

Adapting to Injustice: Young Bisexual Women's Interpretations of Microaggressions

Psychology of Women Quarterly
2016, Vol. 40(4) 532-550
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DOI: 10.1177/0361684316664514
pwq.sagepub.com


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Abstract

In this study, we link together moments of discrimination described by young bisexual women. We do so in order to theorize about associations between negative stereotypes heard early in one's life and later minimization of personal discrimination. Using interviews with 13 young women, we sought to understand the types of negative messages participants heard about "bi/sexuality" as well as the ways that they perceived or did not perceive themselves as having experienced discrimination related to their sexuality. We found that family members and friends often described participants' bisexuality as "disgusting," "difficult to understand," or "hot," and participants described their own experiences with discrimination as "no big deal." We use this analysis to build on previous research concerning microaggressions, sexual stigma, and denial of discrimination to discuss how familial, social, and political environments create a set of conditions in which later injustices are imagined as normative and inevitable. Finally, we discuss the methodological dilemmas facing feminist psychologists who aim to analyze discrimination and the challenges in documenting individuals' experiences of stigma, which may be imagined as no big deal to individuals, but are in fact unjust. It is imperative to develop strategies to recognize, document, and critically assess how injustice becomes all too normal for some and the role that feminist psychology can play in changing this. A *podcast conversation with the author of this article is available on PWQ's website at <http://pwq.sagepub.com/site/misc/Index/Podcasts.xhtml>*

Keywords

sexual identity, stigma, qualitative, LGBTQ, discrimination

Growing up hearing slights and slurs about one's own sexuality from family members and peers is, for some, part of the normal course of life events. What are the cumulative effects of hearing negative comments about oneself (or those like you), from those who are close to you, on a regular basis, and over time? Researchers have argued that familial, social, and political environments can create a set of (dis)abling conditions for sexuality development (Fine & McClelland, 2006) and, in addition, negative experiences may become invisible when injustice is imagined as normative and inevitable (Opatow, 1990, 2001). Taking up questions of how individuals absorb the effects of discrimination over time, we sought to examine the association between hearing negative stereotypes in one's early life and later minimization of personal discrimination (Crosby, 1984; Deutsch, 1974; Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984).

When trying to understand why individuals might downplay or disavow the discrimination they face, researchers have often focused on psychological mechanisms such as belief in a just world (e.g., Choma, Hafer, Crosby, & Foster, 2012), system justification (e.g., Jost & van der Toorn, 2012), or possessing a meritocratic worldview (e.g., Kaiser & Major, 2006). This research has questioned what motivates individuals to perceive their own and others' outcomes as fair. The scholarship on

microaggressions offers another perspective on how and why individuals might downplay their own experiences of discrimination (Sue, 2010). A microaggressions framework emphasizes the characteristics of persistent discrimination, the cognitive labor involved in recognizing discrimination, and how individuals cope with unjust circumstances over time. In a related body of research, Meyer (1995, 2003) has found that experiences of chronic discrimination and anticipation of further stigmatization result in forms of minority stress, leading to negative physical and psychological health outcomes in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2015). Researchers who study microaggressions (Sue, 2010) and minority stress (Meyer, 2003) have persuasively argued for

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greater consideration of how vigilance shapes the lives of people who face chronic and subtle mistreatment.

Bisexual women experience higher rates of poverty, workplace discrimination, and physical and sexual violence than gay and lesbian-identified individuals (Badgett, Durso, & Schneebaum, 2013; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013). Bisexual women also report higher rates of depression and anxiety as compared to their heterosexual and lesbian peers (Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, & McCabe, 2010). These patterns have also been found in younger women; bisexually identified adolescents have been found to report more depressive symptoms, more perceived stress, and higher rates of binge drinking, smoking, and victimization than heterosexual young women (Lindley, Walsemann, & Carter, 2012). It is important to note that researchers also have found that bisexual individuals are less likely to report discrimination than their lesbian and gay peers (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014). There may be several reasons for this underreporting, including fear of retaliation (M. E. Brewster, Moradi, DeBlaere, & Velez, 2013), passing as heterosexual (Herek, 2009b), and lower levels of perceived social support (Roberts, Horne, & Hoyt, 2015). Lower rates of reporting discrimination may also be due to bisexual women downplaying or minimizing the discrimination they experience (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Bringing together research on perceptions of discrimination (Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993), sexual stigma (Herek, 2007), and minority stress (Meyer, 2003) allows for further questions to develop about how sexism and homophobia, when experienced together, may affect how individuals cope with chronic mistreatment and how chronic mistreatment affects reports of discrimination.

In the current study, we examined interviews with young bisexual women about the messages they heard about bisexuality while growing up. We paired these experiences with women's interpretations of the discrimination they faced as young adults, with an eye toward understanding how early experiences of sexual stigma might have affected the coping strategies women used to deal with regular and persistent prejudice. As research continues to highlight the high rates of women identifying as bisexual within the United States and internationally (Gates, 2011), this study contributes to a growing discussion of how subtle forms of prejudice affect young people's understandings about themselves, their sexuality, and their sexual development. We begin with a review of the relevant literature.

Bisexuality-Based Discrimination

Researchers have studied the characteristics and outcomes of bisexual prejudice or biphobia (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Bostwick et al., 2010; M. E. Brewster & Moradi, 2010; M. E. Brewster et al., 2013; Colledge, Hickson, Reid, & Weatherburn, 2015). There is evidence that bisexual individuals have worse mental health outcomes than their lesbian, gay, or heterosexual counterparts, including higher rates of

anxiety (Bostwick et al., 2010) and substance abuse (McCabe, Hughes, Bostwick, West, & Boyd, 2009). In addition, there is evidence that bisexual women have worse mental health outcomes than lesbians, signaling that there may be important gender and sexual identity differences in how sexual stigma is enacted and felt by bisexual women (Colledge et al., 2015; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Balsam, & Mincer, 2010). For example, in their assessment of adolescents with opposite-, same-, and both-sex partners, Udry and Chantala (2002) found that girls with both-sex partners were nearly twice as likely to be attacked (e.g., getting into a physical fight or having a knife or gun pulled on them) as girls with opposite-sex partners only. In their study of LGB adults, Balsam, Rothblum, and Beauchaine (2005) found that bisexual women and men had significantly higher rates of sexual assault in adulthood, as compared to their lesbian, gay, and heterosexual counterparts. This evidence points to the kinds of stigmatizing environments that bisexual individuals face.

