

“I Liked Girls and I Thought They Were Pretty”: Initial Memories of Same-Sex Attraction in Young Lesbian and Bisexual Women

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Abstract There is little research on what is meant by the concept of “feeling attracted” and even less about what same-sex attraction looks and feels like for individuals. Without insight into the phenomenon of same-sex attraction, researchers risk misunderstanding the role of sexual attraction in sexual identity development and risk mis-categorizing individuals in research designs that compare LGBTQ and heterosexual samples. The current study draws from semi-structured interviews ($n = 30$) with young lesbian-, bisexual-, and queer-identified women (ages 18–24) about their initial memories of same-sex attraction. Two questions were pursued using qualitative analytic strategies. We examined the age that participants remembered first experiencing same-sex attraction using content analysis. Two age groups emerged as distinct: those with experiences of same-sex attraction in childhood and those with initial attractions in later adolescence. We also examined key elements in participants’ descriptions of early same-sex attraction using thematic analysis. The role of embodied feelings, relationships with other young women, and social environments including media images emerged as central to initial experiences of attraction. Findings highlight how early experiences of same-sex attraction produced different types of interpretations within individuals and, in turn, these interpretations informed how participants did or did not take up LGBTQ identity labels. These findings may help guide the development of more refined measurement tools for researchers hoping to sample sexual minorities and can contribute to developing more effective supports for individuals who experience

same-sex attraction but may not adopt LGBTQ identity labels and, as a result, are routinely missed in outreach efforts.

Keywords Queer · Youth · Sexuality development · Sexual identity

Introduction

Researchers studying sexual identity and orientation often focus on how often, with whom, and when people have sex, feel desire, or experience feelings of attraction (Johns, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2013; Priebe & Svedine, 2013; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). These milestones offer important insight into aspects of sexuality development for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) youth. However, this emphasis on measuring *when* and *with whom* has often overlooked experiential aspects of sexuality development, including what early same-sex attractions feel like for young people and how they are interpreted. Greater insight into the phenomenon of “attraction” is key to current debates in sexuality research, especially as same-sex attraction is commonly used as an indicator of LGBTQ identity (Diamond, 2000, 2003a; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Russell & Toomey, 2013; Toomey & Russell, 2013; Young & Meyer, 2005). More recently, attraction has been singled out as a concept that lacks coherent definition for participants and, as a result, may severely impact research with LGBTQ youth (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2014).

Attraction is often theorized as one of the primary components of sexual orientation, along with sexual identity and sexual behaviors. There are, currently, several models of how these dimensions are related: some models recognize these dimensions as overlapping, while others see attraction, identity, and behaviors as distinct from one another and less necessarily aligned (Dickson, van Roode, Cameron, & Paul, 2013; Johns et al., 2013; Saewyc et al., 2004; Savin-Williams, 2014; Young & Meyer, 2005). As

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a result, researchers increasingly take pains to carefully consider if and how the concept of attraction captures important and relevant aspects of sexuality.

In order to better understand the phenomenon of same-sex attraction, we examined narratives of initial same-sex attractions with a sample of young lesbian-, bisexual-, and queer-identified women. Analysis of these narratives offered insight into how young women experienced and interpreted their own feelings of attraction, and additionally, the experiential process of sexuality development. With this in mind, we focused on initial moments of recognition of what it was like to feel sexual attraction and the contexts in which these initial attractions were experienced. These memories, we argue, hold enormous potential for contributing to the evolving discussion of sexuality development in adolescence and same-sex attraction for LGBTQ youth in particular. Information about the experience of same-sex attraction has several positive implications, including the development of more effective public health programs, development of more refined tools for measuring the frequency of same-sex attraction in national surveys, and development of increasingly relevant supports for LGBTQ youth.

