who is in a similar situation as Eileen in this scenario?

**2b.** John is a man in his senior year of college. For his sophomore and junior years of college John was in a serious romantic relationship with another man, Stephen. John and Stephen often volunteered at the local LGBTQ center at their university and participated in local activism to support LGBTQ causes beyond their campus. At the start of his senior year, John ended his relationship with Stephen. Later that year, John started dating a woman, Carrie. Upon learning of his new relationship, Stephen told John that he was a traitor to gay people.

- a) What are your reactions to Stephen's statements toward John?
- b) What would you say to a friend who is in a similar situation as Stephen in this scenario?

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