Across studies, several negative stereotypes about bisexuality have stood out as consistent, including that bisexual persons have been accused of being confused and in transition between heterosexual and lesbian identities (Barker & Langdrige, 2008), cowardly and avoiding the stigma of identifying as lesbian or gay (Hayfield, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014), promiscuous and unable to commit to a monogamous relationship (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014), and seeking the attention of heterosexual men (Diamond, 2005). In qualitative research on these issues, several additional important patterns have emerged, namely, that chronic stigmatization may come from people close to bisexual individuals, such as friends, family, and even romantic partners (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002; Hayfield et al., 2014; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). For example, family members are a common source of discrimination (e.g., "My sister said to me . . . I would prefer it if you were just my gay brother, and not this slutty person who just sleeps with everyone"; Ross et al., 2010, p. 498). In daily diaries with young adult bisexual women and men, Flanders, Robinson, Legge, and Tarasoff (2016) found that female participants heard slights from their romantic partners that portrayed them as attention-seeking, hypersexual, and prone to infidelity (e.g., "[my girlfriend said that] bisexual people can't commit to just one type of partner—it reinforces the message that we are 'greedy' and that we cannot generally be monogamous"; Flanders, Robinson, Legge, & Tarasoff, 2016, p. 11). These findings highlight that, while the boundaries of "acceptable" sexuality are often imagined as being enforced through social institutions or from far away, sexuality policing often occurs close to the person. These mundane exchanges often move vigilance about one's sexuality into the personal realm and into the self. In the current study, we examined this pattern to better understand how hearing stigmatizing comments from family and friends affected young bisexual women.

Researchers who study perceptions of discrimination have focused on cognitive and motivational processes in the attribution literature (e.g., Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). Individuals often rely on consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus when making appraisals about whether they have been discriminated against—and if these elements are missing, individuals may disavow facing discrimination (Crosby, Burris, Censor, & MacKethan, 1986; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Other explanations for minimizing discrimination include individuals' desire to protect their self-esteem, maintain perception of self-control, and reduce potential social costs incurred for making complaints (Crocker & Major, 1989; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2004). Still other scholars have turned toward the persistent yet imperceptible aspects of discrimination in order to explain why individuals might minimize the discrimination they face; for example, Cortina's (2008) model of incivility in the workplace captures the types of everyday sexism women face on a daily basis when they go to work (see also Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016). Because workplace incivility is ambiguous, women may appraise these experiences as frustrating but not particularly threatening. Although minimizing sexism may temporarily alleviate psychological distress, frequent acts of incivility can accumulate over time and negatively affect well-being (Cortina & Magley, 2009). Attention to the size, scope, or regularity of prejudice has developed into research on microaggressions, where discrimination is so commonplace that it becomes normalized and, as a result, harder to see (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014; Opatow, 2011, 2016).

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are a form of prejudice that appears small enough to be discounted but nevertheless accumulates over time, resulting in negative psychological and social outcomes (Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, & Davidoff, 2016; Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities" (Sue, 2010, p. 5) and have been found consistently to be a major cause of chronic disease for people of color (Nadal et al., 2016). The daily wear and tear of microaggressions has been found to be detrimental to the health and well-being of those who contend with a steady stream of daily slights, including African Americans (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), Asian Americans (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009), and individuals with disabilities (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Researchers have argued that the framework of microaggressions can also be applied to the types of discrimination LGB individuals face (Nadal, Rivera, Corpus, & Sue, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011). For example, Nadal and colleagues (2011) found that LGB participants reported increased emotional distress, isolation, and low self-worth after a friend or parent suggested that they hide their sexual orientation in order to secure a job interview. These and other findings suggest that a microaggressions framework offers a

useful way to understand how individuals interpret messages they hear about their sexuality and to examine the implications of subtle forms of prejudice.

In research with adolescents and young adults, mundane and hard to discern derogatory slights are commonly used to marginalize LGB peers. For example, Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, and Yu (2012) found that LGB college students reported frequently hearing the phrase "that's so gay" to describe something as stupid or undesirable during daily interactions with their heterosexual peers. LGB students who heard this phrase had a greater likelihood of not feeling accepted by their heterosexual peers and reported feeling left out at their university. Wright and Wegner (2012) found that LGB adults who experienced higher frequency of homophobic microaggressions while growing up also reported lower self-esteem and increased negative feelings at the time of study. These findings suggest that not only do microaggressions affect LGB individuals in the present, but exposure to subtle forms of prejudice throughout childhood can also significantly affect mental health later in life. Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2016) found that young women and men described routine diminishment of women and girls in school, work, family, and digital life. The authors found that young women worked to make sense of living amid this pervasive sexism by deemphasizing the role that sexism played in their lives. Calder-Dawe and Gavey argued that these maneuvers to negate or deny the impact of sexism allowed young women to "sidestep victimhood" and avoid appearing weak and disadvantaged; instead, they appeared resilient and self-determining. This argument highlights the complex matrix of strategies that may be used to interpret negative experiences, including the reasons one might avoid, minimize, or even deny one's own experiences with discrimination.

Method

Current Study

Findings from studies on sexual stigma, biphobia, perceptions of discrimination, and the role of microaggressions demonstrate that researchers should look more closely at the impact of negative stereotypes on individuals, the role of gender norms in shaping how individuals respond to discrimination, and the implications of chronic sexual stigma. While researchers have documented the range of stigmas bisexual women face in their daily lives, less is known about the cumulative effect of hearing negative messages about one's sexuality over time. Survey and experimental approaches have enhanced researchers' understanding of the conditions under which individuals perceive or misperceive discrimination (Major et al., 2002). In the current study, we aimed to use qualitative data to extend this prior work by examining the messages young women heard about bisexuality from family and friends and how young women adapted, coped, or avoided discriminatory experiences concerning their sexual identity.

Sample

Data for this article were collected as part of the Michigan Smoking and Sexuality Study (M-SASS), a project that used interview and survey methods to analyze sexual identity, sexual stigma, and smoking habits among a sample of lesbian, bisexual, and queer young women living in the United States. M-SASS focused on the experiences of young sexual minority women in order to examine how minority stress and experiences of discrimination might play a role in why this group has the highest smoking rates and suffers from other sexuality- and gender-based health disparities (K. L. Brewster & Tillman, 2012; Gruskin, Byrne, Altschuler, & Dibble, 2008). Participants were recruited into the interview and survey portion of M-SASS at different times and using different recruitment strategies. The survey sample (not reported here) was recruited across the United States using web-based sampling. For discussion of survey findings, see Johns, Pingel, et al. (2013).

In the current study, we focused exclusively on the interview portion of M-SASS ($N = 30$) and, within the interview sample, on those participants who identified as bisexual ($n = 13$). Participants were recruited through targeted advertisements on social media (e.g., Facebook). Ads about the study were displayed to those who identified as women, listed themselves as interested in other women (or men and women), resided in the state of Michigan, and were within the target age range of 18–24 in 2011 when the interviews were conducted. When potential participants clicked on the Facebook ad, they were sent to the study website and asked to fill out an online screening form. If eligible, a date and time for an interview was scheduled. Participants received a US\$25 electronic gift card for participating in the telephone interview. Purposive sampling was used in order to ensure diversity of sexual identities (lesbian, bisexual, and queer) in the sample. In total, 30 women (15 lesbian identified and 15 bisexual/queer identified) were interviewed as part of the parent study. For further discussion of interview findings, see McClelland, Rubin, and Bauermeister (2015) and Youatt, Johns, Pingel, Soler, and Bauermeister (2015).

Our analysis focused on interviews conducted with the 13 participants who identified as bisexual during the interview portion of the study (2 participants who identified as queer were not included in the current analysis). The 13 participants in the bisexual subsample were 19–24 years old ($M = 21.85$, $SD = 1.37$); participants identified as White ($n = 10$), Black/African American ($n = 2$), and Latina/Hispanic ($n = 1$). Just over half ($n = 7$) of the participants lived in urban areas (defined as all populations with over 50,000 according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), while the remainder of participants lived in rural or suburban areas (i.e., those with less dense populations).