Research in the field of adolescent sexuality has often focused on clarifying the relationship between sexual orientation and sexual identity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005, 2006; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). In the current study, however, we did not theorize participants' narratives of same-sex attraction as specifically within one of these constructs, but instead as part of a larger conceptual category of "sexuality development" (Tolman, 2006; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). When considering the intimate lives of young people, Tolman (2006) has encouraged researchers to adopt a multidimensional approach that accounts for *sexuality* rather than *sexual* development. A sexuality development framework draws attention to broader considerations of adolescents' attractions, desires, identifications, pleasures, as well as the contexts surrounding these experiences, rather than the more common and limited focus on adolescent sexual behaviors (Tolman, 2002a, b). As such, sexuality development includes several more dimensions that enable study and analysis of gender, sex, and culture:

The process of girls' bodies changing into women's is an absolutely central anchor of female sexuality development, not only for girls' experiencing new feelings, experimenting with new forms of embodiment, and playing malleable identities, but also for how they start to be processed and treated as the sexual beings they are becoming (Tolman, 2006, p. 85).

A shift towards sexuality development also encourages a shift towards studying "positive" or "normative" aspects of sexuality in young people (Diamond, 2006; Russell, 2005; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). From this perspective, researchers have been encouraged not only to study negative outcomes such as disease and pregnancy, but also to expand our focus to include

how young people come to think of themselves as learning about concepts such as desire, pleasure, and want (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Fine & McClelland, 2006; McClelland & Fine, 2008, 2014; Tolman, 2002a, b). "From a positive point of view, we might ask girls when they first had sexual feelings and orgasms, and what these were like. How did they make sense of them? How did they respond?" (Tolman, 2006, p. 86). With this cue, we move toward similar questions in the current study. Through an examination of narratives with young lesbian, bisexual, and queer women who were asked about their initial experience of feelings same-sex attraction, we analyzed the range of thoughts, feelings, and physical experiences that comprised participants' "erotic phenomenology" (Diamond, 2013, p. 11), thereby contributing necessary and often under-studied aspects of sexuality development.

Literature Review

Attraction Research

Several dimensions of attraction have been considered important when exploring the development of LGBTQ identities. These have included the age of first same-sex attraction (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2011), the frequency of same-sex attraction (Bos, Sandfort, De Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008), and the strength of same-sex attractions (Rosario et al., 2008). An individual's first experience of same-sex attraction has consistently captured researchers' attention as a way to understand the dawn of LGBTQ identity development. Herdt and McClintock (2000), for example, argued that the development of sexual attraction becomes stable around "the magical age of 10," irrespective of gender and sexual orientation. In contrast, other researchers have emphasized the importance of considering gender differences in early experiences of attraction (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). In a national sample of Australian adult twins, first initial awareness of sexual attractions was 13.7 years for men and 16.3 years for women (Dunne, Bailey, Kirk, & Martin, 2000). This age discrepancy has also been found between lesbian and gay individuals, with female adolescents reporting later recognition of same-sex attraction than male adolescents (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Rosario & Scrimshaw, 2014). These reports of initial attraction provide important developmental timelines, but, unfortunately, provide less information about variations within experiences of attraction (i.e., to whom, under what conditions, and with what outcomes). As a result, we know little about individuals' memories of feeling same-sex attraction, interpretations of these attractions, or the contexts in which these experiences occurred.

Researchers, however, consistently rely on measures of attraction in order to make decisions about samples. For example, the "romantic attraction" items from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health; Harris et al., 2009) have been used to select participants in the sample who have

experienced same-sex attraction (“Have you ever had a romantic attraction to a female?” and “Have you ever had a romantic attraction to a male?”). Based on the answers to these two questions, Add Health participants have been regularly classified as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, or asexual in research (e.g., Lindley, Walsemann, & Carter, 2012). Other examples of attraction items include “To whom are you sexually attracted?” (Thompson & Morgan, 2008) and “On a scale measuring your attraction to the (a) opposite sex and (b) the same sex, where would you place yourself?” (Priebe & Svedin, 2013, p. 729). These examples are representative of the types of items that have been regularly used in research with LGBTQ youth and have been used to assess a wide variety of outcomes, often with a focus on how youth who report some same-sex attraction differ from their heterosexual peers (Bauermeister et al., 2010).

Investigators have found same-sex attraction to be associated with a variety of health disparities, including increased risk of experiencing violence (Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013), increased suicidal tendencies (Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010), and increased likelihood of engaging in high-risk behavior, such as drug use (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2008). Additionally, same-sex attraction has been associated with decreased school outcomes, including less social integration at school and increased emotional distress in comparison to other-sex attracted youth (Johns et al., 2013; Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007).