Interview Procedures

Before beginning the interview, all participants consented to both the interview and to being audio recorded. Because data were collected via telephone and not in person, the university

institutional review board (IRB) approved a waiver of documentation of informed consent (i.e., requiring that the subject sign a document). Interviewers read the consent over the phone prior to initiating the interview with a participant. When participants were sent their incentive payment, they also received a link to the consent document for their reference. In addition, a certificate of confidentiality protected study data. This document, issued by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, protects researchers and institutions from having to disclose participant data that are collected as part of a study from any civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceeding, whether at the federal, state, or local level. The IRB of the university approved all study procedures.

Three female interviewers were trained to conduct the interviews. Interviewers were lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer-identified women in the same age-group as the participants, although neither their sexual identity nor age was disclosed to participants. The M-SASS research team developed interview questions to investigate a range of possible stressors that young LGB women faced while growing up and were associated with their sexuality. The interview protocol included questions about participants' early messages concerning same-sex sexuality; questions about their own early experiences of sexuality, including initial experiences of feeling same-sex attraction; questions about coming out to friends and family; and how participants defined their sexual identity. In addition, participants were asked to tell the story of the first time they came out to someone (whom they told, the other person's response, and how the participant felt about the experience). Interviews typically lasted 60–90 min. Examples of interview questions relevant to the present discussion included: "Where did you learn about same-sex sexuality?" "Who was the first person that you came out to?" and "Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your sexual identity?" Data from these questions were analyzed in 2014.

Data Analysis

Our aim in this study was to understand the psychological processes women use in responding to microaggressions. In our case, 13 interviews provided enormous detail and contributed to the challenging project of understanding subtle socialization processes that are often difficult to study empirically; they are often hiding in plain sight. Both interview methods and qualitative analysis strategies provided a type of depth that a larger sample or a different data collection strategy might not have offered. Discussions about sample size in qualitative research often center on "how many" interviews constitute valid qualitative inquiry (Francis et al., 2010; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Robinson, 2014). While some have called for guidelines regarding the minimum number of participants (Bryman, 2012), others have cautioned that these recommendations devalue the methodological and

epistemological priorities of qualitative work (Barbour, 2001; Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). While sample size is often considered the primary indicator of "rigor" in many studies, this evaluation relies on researchers pursuing generalizability of their findings. There are, however, many other indicators of a study's worth and level of rigor, including the strength of its analytic frame, the composition of the sample, the types of data that are collected, and the potential impact of a study's findings (Marecek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997). In the current study, we followed guidelines offered by qualitative psychological researchers who argue that the richness of information provided and the theoretical framing of the research project are the most meaningful indicators of robustness, rather than the number of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Epistemological framework. Our analysis focused on two key moments within the interviews: first, messages about bisexuality heard from family members and peers and, second, participants' interpretations and perceptions of sexuality-based discrimination they had faced. Analytic procedures were informed by two approaches. First, a feminist poststructuralist perspective guided our analytic decisions, specifically regarding attention to language (Derrida, 1967/1974). Poststructuralist theorists argue that any study of language must proceed with attention to how social relationships and histories shape what meaning is derived from language (Butler, 1995). Feminists have argued that unequal status due to gender, race/ethnicity, and colonial histories are especially important to consider when examining language (Lather, 1993; Spivak, 1988, 1993). As this work has moved into feminist psychology (see Gavey, 1989), researchers have analyzed aspects of power, status, and socialization in what participants talk about and how they talk (Boonzaier, 2008; Owen, 2012; Ussher, 2004; see also Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000). This perspective demands not only attention to "context" but also attention to the way that language is used (or not used) to communicate. Participants' communications (in surveys, experiments, or interviews) may be motivated by, and may be constrained by, several social forces that are not clearly visible (e.g., not feeling safe, being in a low-status position) and, in addition, may be outside the participant or the researcher's awareness. In other words, a feminist poststructuralist perspective demands researchers ask a set of questions about the situation, the person, and participants' many social roles. For example, if a participant says, "Everything is fine," this comment might be recorded as an endorsement of a positive attitude. However, additional questions of when, why, and how this particular statement was used, and what else it might stand for, contribute important insight into the person and what they feel "fine" about. In our analysis, we focused on developing an analytical strategy that moved beyond participants' surface-level descriptions to explore language choices, silences, and gaps in communication in participants' accounts. Using a feminist

poststructuralist perspective, we aimed to represent individuals' experiences as well as focus on how they represented (or did not represent) their experience (Josselson, 2011a).

In addition to feminist poststructuralism, the work of feminist psychologists who study distributions, procedures, and outcomes related to justice claims encouraged us to develop critical awareness of how individuals adapt to injustice (Clayton & Opatow, 2003; Opatow, 1990, 2011, 2016). Feminist psychological insight is key in approaching studies where adaptation is both necessary and difficult to observe. It requires that researchers attend to moments when individuals do not insist on better treatment or more resources, but instead, report being satisfied with the status quo (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crosby, 1984; McClelland, 2010).

These two approaches, feminist poststructuralism and feminist justice research, guided how we approached the analysis of the interview data, and with these in mind, we made the following decisions: (1) We paid attention to how participants described the negative messages they heard about bisexuality as well as unstated patterns among these messages. (2) We attended to how participants described experiences of discrimination as well as listened for moments when participants told us that they were fine, "used to it," or when negative interactions were "not that bad." Our questions throughout this article follow the threads developed by feminist psychologists who have argued for better recognition that early negative messages about oneself create an environment in which discrimination becomes normalized; hence, discriminatory messages are perceived as part of the normal social landscape and truly something that is "not a big deal" (Baker, 2008, 2010; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016).

Data analysis procedures. We examined two questions in our analysis: (1) How did family members and peers respond when participants came out as bisexual? (2) What kinds of discrimination did participants report and how did they describe their responses to these experiences? We used thematic analysis strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to represent patterns in the data; we used narrative analysis strategies to guide our interpretation of how participants' early experiences might be related to their later ones.

Thematic analysis. We used an inductive approach to thematic analysis, which meant that themes were developed from the data content. This is in contrast to methods that aim to test predetermined hypotheses or to examine data for insight into specific predetermined categories. In the thematic analysis, our aim was to understand the pattern of stereotypes that people heard about bisexuality and to focus on the implications of these messages, not to determine the content of what was said or to limit our analysis to just what participants described during the interview. We relied on social constructionist and feminist strategies in our thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014; Hayfield et al., 2014), which meant that themes we developed reflected

participants' descriptions as well as elements that were made more clear through the analysis of the group.

The first and second author worked collaboratively in the data analysis stage; both reviewed the data and developed codes through reading and discussion of the interviews. Coding and analysis followed a four-step process. First, data were coded using broad codes referring to the messages participants heard about bisexuality as well as the source of these messages, noting for example, whether messages came from peers or strangers and whether the messages were negative or positive messages about bisexuality. The second round of coding identified more details about each excerpt, for example, adding in elements of affect, such as the differences between shaming the participant about their bisexuality and avoiding the participant after they came out as bisexual. In the third step, the codes were collated in order to develop potential themes. Provisional themes were created from the codes, such as "disgust," "discomfort," and "sexually available." The fourth stage involved further refinement of provisional themes, which meant revisiting the coded data, and then the full data set, to determine the fit of potential themes. In this fourth stage, we focused on interpreting what participants reported hearing about bi/sexuality (e.g., "that's disgusting") as well as the meanings and social norms communicated through these messages (e.g., "they treat you like you're an animal").

Following our analytic decisions, we do not report the frequency of themes found in the data. This decision is rooted in arguments about the limitations of applying quantitative logic to the analysis of qualitative data. Many qualitative researchers have argued that frequency counts of thematic codes or themes fundamentally misrepresent the epistemological and methodological contributions of qualitative inquiry (Bhati, Hoyt, & Huffman, 2014; Brinkmann, 2015; Gergen, Josselson, Freeman, & Anderson, 2015; Valsiner, 2014). Qualitative researchers often avoid reducing complex phenomena to numerical values; instead, scholars strive to gain insight into how participants articulate their beliefs and experiences. We did not want to equate the frequency with which participants endorsed a particular idea with its meaningfulness; reports of frequencies have the potential to overemphasize ideas that are most easily spoken and underemphasize those that are more difficult to describe (Braun & Clarke, 2013). We aimed to understand the contextual and subjective experiences of participants and believe the frequency of themes would not significantly contribute to this aim.

Narrative analysis. While the separate parts of the interview in which stereotypes about bisexuality, coming out stories, microaggressions, and descriptions of discrimination could be analyzed as discrete events, we saw these elements as more aptly analyzed in relation to one another. As a result, we used narrative analysis strategies to examine sequencing within participants' stories (Chase, 2003; Josselson, 2011b; Riessman, 2005). In this part of the analysis, rather than

identifying themes, we focused on identifying the sequential order of events described by participants. We used this approach as a way to examine how participants described their early life, their experiences of discrimination, and their interpretation of these experiences. Narrative analytic approaches pay particular attention to time and temporal relations and have unique strengths when examining individual processes in the midst of social norms (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994). In our narrative analysis, we temporally organized events described in each interview to produce a story for each participant (Kelly & Howie, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1995). This strategy differs, for example, from collecting stories from participants and analyzing the narrative elements of these stories (McAdams, 2001).

The semistructured interview format invited the participant to recall her experience from younger ages to the present. Subsequently, many of the transcription data were in chronological order; however, some were not and through a temporal organization of the data, more information could be assessed. In this step, the first author read every interview and each time a participant described hearing a message or described an experience related to their sexuality, the participant's age at the time was noted (e.g., "age 12"), the source of the message was noted (e.g., "from peer"), the content of message was noted (e.g., "called a slut"), how the participant described their response at the time was noted (e.g., "felt sad"), and, lastly, how the participant felt about the message at the time of the interview was noted (e.g., "now feels angry"). Experiences of discrimination (even if they did not call it discrimination) were noted in this same way (e.g., "called dyke" and "it's not a big deal"). These brief notes allowed for a sequencing of events to be more clearly analyzed than using thematic analysis, which enables a clear examination of the types of things that bisexual women reported hearing but was less effective in making the order of these messages clear. This step reduced a full-length story to a much shorter chronological narrative, which sharpened the focus of the events, actions, and subsequent outcomes in each story. Due to space limitations, we do not report on the sequences in the current study but used these data to inform our analysis of the discrimination participants reported throughout their interviews.

Last, we used the term "bi/sexuality" throughout the analysis in order to mark that the messages young women reported hearing were sometimes about bisexuality, other times about same-sex sexuality, or sexuality more broadly, but nevertheless interpreted and remembered by a bisexual-identified speaker. The term bi/sexuality, then, offers a way to reference all of these dimensions simultaneously.

Results

Exposure to Stereotypes About Bisexuality

Early messages about sexuality offer insight into the range of ideas young people hear; they often convey loved one's

attitudes about sex and sexuality. We categorized reactions from friends and family about participants' coming out as bisexual into four main categories; these included responses that underscored listeners' disgust, discomfort, titillation, and ambivalent tolerance. These four categories formed a continuum of responses, some more explicit in their stigmatization, but none completely free of stigma. Each theme name highlights the content and tone that participants reported hearing as well as the more implicit aspects of the message that sometimes went unacknowledged by participants. For example, the ambivalent tolerance theme exemplified by the phrase "that's fine, but ..." enabled us to analyze how friends and family were not explicitly rejecting participants (as seen in the "that's disgusting" theme); however, when these excerpts were analyzed together, the refrain of this theme highlighted the more subtle ways that silence was present and could be read as both acceptance and/or avoidance. Participants' excerpts are followed by their age and race; all names provided are pseudonyms.

Disgust: *"That's disgusting."* Explicit forms of rejection included being told that bisexuals were "sinful" or that they were "going to hell." Throughout the interviews, participants consistently marked these stigmatizing moments with feelings of shame, frustration, and sadness. As Aisha (20 years old, Black woman) reported, coming out as bisexual was particularly dehumanizing:

[Friends] start to act differently around you. They don't want to be around you anymore. They make jokes at you ... [They] make all of these horrible remarks about when, or how wrong, it is and you shouldn't lead your life this way. And they would just [rather] be away from you, like you have a disease or something ... Even though you still are a human being they treat you like you're just an animal.

Participants reported that they wanted to be open about their bisexuality; however, this meant possible rejection from the meaningful relationships in their lives. Celeste (20 years old, White woman) offered insight into experiences of social marginalization from her peer group after she came out as bisexual to a trusted friend:

I had told my friend and she kind of blabby-mouthed that I was bisexual to a lot of those people and they just were like, "what is wrong with you?" Like, "you're the devil, like, you're—you're disgusting, you're wrong, like that's just, that's sinful, you're going to hell." And it was just, it was so awful, it was a horrible experience and like I never wanted to see them again ... But when the fact was brought up that I was bisexual they just like flipped out and like couldn't handle it even though they had met me as a person before.

These messages underscore the extreme elements that were present in some of the messages participants heard about bisexuality. Being told that bisexuality was "gross" or being

treated like "an animal" were the most explicit negative reactions and demonstrate not only what participants heard but also how they managed hearing these messages. For example, Celeste described it as a "horrible experience," and both Aisha and Celeste described their own sense of confusion about how their bi/sexuality transformed them in their peers' eyes from friend to "animal." Other reactions were less extreme, but nevertheless contained elements of sexual stigma.

Discomfort: *"That makes me uncomfortable."* Participants described responses from family and friends that included silence, awkwardness, and disapproval. For example, when Celeste described coming out to her parents, she was not met with anger or surprise, as we saw in her friends' reactions above. Instead, her parents chose not to talk about it at all: "They weren't shocked and they weren't mad. But they were just kind of like, 'okay, end of discussion, like I don't really want to talk about it anymore.'" Participants also reported that family and friends responded to their bi/sexuality with confusion and disbelief. Throughout the interviews, young women reported hearing phrases such as "I just don't understand it," or as Bridget (20 years old, White woman) found, messages from her mother that included "that's fine if you're gay, that's fine if you're straight, but I don't get bisexuality." Elements of not understanding bisexuality were thematically linked with messages about discomfort, as the affect underlying these messages was shared: Bi/sexuality was described or imagined as making others uncomfortable.