Within the context of young women more specifically, Johns et al. (2013) found decreased psychosocial wellbeing (i.e., depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and social support) in a large U.S. national sample of predominantly heterosexually identified women who reported greater than average same-sex attractions. This finding demonstrates the role that same-sex attraction plays in wellbeing and, importantly, that this effect operates independently of individuals’ sexual identity. As Johns et al. (2013) explained, this may be a direct result of strains introduced by attraction to same-sex individuals, without ever claiming a LGBT identity: “ownership of same-sex attractions in a culture that privileges other-sex attractions may be enough to compromise psychosocial wellbeing” (p. 92).

The effects of experiencing same-sex attraction have been found to negatively affect other domains of life as well, and these effects have been found even when individuals report only slight amounts of same-sex attraction (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2006; Busseri et al., 2008). Bos et al. (2008) found that Dutch adolescents (ages 13–15) who experienced feelings of same-sex attraction rated their paternal and peer relationships as lower quality, and additionally, reported poorer mental health and worse school performance than their peers who did not experience same-sex attraction. Busseri et al. (2006) found that those with “mostly heterosexual attractions” reported worse psychological functioning and parental relationships than their peers with “exclusively heterosexual attraction,” and both of

these groups fared better than those with greater amounts of same-sex attraction.

These findings highlight how important measures of same-sex attraction are when assessing developmental trajectories and mental health outcomes for young LGBTQ individuals. However, while these studies indicate potential outcomes for youth who experience same-sex attractions, they do not adequately describe patterns of experience and situational triggers that shape the sexuality development of young people. We have little information about what is meant by the concept of “feeling attracted” to someone and even less about what same-sex attraction looks and feels like for young people.

The Importance of Studying Meanings

Savin-Williams and Joyner (2014) recently highlighted how the concept of attraction remains under-defined in sexuality research and, perhaps more importantly, under-defined for participants who are asked questions about their attractions. Savin-Williams and Joyner’s analysis of attraction items included in Add Health found patterns of inconsistent responses, which they argued were, in part, due to the ambivalent meanings that could be associated with “feeling attracted”:

...given the unusual and vague term romantic attraction, these were adolescents who misunderstood the question (“Does romantic attraction mean I like someone or want to have sex with them?”) (pp. 416–417).

Working from this set of ambivalent meanings and potential misunderstandings, Savin-Williams and Joyner (2014) pose an essential question: “Is the construct of romantic attraction itself the problem?” (p. 417). This question challenges those of us working in sexuality research to examine our terms more carefully and, importantly, return to individuals’ experiences of attraction to help clarify the concept for use in research.

Select studies have focused on how individuals understand their sexual feelings and experiences. A few have focused specifically on meanings of attraction and desire (Ussher, 2005; Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000), while others have focused on the relationship between attraction and sexual identity development (Morgan & Thompson, 2006, 2011). For example, Ussher (2005) focused on “first times” of lesbian desire and asked lesbian-identified women to reflect on memories when they first became aware of their sexual desire and how they interpreted these feelings. In her analysis, Ussher (2005) highlighted the important role silence played in her findings, and in particular, the dearth of imagery and opportunities for lesbian women to recognize, name, and share their experiences of desire. She found that this silence lead many women to have difficulty in recognizing when they felt sexual desire, difficulty in speaking about it, and difficulty in making meaning from their experiences.

In a similar vein, researchers have examined how individuals understand their experiences of attraction, with a more specific

interest in understanding the relationship between attraction and sexual identity. In their study with young heterosexual-identified women, Morgan and Thompson (2011) examined participants' "process of sexual orientation questioning" to see how experiences of attraction related to individuals' cognitive decisions regarding their sexual identity. They found that the majority of young women in their study reported a great deal of self-reflection about their own attractions to both men and women, which helped to confirm or develop their heterosexual identity. These findings usefully demonstrate that reflecting on experiences of attraction occur across the sexual identity spectrum and is a facet of sexuality development more broadly. These few studies of initial experiences of desire and transitions to new sexual identities (see also Diamond, 2008; Kitlinger & Wilkinson, 1995) offer useful guides to study how individuals remember and interpret early experiences of same-sex attraction and help develop a set of questions about what remains not yet understood about the phenomenon of "feeling attracted" to someone.