Eleanor (21 years old, White woman) similarly reported that friends and acquaintances became uncomfortable with her bisexuality: "People are uncomfortable speaking with me after they find out I am bisexual because they think that I am going to ask them to sleep with me or something like that." These experiences illustrate that peer relationships may develop in specific ways for bisexual women, as both same-sex and other-sex peers may interpret bisexual identity as potentially sexualizing their relationships. These responses demonstrate how discomfort (silences, confusion, etc.) was used to create distance between the speaker and the listener; discomfort communicates a mild form of rejection while not appearing to reject the person.

Titillation: *"That's hot."* In addition to explicit rejection and subtler forms of silencing, bi/sexuality elicited a titillated response from strangers and friends. Participants reported reactions that focused on objectifying attitudes directed toward bisexual women that drew on tropes of them as promiscuous and hypersexual. Participants reported consistently being told, "that's so hot." Celeste reported that some of her friends responded by imagining that her bisexual identity meant she was more sexually available: "Like, 'oh, this means that she can hook up, like do threesomes and all that.'" In addition, participants described varying forms of sexual harassment related to their bisexual identity, including

unwanted comments from friends and coworkers. As Eleanor (21 years old, White woman) reported:

A couple of months ago I went to a Christmas party with my boyfriend for his work and we had all had a little bit too much to drink and they found out somehow, either from me or from somebody else, that I was bisexual and I was actually harassed for quite a long time because they assume that because I'm bisexual I'm open to anything. You know, there were a couple of remarks to the fact that I should strip naked and just start having sex in the middle of the snow.

These messages concerning stereotypes of bisexual women as hypersexual, while not as immediately rejecting as the messages about sinfulness or disgust in the earlier theme, nevertheless underscore an implicit rejection in which the target of the message is positioned as sexual object and not a person.

In addition to hypersexuality, bisexual women were described as potentially sexually greedy. As Frances (22 years old, White woman) reported, "a lot of people were like, 'You either lick cooter, or you stick it. And you can't have both, and if you are, then you're just a greedy person.'" These responses illustrated that bisexuality was not only perceived as hypersexual but also that this was accompanied by a stereotype about being self-indulgent and ultimately excessive in their sexuality (McClelland & Fine, 2008). Like the other responses of disgust and discomfort, these messages concerning titillation and excessive sexual appetites also created distance between the participant and others without appearing to outright reject them.

Ambivalent tolerance: "That's fine, but . . ." Finally, participants described reactions to their bi/sexuality as relatively uneventful. In these cases, family members were described as generally supportive; nevertheless, there were negative attitudes about bisexuality woven through descriptions of being fine and "okay with it." For example, Gillian (22 years old, White woman) reported:

I kinda semi-came out to my grandparents because I told them I was involved in my diversity group, and they asked me, "Are there any homosexuals in that group?" I mean they were okay with it. One of my grandmas prays for me, but my parents are pretty fine with it. I identify as bi now, which they find weird and I "should pick a side."

Even within narratives of "that's fine," there were threads of disapproval and/or distance. Peers and family members often communicated a passive form of acceptance that framed bisexuality as not a big deal and yet still contained elements of judgment. This appears most clearly in Aisha's experience of coming out to her mother:

[I said], "it's just that I like women and I have for a long time." She was like, "oh, that's not a big thing." She was just like, "I

fornicate, so we're both sinning, so it's not a big deal." And so she just walked out the room and I sat there very shocked, very shocked, I can't say anything like after that, I was just blown away by what she said.

Although her mother's response was one of overall support, she still characterized Aisha's sexuality "sinful" and aligned it with her own sin of having sex outside of marriage. This theme captured the ways that participants reported how others saw their sexuality as fine, but these descriptions also contained aspects of intolerance and ambiguity that undermined the sense that coming out as bisexual was fine. This dynamic can be seen especially clearly in how Hannah (21 years old, Black woman) described how her best friend "accepted" her sexuality and how she subsequently made sense of how her peers had to "overlook" her sexual identity:

I told my best friend at the time and she accepted it. And everybody—cause I'm just a nice, genuine person, so, I guess people always overlooked that . . . Ninth grade was ending. I was more like a popular kid in ninth grade, I was hangin' with the seniors. So, I was popular at the time. So, at school it was no problem.

Her description includes several elements, including her best friend's response of accepting Hannah's bisexuality as well as Hannah's efforts to make sense of why she thought things had not gone badly for her: from her niceness, to her genuineness, to her popularity. All of these pieces coalesce in Hannah's description, but this example demonstrates that young women, even when they were told their sexual identity was fine, were also asked to absorb some amount of ambivalence and judgment.

This range of responses—from disgust to being ambiguously fine with a young woman's bisexual identity—captured a set of reactions about bi/sexuality heard from family and peers. Ranging from severe to mild rejection, these four themes highlight how sexual stigma floats in the air, takes work to defend against, and is often difficult to interpret. These negative stereotypes emerged when participants shared their bisexual identity with friends and family. Within each of the four themes, there is evidence of the emotional and cognitive labor that illustrates what sexual stigma looks like in people's lives. In addition, these themes document the content of what participants heard and how they worked to absorb these messages. This involved marking experiences "horrible" in some cases, "being very shocked" at someone's lack of explicit rejection, or relying on one's popularity as a way to explain why there wasn't more fallout from coming out as bisexual. Across all of these examples, there is some evidence of how participants made meaning throughout these social interactions surrounding their bisexuality. In the next section, we turn from their early lives to their later experiences as young adults and their young-adult perceptions of bi/sexuality-related discrimination.

Disavowals of Discrimination

When asked about whether they had ever faced discrimination as a result of their bisexuality, young women in the study consistently said “no.” In our analysis, we examined what participants thought about discrimination. The ways that participants spoke about understanding their experiences of discrimination encouraged a set of questions about how young women came to see negative experiences surrounding their bi/sexuality as normal and to be expected.

“Not me personally.” Throughout the interviews, when asked whether they had faced discrimination due to their sexual identity, participants consistently reported they had not been discriminated against (Q: “Have you ever been discriminated against because of your bisexuality?” A: “No.”). However, this “no” was quickly followed with examples of negative interactions with peers, disrespectful comments from family members, or slurs heard from strangers. Nearly all participants described hearing derogatory remarks regularly, but they did not see this as a form of sexuality-based discrimination. Typical responses from participants included “Ye—um . . . not—I mean, not personally, somebody has never, like, come up to me and been, like, telling me straight up, discriminating me.” Bridget’s (20 years old, White woman) unsure agreement she had not been discriminated against was followed by retreat (“Ye—um . . . not—I mean, not personally”); this response exemplified the complex nature of participants’ responses concerning what “counted” as discrimination. This is not surprising if one considers the term “discrimination” as signaling a prototypical standard, such as being refused a job or housing, which these young women may have not yet encountered. However, we heard story after story of young women being called “dyke,” being ridiculed in public, getting “weird looks,” and a slew of negative experiences concerning their sexuality. Isabella’s (22 years old, White woman) descriptions illustrated this sequence. In an exchange during one part of the interview, she described knowing how people think bisexuality is “wrong.” This was followed by her denial of facing discrimination and when asked to clarify, she described getting dirty looks and other microaggressions when holding her girlfriend’s hand:

- Q: What ideas or perceptions does society have about people who are bisexual?
- A: I don’t think they look at it right . . . They say, “you’re not supposed to,” “God wouldn’t like it,” and just a bunch of negative stuff.
- Q: So, what gives you that impression?
- A: Just the way people talk and how they look.
- Q: Have you ever felt discriminated against um because you’re bisexual?
- A: No.

- Q: So when you say the way people look, what do you mean by that?
- A: They’re like, if I’m walking around with my girlfriend and we’re holdin’ hands they’ll just like look at, like guys will smirk and girls will give, like, a dirty look.
- Q: And has that happened to you before?
- A: Yes.

In this excerpt, Isabella indicated that she knows discrimination occurs, but like Bridget who also argued that she had not faced discrimination personally (“Ye—um . . . not—I mean, not personally”), Isabella distances herself from having been the victim of discrimination and therefore does not need to account for this lower status identity (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). When the interviewer presses her for clarification, Isabella goes on to describe microaggressions that she experienced, such as “dirty looks,” but is no longer in the position of having to account for being a victim of discrimination or to explain how she handled that kind of situation.

In addition to participants denying forms of mundane discrimination, participants emphasized that these instances were often no big deal. For example, Jacqueline (23 years old, White woman) recalled a time when she was called dyke:

You’re holding a girl’s hand in the street, that kind of thing. Or I have a couple of rainbow ribbons on my backpack . . . whatever, but like, I’ve gotten that before, you know. I’ve heard, like, “dyke” screamed at me. I’m like, “Whatever. Sure.” . . . I understand you’re hurlin’ it at me with malice, but I’m not . . . I’m not really worried about it.

This example and her explanation that she has “gotten that before” and “like, whatever” signal just some of the ways participants worked to make these microaggressions less disturbing. Jacqueline’s tone and dismissal of the discriminatory experience (“I’m not really worried about it”) was typical of the encounters young women described as well as their own coping strategies when considering these experiences.

“Let it roll off your back.” Participants described a range of ways they navigated these stigmatizing experiences, including avoidance techniques, passing as heterosexual, and wearing clothes that allowed them to be viewed within expected gender norms (i.e., as “feminine” enough). These descriptions provided an additional perspective on how young women imagined their own participation in these negative interactions. For example, when Jacqueline (23 years old, White woman) described that she had “gotten no more than weird looks or whatever, a couple of slurs thrown [her] way,” she went on to say that “I try to be more like a duck, let it roll off your back kind of thing.”

In addition to descriptions of letting slurs roll off their backs, participants described ways that they actively avoided

discrimination. Passing as heterosexual was one strategy. As Celeste (20 years old, White woman) reported: “I act straight. I don’t tell strangers and I don’t tell classmates about it.” In contrast, Eleanor (21 years old, White woman) described how it was essential to disclose her sexual identity in order to avoid possible employment discrimination: “I’ve told every single one of my employers that I am bisexual . . . my employer [understands] the fact that I am bisexual should in no way make any of the employees feel concerned for their safety.” Each of these strategies highlights the vigilance and labor that was required to reduce any perceived potential negative outcomes as a result of people knowing they were bisexual. Eleanor’s description of telling “every one of [her] employers” makes especially clear how she saw this vigilance as her responsibility, and that this was not for herself and her own safety, but assurance that her peers should not “feel concerned for *their* safety” as a result of her bisexuality. In this way, bisexual women can be seen to be protecting themselves (and others) in various ways from the possible fallout of negative stereotypes, microaggressions, and assumed dangers associated with bi/sexuality.

While these avoidance strategies may have felt protective, these descriptions make clear that participants considered avoiding discrimination as their responsibility. Throughout the interviews, young women described how they avoided situations that might invite criticism; letting slurs “roll off your back” and acting straight make clear the efforts young women made to avoid being stigmatized. For example, Karla’s (22 years old, White woman) response to the question of whether she had faced any discrimination highlighted how she “hasn’t opened the door for that”:

Um, no, but I guess I haven’t really opened the door for anything like [discrimination] besides with my family. But other than that, no, I haven’t opened the door for that. [Q: And what would that be, to open the door?] . . . I guess allowing for some discrimination, I guess. Opening the door for it. Putting myself in that situation where I might, or could be, discriminated based upon [my sexuality].

Karla’s description of not putting herself in a situation where she might face discrimination highlights the role of self-surveillance and vigilance surrounding bi/sexuality. These avoidance strategies add an additional layer to the no big deal examples described above. Not only are negative interactions described as minimal, they are also seen as easily preventable, and up to the individual to monitor and avoid.

These beliefs run parallel to rape myth discourses, which also emphasize that a person must remain vigilant and not put herself in harm’s way in order to remain safe (Gavey, 2005). In other words, safety is earned, not expected. Seen in tandem, these efforts to retain control can be understood as part of a larger tapestry of ways which young women frame discrimination they experience as their fault, something that can be avoided and, as a result, those that do admit to

discrimination (or become victims of violence), can be blamed for not having exerted enough control (over their bodies, their environments, or those around them). This attitude, in part, helps to explain one reason that participants would not want to admit to facing discrimination. To do so would be to identify as victim, and perhaps worse, to admit lack of control (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Participants’ dismissals of discrimination coupled with coping strategies and avoidance techniques offer insight into possible adaptation to discriminatory situations they have experienced throughout their young lives.

Discussion

We focused our analysis on two aspects of participants’ experiences: early messages about bi/sexuality and later perceptions of discrimination. Our aims were to document the messages young women heard about bi/sexuality and the coping and meaning-making responses they described. Building from research which has documented that individuals with marginalized identities frequently minimize their experience of discrimination (Crosby, 1984; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002), our findings help to elucidate aspects of how individuals might also adapt to forms of mundane injustice—seeing discrimination as normal and to be expected. These findings elucidate the ways individuals internalize negative messages about bi/sexuality and how this potentially affects their willingness to perceive future events as discriminatory.

We used multiple, complementary analytic strategies that allowed for layers of meaning to emerge over the course of an interview. The use of a poststructuralist perspective helped several findings stand out: While participants disavowed or minimized their experiences of discrimination, we did not. Participants also described negative comments they heard as “not a big a deal,” but in our analysis, we called attention to these comments as requiring psychological labor, even if the person did not tell us about this labor or see it as difficult. In addition, a feminist poststructuralist perspective on the interview material helped to highlight how the comments that friends and family made about bi/sexuality drew on culturally available discourses about bisexual women as disgusting and sexually excessive. This perspective helped to inform our thematic analysis which captured patterns in these comments, but drew them together in such a way that we were able to examine not only the content of these comments but also analyze how certain messages required young women to react. For example, when faced with ambiguous tolerance of their bi/sexuality, exemplified by the phrase, “that’s fine, but . . .,” we were able to trace how participants struggled to decode this kind of message even while they reported being relieved that they did not face more severe rejection. These examples demonstrate that feminist analysis is essential to any study; without attention to social norms and silences, researchers risk overlooking ways that individuals are

negatively affected by situations, but unable or unwilling to communicate this experience.