In order to build on this body of work, we draw upon interviews with 30 lesbian-, bisexual-, and queer-identified young women who focused on their initial experiences of same-sex attraction. We examined how young women remembered their first experiences of feeling attracted to other girls, women in general, or more abstract feelings of same-sex attraction. We examined the qualities that young women used to describe these initial experiences in order to explore what attraction looked and felt like, and to better understand this aspect of sexuality development in young women.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The current study examined interviews from a cross-sectional study investigating young women's smoking behaviors conducted in the summer of 2011. Participants were recruited through targeted advertisements on Facebook and were offered a \$25 electronic gift card incentive for participating in an in-depth telephone interview with a trained female interviewer. To be eligible for participation, women had to be between the ages of 18 and 24 (i.e., born between 1986 and 1993), reside in Michigan at the time of the interview, and identify as other than heterosexual (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, and queer). Facebook advertisements were visible only to women fulfilling these criteria. Given that 84 % of U.S. young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 use Facebook (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2014), other recruitment strategies may not have provided the same level of access to our target population (Ramo & Prochaska, 2012).

Three female interviewers underwent comprehensive preparation in the months prior to data collection with the objective of enhancing interview skills and awareness in regard to conducting these interviews. This preparation included a training session with

a mental health professional with extensive experience conducting in-depth interviews with youth. Additionally, each member of the interview team conducted two face-to-face pilot interviews. The intent was to test the interview protocol for sufficient depth and clarity, as well as our interviewers' comfort level with its content and language. Based on pilot data feedback, the interview protocol was modified and finalized. Pilot interviews were not included in the data analyses.

The in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone in a private space designated solely for this purpose. The interviewers began by reading a detailed consent form to each participant, explaining the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Participants explicitly consented to both the interview process and the audio recording. Interviews covered topics related to stress, discrimination, LGBT community, smoking, and experiences of same-sex attraction (Youatt, Johns, Pingel, Soler, & Bauermeister, in press). Participants were asked over the course of the interview about the contexts surrounding smoking behaviors, the development of their sexual identity, and their involvement in the LGBT community. The portion of the interview that is described in the current study concerned issues related to when participants described feeling attracted to other women, how they initially learned about same-sex attraction in general, when they first came out to someone, and how they described their current sexual identity. Interviews typically lasted 60 to 90 min. Study data were protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, approved all study procedures.

Measures

Two questions were pursued using two qualitative analytic strategies. First, we examined the age that participants described first experiencing same-sex attraction and the affective qualities of these initial memories. We used a summative approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) in order to identify participants' ages, as well as identify any patterns in participants' descriptions of their ages alongside the interpretation and meaning of their ages. This analysis involved coding each interview for participants' age, as well as all references to their age, sorting the participants into groups based on their age, and lastly, analysis of the affective qualities in participants' descriptions of their age of first same-sex attraction. Age groups were not determined prior to analysis, but were developed in the sorting process and emerged from the interview data.

Second, we expanded our analytic frame to more closely examine the contexts surrounding these initial memories of attraction. For this analysis, we relied on thematic analysis strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to focus on the contexts that helped participants recognize their same-sex attraction, as well as their emotional and physical reactions to these initial experiences of attraction. Our intent in this secondary phase of analysis was not to distinguish or compare groups (i.e., lesbian from

bisexual women, those with strong same-sex attraction from those with less strong attractions, or those with current female partners from those with male partners). While each of these distinctions might be fruitful, our analysis focused, instead, on the characteristics and processes young women described as they experienced initial same-sex attractions. This, we believe, offers needed insight into the psychological aspects essential to studies of sexuality development and can help clarify the conditions in which young women are able to remember feelings of sexual attraction (Diamond, 2013; Tolman, 2006). Themes were derived from the interview material; coding procedures are described below.

For both of these analytic questions, similar procedures were used. A team of two trained researchers (SM and JR) developed and refined a codebook through an iterative process after reading a sub-sample of interviews multiple times. Any code discrepancies were resolved through discussion and refinement of codes. Several sub-codes were developed to capture nuanced patterns found within the interview material; themes within these codes are described below. We coded the interview transcripts using a dedicated software program for coding interview data, Dedoose version 4.5 (2013). Inter-rater reliability was good (Cohen's $\kappa = .85$; Cohen, 1960), demonstrating that codes were applied similarly throughout the data.