Stereotypes About Bi/Sexuality

Our findings about exposure to negative stereotypes echo previous findings concerning bisexuality, including expressions of disgust, discomfort, and fears of hypersexuality (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; M. E. Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Burke & LaFrance, 2016; Hayfield et al., 2014). In addition to documenting this continuum, our findings highlight that negative stereotypes about bi/sexuality not only created distance between the speaker and the listener, but in addition, the listener may be asked to absorb implicit and explicit negative messaging as well as the affective and cognitive labor that is required to process these messages about oneself.

We extend prior research on negative stereotypes about bisexuality by proposing a link between these early messages about bi/sexuality and the proactive and reactive strategies that LGB people employ when faced with the possibility for discrimination (Meyer, 2003). We demonstrate that vigilance and other coping strategies become necessary to survive sexual stigma. For example, young women described passing as heterosexual, developing avoidance techniques, and discounting prejudicial experiences as not a big deal. We argue that it is key to not only document the accumulation of negative stereotypes but also document the emotional and cognitive practices that are necessary to navigate explicit and implicit discrimination. By considering these protective strategies to guard against sexual stigma early in life, we also gained insight into the strategies that individuals may develop when considering whether they have faced discrimination later in life.

Minimization of Discriminatory Experiences

Like many other studies of discrimination, we found that participants in this study denied having experienced discrimination (Major et al., 2002). Participants went on to describe experiences of discrimination, which ranged from mild to severe; they often struggled in the interview as to whether these “counted” as discrimination and some also described how they were able to avoid discrimination. Did participants not want to acknowledge these experiences as discriminatory, did not see them as such, and/or did not want to admit they had been negatively affected by discrimination? In other studies (Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, West, & McCabe, 2014; Herek, 2009a), bisexual individuals were found to report lower rates of discrimination than their gay and lesbian peers. For example, Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, and McCabe (2010) reported that 19.5% of bisexuals reported any past-year sexual-orientation discrimination, compared to 51.7% of lesbian and gay respondents. When considering this discrepancy, Bostwick and Hequembourg (2014) wondered, “If

explicit discriminatory life events are significantly less common among bisexual groups, what then, accounts for such high rates of mental health disorders among this group?” (p. 489). In other words, looking at the rates of discrimination would lead one to believe that bisexual individuals simply experience less discrimination, yet they also seem to suffer more adverse outcomes. Why is there this discrepancy? This question invites and indeed requires us to theorize our own findings relevant to what Crosby (1984) called “the denial of discrimination.” Cosby argued, “if you are a woman, you are probably at a disadvantage because of your gender, but you are not very likely to acknowledge the fact. The chances are that you deny your own victimization” (p. 371).

Young women in our study consistently dismissed the slurs, weird looks, and derogatory comments they heard directed at them as not a big deal. In other words, these exchanges were so pervasive and routine that they were often framed as innocuous. Microaggressions provide a useful framework for our findings because microaggression theory emphasizes the role of attributional ambiguity (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). Many of the experiences described by participants would be considered microaggressions; this may also help to explain why participants did not understand it to be “real discrimination.” When negative treatment is perceived as ambiguous, individuals have been shown to attribute negative consequences to their own behavior rather than the behavior of others (Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). Even in nonambiguous circumstances, however, psychologists have found that women minimize their own discrimination, even under circumstances that were objectively unfair (Crosby 1984; Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). Experimental studies have consistently found that low-status individuals minimize or deny discrimination across a range of scenarios (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). Qualitative insights derived from the current study add several elements to existing theory.

We argue that developmental elements play an important role in adapting to injustice. First, negative messages often came from friends and family (mistreatment from close range); second, negative messages about bi/sexuality occurred early in life and remained consistent (accumulation of mistreatment); and third, early messages set the stage for expectations later in life (threshold of mistreatment affected). These elements helped to frame participants’ minimization of discrimination as a result of mundane sexual injustice. With this evidence, we theorize that the accumulation of negative stereotypes over time is a form of chronic minority stress and contributes to how young women come to interpret themselves as outside the scope of discrimination (Opatow, 1990). This results in individuals diminishing or downplaying any negative effects of mundane unjust treatment; discrimination has come to be expected, may go unnoticed, but nevertheless draws on an individual’s cognitive and emotional resources.

Rather than focusing on coping strategies, such as protecting one’s self-esteem, our findings may offer insight into how

discrimination is transformed into “no big deal” by the target. Similar to our own findings, Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2016) found that young women reported that sexist issues they faced were no big deal and that sexism was a thing of the past and of little consequence. In her study of Arab and Muslim students, Shammass (2015) found that participants maintained there was little discrimination against Islam at their colleges. Explanations students gave ranged from the school’s location being “ethnically diverse” to descriptions that some students are bothered by racist comments, but others “‘have a strong character [so] they don’t really care’” (p. 16). In focus groups, participants explained that they did not report discriminatory experiences for several reasons, including fear of noting these experiences on a survey, assumptions that nothing would change if they reported, and worries about being seen to be “making a big deal” out of something.

The current study also asked: Why do participants acknowledge their negative experiences, but minimize reporting of the discrimination they face? While sexism and heterosexism are important political tools to aid individuals in recognizing discrimination, these tools also position the individual as damaged as a result of being discriminated against. As a result, it becomes more difficult to study sexism and heterosexism when admitting to these experiences has either become so normal as to be invisible or so associated with being damaged that it makes the statement dangerous (Fine, 2012). This presents feminist psychologists with a set of methodological dilemmas when studying unjust circumstances (Bowleg, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Russell & Seif, 2002).

Practice Implications

When individuals downplay or trivialize injustices, the question remains, how can one ask people to report on what, to them, has become normal? This presents a methodological dilemma to those who are interested in documenting discriminatory experiences or individuals’ responses to discrimination. When individuals stop recognizing situations, experiences, or people as injurious, it sets up a set of potential silences and difficulties for those who are tasked with documenting and arguing for more (legal, social, interpersonal) protections.

As researchers, we have to think carefully about how to “find” things that are hidden in plain sight. Participants may normalize their experiences with violence, aggression, insults, and discrimination, and they may, at times, lose the ability to label such experiences as “weird” and “abnormal,” making them all the more insidious and difficult to document or analyze. With this in mind, we offer several suggestions for researchers who aim to develop theories and methods to understand perceptions and minimization of discrimination. We argue that accommodation to these conditions must be documented—in this group and in every other group that

experiences the constant “drip feed” of discrimination (Fine & Ruglis, 2009).

As participants are often unwilling to label discriminatory actions, researchers are encouraged to pursue questions in this field using a variety of designs, including structural analysis and observational strategies as well as analysis strategies that examine interpretive processes. Examples include using subtle prompts, such as relating stories of low points (e.g., Frost, 2011) or asking about behaviors related to discrimination, but not discrimination itself (e.g., an item from the Anti-Bisexual Experiences Scale, “People have not wanted to be my friend because I identify as bisexual”; M. E. Brewster & Moradi, 2010, p. 458). Researchers might also pair surveys with focus groups. Shammass (2015), for example, found that while participants reported little evidence of experiencing discrimination in a survey format, they were able and interested in talking about their rationales for low reporting in focus groups.

Methods that allow for experience sampling, including daily diary studies (e.g., Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003), might also capture ongoing experiences of daily hassles, slights, and slurs that would be missed in studies about discrimination. Last, while there is a good deal of research that shows individuals with low-status identities often minimize their own experiences of discrimination (Schmitt et al., 2014), there is still little guidance about how to address this issue in legal and research contexts, where those who have been aggrieved are often required to report and claim this experience, with very little acknowledgment of the barriers that stand in the way (Fine, 2012; Kaiser & Major, 2006). Finally, studies that can account for structural barriers that impede individuals from recognizing and/or reporting discrimination are also essential (e.g., Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Several theoretical contributions are also useful to consider for their relevance to the study of young women’s sexuality and how to theorize accommodation to discrimination. McClelland’s (2010, 2011, 2014) work on intimate justice offers one perspective; she has critiqued sexuality research for failing to account for differences in what people think they deserve and for overlooking how individuals determine what is fair when aspects of sexuality are involved (see also Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Researchers do not routinely consider how structural inequalities (e.g., in social norms, political rights) precede self-evaluations of desire, attraction, or satisfaction. As a result, data are evaluated with little insight into the conditions under which individuals develop sexual expectations or feelings of entitlement to aspects of their own sexuality. In addition, Bay-Cheng’s (2015, 2016; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008) critical work highlights the high social costs that young women face when imagining themselves as being (or not being) sexually agentic. Bay-Cheng usefully draws attention to the limits of feminist research designs that measure agency and desire, without further attention to the social organization of these ideas that

precedes any data collection or analysis. Researchers must continue to develop theoretical and methodological practices that allow them to observe and critique how individuals across social conditions learn to diminish expectations for their own self-worth as a result of the negative stereotypes they hear, the insulting messages they absorb, and the persistent set of discriminations they face.

Future Directions

We encourage researchers to consider how individuals navigate inevitable tensions that arise when one faces microaggressions and then dismiss them as trivial. This is an important next step to better understand how microaggressions lodge themselves under the skin. The process of dismissing mundane injustice likely affects how individuals develop racial, gender, and sexual identities as well as possibilities for resistance and social change more generally. In addition, young bisexual women in this study consistently reported being described by family members and peers as being “confused” about their sexuality. We wonder about the implications for this type of invalidation; the message that one’s own internal experience is out of reach and disorganized—even to oneself—is an unusual set of messages and the psychological implications of this communication are worthy of further investigation. In addition, while we did not have an adequate sample size to examine potential differences among individuals who had grown up hearing extremely negative comments about their bi/sexuality (“that’s disgusting”) and those who heard less extreme responses (“that’s fine, but . . .”), this would be an important question to pursue in future research. In addition, we found that religious references (“going to hell,” “sinful”) emerged for several participants. We wonder how religious references might inform the tendency of participants to minimize or deny experiences of discrimination and whether religiosity might inform the kinds of management strategies that participants employed. In the current study, we were not able to explore this question, but this remains a provocative area for future research.

In addition, we encourage future researchers to examine how discriminatory remarks about sexuality intersect with race and class (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013). This would contribute to the growing literature on the cognitive and health implications of microaggressions for individuals who navigate multiple stigmatized social locations (Bowleg, 2008, 2013). In addition, it would be important to examine how responses to microaggressions are shaped by gender presentation and gender conformity. We were not able to examine how young women interpreted how they saw their gender presentation as a dimension of their experience (and how this may have affected messages heard from family and friends), although we would expect that conformity to gender norms may have buffered some women in this study more than others.

Study Limitations

There are compelling alternative explanations for the findings presented in this study. We did not study sexual socialization histories in a laboratory setting nor isolate any of the many contributing factors that led the women in this study to deny they had ever faced discrimination. In addition, the interview question about discrimination (Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your sexual identity?) may have been worded in such a way that participants did not feel they recognized their lives in the question. This question may have created too high of a threshold or discouraged participants’ acknowledgment of more subtle forms of discrimination. The interview context may also have made it uncomfortable for participants to claim that they were a “victim” of discrimination, an identity that may have felt like it diminished feelings of agency. The participants may have felt that they would be negatively judged or would have to justify their appraisal of discrimination, all of which may have been too psychologically or interpersonally costly.

Recruitment via social media may have meant that some experiences of bisexual young women were missing, including those who did not identify as interested in other women (or women and men) on their Facebook profile. When considering the merits and limits of Facebook as a recruitment strategy, some have found Facebook especially useful in recruiting diverse samples (Amon, Campbell, Hawke, & Steinbeck, 2014; Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov, & Stillwell, 2015). Others have found limits to this recruitment strategy, including that Facebook users have higher levels of education, are younger in age, and are less racially diverse (Bhutta, 2012; Frandsen, Walters, & Ferguson, 2014).

In addition, the study included the experiences of predominantly White women and, as a result, overlooked a more thorough examination of the experiences of women who navigate stigmatizing environments at the intersections of race and bi/sexuality (Bowleg, 2012; Parent, Deblaere, & Moradi, 2013). For example, given the persistent ways that young Black women are imagined to be sexually deviant and hypersexual (Collins, 2000; Fasula, Carry, & Miller, 2014), research on the experiences of Black women who identify as bisexual may shed further light on how bisexuality stigmas become amplified or diminished and how these might also affect Black women contending with various forms of discrimination and hypervigilance.

Conclusions

Hortense Spillers (1987) famously observed: “We might concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us [emphasis in original]” (p. 68). Spillers’ comments drive home the utter importance of studying injustice and, indeed, how difficult it can be to document the many ways people are harmed and killed by words. In this study, we used interview material to

theorize about the implications of spending a lifetime absorbing negative attitudes about one's bi/sexuality. We wondered how young sexual minority women might adapt to these experiences of sexual stigma. In our analysis, we learned that participants heard many negative messages, ranging from mild to severe, and that they experienced a range of discriminatory experiences, also mild to severe, that targeted their bi/sexuality. The participants consistently trivialized their experiences and often described slurs, dirty looks, and other negative interactions as no big deal. We argue that the appraisals of these experiences as routine demonstrate adaptation to micro-level forms of prejudice. As Spillers reminds us, words can kill us. It is imperative to develop strategies to recognize, document, and critically assess how injustice becomes all too normal for some, and the role that feminist psychology can play in changing this.

Authors' Note

Anonymized interview transcripts from participants who consented to data sharing are available by e-mailing José Bauermeister at bjose@upenn.edu

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the interviewers on this project, Emily Pingel, Michelle Johns, and Emily Youatt.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a grant from the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center to Dr. Bauermeister.

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