Results

Sample Demographics

The young women in the sample ranged from 18 to 24 years old ($M = 21.72$; $SD = 1.61$). Half (50%; $n = 15$) of the women in this study identified as lesbian, 43% ($n = 13$) identified as bisexual, and 7% ($n = 2$) reported another identity, including queer, pansexual, and “no label”. The sample largely mirrored the racial demographics of the state of Michigan (United States Census Bureau, 2014): 80% ($n = 24$) identified their race as White/European-American, 13% ($n = 4$) identified as Black or African American, and 7% ($n = 2$) as Latino/Hispanic. Attention was also paid to social environment; in order to ensure diversity of locality, participants were asked to characterize the area or neighborhood in which they lived as either predominantly *urban* or *rural*. Approximately, two-thirds (63%; $n = 19$) of the interview participants grew up in an urban setting (defined as a city with a population greater than 50,000 people according to the United States Census Bureau, 2013), and 37% ($n = 11$) were from rural environments (defined as all populations not included within an urban area). At the time of the interview, about half of the sample ($n = 17$) were students at a two- or four-year college and none of the participants identified as an international student.

In addition to these sample demographics, the sociopolitical context of the state of Michigan is essential to consider, as state policy and law have consistently been unsupportive of LGBTQ

individuals. During the time of this study, Michigan had no statewide employment discrimination protections for LGBTQ individuals (Bauermeister et al., 2014). In addition, school climates in the state had been found to be unwelcoming to queer students; state-level research had found that a majority of LGBTQ students in Michigan reported hearing homophobic remarks or experiencing verbal and physical victimization from other students and school staff (GLSEN, 2013), perhaps due in part to the fact that Michigan public schools did not have anti-bullying policies in place (GLSEN, 2013). Thus, both statewide policy and secondary school climate were often unsafe social locations for LGBTQ youth growing up or residing in Michigan at the time of the study, as well as the previous decade.

Content and Thematic Findings

We first present the findings from our research question concerning developmental timing of same-sex attraction, and second, our research question concerning the experiential contexts of participants' feelings of same-sex attraction. When participants are quoted, their age, self-reported sexual identity, race, urban/rural home environment, and self-reported age at first same-sex attraction (SSA) are included with each interview excerpt in order to give a sense of the range of experiences represented in the findings.

Timing of Initial Same-Sex Attraction

Memories of first same-sex attraction were examined for participants' descriptions of when these feelings first occurred. Two time points emerged in the analysis as most distinct from one another: early in life (before age 10) and later adolescence (ages 16–22). As participants recalled aspects of their same-sex attractions, not only did the timing stand out, but their own interpretations of these initial experiences also stood out as central. Most notably, participants in the younger age group (10 and below) and the older group (16 and above) recalled experiences that were threaded with anxiety about feeling “not normal” as a result of their age (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004; Warner, 2000). Interestingly, while both the younger and the older groups both described feeling different than their heterosexual peers, each group narrated additional layers of contending with their own expectations of “normal” that accompanied feeling attracted to another girl or woman. With an interest in better understanding these aspects of normality and same-sex attractions, we focused our analysis on the two outer groups, which are both presented in greater detail below.

“Gay as a Kid:” Same-Sex Attractions Before Age 10

Approximately, one-third ($n = 11$) of participants described same-sex attractions as clear to themselves as children, ages ten

and younger. One young woman who described her first same-sex attraction at “4 or 5 years old” stated this most plainly: “It’s been apparent to me all my life that I’ve been attracted to other women” [age 18, white, urban, lesbian, SSA at 4–5]. Participants in this group spoke of negotiating internal experiences often without language, feeling different than their peers, and memories of feeling that their peers would not approve of their emergent attractions. These qualities were evident in a young woman’s description of experiencing “a preference for women” as young as 8 years old and treating girls “a little bit differently”:

I could definitely feel, like an attraction of appearance. It was definitely different from looking at boys, looking at girls. I always treated girls a little bit differently...By about eight years old or so...it was definitely a preference for women and that I was gay, as a kid [age 23, white, lesbian, urban, SSA at 8].

Women in this group often identified an awareness of feeling “different” from their same-gender peers, especially as their heterosexual peers began to talk about boys: “I’ve always known it since I was a little...when my friends were like, oh, the boys are so cute! I was like, the girls are so cute [and] I came out when I was thirteen” [age 19, white, rural, lesbian, SSA at 10]. This recognition of difference—specifically attraction directed at girls and *not* boys—often produced awareness paired with anxiety. Others in this group remembered not having the language to describe their feelings of attraction, but often remembered having awareness that there were, nevertheless, negative associations with these feelings:

I didn’t have words for it...maybe I was just really sheltered as a kid from that kind of thing. But I knew my parents didn’t like gay people. I didn’t know what gay people were. And...I just didn’t really have a word for it...I wasn’t ashamed of it, I just didn’t want to tell anyone about it yet [age 23, white, queer, urban, SSA pre-teen].

This group of young women who recalled childhood memories of same-sex attraction highlighted how these early experiences could be both clear and muddy, as well as the role that peer comparisons and lack of language to describe interior experiences played in contending with this set emergent of feelings.

“What Took You So Long?” Late Adolescence Same-Sex Attractions

In contrast to those who spoke about early same-sex attraction, approximately one-third of participants ($n = 9$) spoke about experiencing same-sex attraction later in their adolescence. For many in this group, this timeframe felt “late” and even “off time” in the sense that many of their gay and lesbian peers had experienced same-sex attractions earlier in life. One young woman who experienced same-sex attraction at age 20 summarized this sentiment: “Everyone thinks I’m a freak...I had talked to people

who are like, ‘oh yeah I knew when I was six, I knew when I was ten, I knew when I was 14’ and then they look at me like ‘what took you so long?’” [age 20, white, lesbian, rural, SSA at 20].

For this group of women, their experiences of same-sex attraction came after years of having other types of feelings, including being solely attracted to men and/or feeling extreme homophobic attitudes toward gay and bisexual people. The following young woman’s experiences are similar to several women in the sample who described years of bullying around being perceived to be gay as well as their own feelings of homophobia preceding their own later recognition of same-sex attraction:

Well, I mean, I used to get told I was [gay] and stuff, and kind of picked on in school like everybody does. And I actually was actually very homophobic in the beginning because of that... But, actually I came to the realization that I was [bisexual] at age seventeen [age 24, white, bisexual, rural, SSA at 17].

Young women who reported later adolescent experiences of same-sex attraction often described several types of realizations that accumulated over time. These experiences were commonly described as externally driven, with less explicit attention to their own feelings and more focused on the relationships with specific women in their lives who had transitioned from friend to girlfriend. This can be seen most clearly in this young woman’s description of her initial same-sex attraction at age 20:

The other female approached me. And you know, I don’t know what changed. Maybe like my sentimentality changed and I, at first I was all like, “uh, no,” you know, “uh no, that’s gross” when I was back in high school...It was just start up like as friends, like homegirls, you know. And we just started like, we were conversatin’ every day and somehow it escalated into a relationship... after bein’ friends for a while [age 23, Black, lesbian, rural, SSA at 20].

Unlike the young women who described same-sex attraction during childhood as similar to “coming home” or finding a missing piece to a puzzle, participants with later adolescent memories often expressed greater uncertainty in their attractions throughout their development:

I knew that I was attracted to [women], but it was kind of one of those where you’re not—I wasn’t completely 100 % on it...I didn’t really fully understand it until a few years [ago]... I’d had the feelings before, and about a year later that was when it was, you know, 100 % that I was [age 19, white, bisexual, rural, SSA at 16].

These feelings of uncertainty were embedded throughout this group, although participants consistently described these feelings as diminishing over time. As all of the young women in the sample identified as lesbian, bisexual, or queer, it may be that some of the participants in this later age group were, in fact, less certain of their attractions for women. However, participants’

uncertainty often included several aspects, including reflections of their ambivalent sexual feelings, a result of being seen by peers and/or by themselves as not “true” or “good enough” lesbians, and/or the accumulation of negative homophobic attitudes about same-sex attraction.

These two age groups (10 and below and 16 and above) offered a way to understand the timing aspect of sexuality development for this group, but the contextual aspects of these memories remained less visible. With this in mind, we turned our attentions to the conditions and contexts that participants described surrounding these initial experiences of same-sex attraction in order to understand more about these early experiences.

Contexts of Initial Same-Sex Attraction

We examined the contexts that participants described when relating their memories of same-sex attractions. This included what else or who else was present during this initial memory, the characteristics of the descriptions, and the details that each participant included in their descriptions. Three distinct patterns emerged in analysis: embodied experiences that included the recognition of same-sex fantasies; relational pathways that included early same-sex sexual experiences; and social pathways that included memories of gay or gender non-conforming characters on TV shows as well as negotiation with social expectations more broadly. These three contexts of attraction allowed us to further understand what participants experienced as important and instrumental in their recognition of same-sex attraction.

Embodied Contexts

When participants spoke about embodied experiences of initial same-sex attractions, some recounted sexual fantasies during masturbation, sexual dreams about women, as well as experiences of looking at a woman and seeing and feeling “something new.” Embodied experiences were evident when participants described aspects of their memories as located in their bodies as well as their sexual imagination. For some, this included memories of early masturbation fantasies:

Like if I were to get into the nitty gritty, if I were masturbating and I was thinking of something with the intent of it turning me on, [I would imagine] a man and woman, and the focus was always on the woman, like in my head, you know like clarifying details about her versus, you know, the guy was always just like a stand in [age 20, white, bisexual, urban, SSA at 8-9].

Interestingly, participants’ descriptions lacked explicit references to their genitals or getting wet. This finding is not surprising given the research on female adolescent sexuality which has found that girls and young women consistently experience silence around their sexual bodies (Braun & Kitzing, 2001) as

well as consistent messages concerning genital and body shame (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether & Caruthers, 2005).

Instead, memories often focused on how seeing other girls made them feel, with common references to sensations in “bellies” and “guts.” Interestingly, when these embodied memories were recalled, participants often compared the experience to how one feels (or is supposed to feel) when seeing a boy. This reference point is important to note in participants’ speech as it signals how some participants learned or had also felt “butterflies” for boys as they were growing up. For example, this young woman recalled feelings like this around age 11:

I started getting the feelings you get for when you see a boy you like, and I seen a couple girls I like, I started gettin’ butterflies in my tummy and, and dreamin’ about ‘em and just, just feelin’ the same way you would if you would if seein’ somebody that you like or anything like that [age 22, white, bisexual, rural, SSA at 11].

These moments of making meaning of one’s embodied experiences locates same-sex attraction for some in their interior thoughts, fantasies, and sensations. As one young woman recalled, sometimes these moments were short, but meaningful: “There was this one girl that I saw and I actually like looked at her and I realized how beautiful she was. It’s like oh, well maybe I’m not straight” [age 20, white, lesbian, rural, SSA at 17].

While some participants recalled understanding that embodied experience might be meaningful to their sexuality, others recalled that they had less awareness of how to interpret these experiences. For example, one young woman who remembered dreaming about women in middle school also recalled that she did not make much of it at the time: “I didn’t really think about it too hard though because I never really knew anybody who was like that or it wasn’t really opened up to me, like I never saw that part of the world, I guess” [19, white, lesbian, rural, SSA at 14–15]. This collection of embodied experiences offers insight into how attraction can emerge within the self as a fantasy, memory, or fleeting encounter, and for some, was emphasized by their visceral responses to other girls and women.

Relational Contexts

Relational pathways included early sexual experiences with other girls as a child, as well as the experience of having girl friends transition to girlfriends in later years. These relational pathways differed from the embodied descriptions in that participants emphasized the relational qualities of the experiences rather than their embodied qualities. This distinction can be seen in the word choices participants made, as well as the general characterizations of their initial memories.

For some, early sexual experiences with friends were seen as genesis moments for participants’ emergent attractions. These sexual experiences included taking showers with friends and “rub[bing] each other and stuff,” as well as sleepovers in middle

school during which sexual experiences occurred. One young woman described how these sexual experiences with girls were instrumental in the recognition that she “liked girls” and that she would want to date a girl, and that as a 9 year old, she was able to recognize and describe attractions to both girls and boys:

When I was about like nine years old... I liked boys but I also liked girls. Me and my friends, we would kiss and stuff, so that's what made me think I liked girls... I told my mom when I was about 11 years old that I liked girls and I thought they were pretty, and I would want to date one [age 22, white, bisexual, rural, SSA at 9].

Through these moments of sexual exploration, participants described how they became attuned to their attractions for female peers. These descriptions did not emphasize the embodied qualities of these experiences, but instead, relational qualities were prioritized, including how friendships were affected and how participants negotiated the emergence of same-sex attractions within their peer groups.

Young women in the study consistently recounted memories of friends with whom they became romantically or sexually involved. In the majority of these narratives, participants described “really liking” a friend. Within these friendships, young women developed insights into a range of feelings and emotions about themselves. For example, a young woman described “liking” a friend at age 13: “So, at that time I was still really still into boys but in the back of my mind it's like, ‘ooh, I really like her.’ You know? So after that it just, that's how everything developed” [age 20, Black, bisexual, urban, SSA at 13].

Descriptions of romantically inflected friendships often included aspects of “falling into a relationship” with a close friend. One young woman explained that her initial same-sex attraction was for her best friend, which led quickly to a romantic and sexual relationship: “I only realized I was attracted to women when I started having feelings for my best friend... we realized we were in a relationship with each other without admitting it, kind of” [age 23, white, bisexual, urban, SSA at 21]. Many other narratives followed this same arc of moving fluidly from friend to lover: “I mean like, we [were] friends, we started being friends and that lead to other stuff” [age 23, Black, lesbian, rural, SSA at 22].

Relational contexts—be they sexual or driven by a friendship—were described as one of the essential ways that young women recalled becoming aware of their feelings of sexual attraction. These memories, rather than being recalled as originating within the person, were remembered instead as emerging within the relationship or experience itself, sometimes even emerging within another person entirely. Of note, several women who described their initial attraction as relational did not describe themselves as making choices or decisions about their attractions, but instead described themselves as driven by the relationships they were in, or in some cases, being told by another person that they might be gay or bisexual. These relational contexts were always dyadic; this differed from those memories

where there were more broadly felt social conditions in which same-sex attraction was remembered.

Social Contexts

Social contexts included messages about sexuality and gender norms from social sources such as media and messages from peers. Unlike embodied experiences, social contexts reflected how sexual attractions were shaped by someone or something else—outside of a dyadic relationship. Women consistently described crushes on female television characters and peer attitudes about gender and sexuality as influencing their early recognitions of attraction. As such, social contexts combine sets of insights that are gained through interacting with larger social forces, such as the media, social norms, and groups of friends.

Participants described early media images as very important to their recognition of same-sex attraction. For some, media images of gay and/or female characters inspired feelings of desire, which allowed the participant to recognize that she was attracted to another female. For example, one woman described seeing two women being sexual and feeling drawn toward the image: “[Seeing] the women-on-women thing, I'm like ‘yeah, yeah.’ I wanted to try that” [age 20, Black, bisexual, urban, SSA at 13]. Other participants described television characters such as Xena the Warrior Princess and similarly feeling drawn toward the character; only later did they recognize that being drawn to Xena was a form of sexual attraction. As one young woman recalled, these early experiences of recognition still felt uncertain, often silencing discussion about female crushes with friends:

In the fifth grade I was watching a movie with one of my friends, and I noticed that I liked the girl character better than the boy character. And I was gonna ask her if she felt the same way, but I figured that was a weird question, so I didn't. And I just kind of hid it from there on out. Until I was eighteen [age 22, white, lesbian, rural, SSA at 10-11].

For many young women, these initial recognitions of same-sex attraction were subtle—a crush or feeling drawn to the physical qualities of television characters—yet even when young, every woman in the sample reported being aware of possible threats as a result of disclosing these (even fleeting) feelings to others.

In addition to media images, peer groups offered another set of social messages that participants described as influential in the construction of their early experiences of attraction. Consistently heard throughout the interviews were descriptions of how young women's early moments of same-sex attractions were experienced initially as dawning recognition of “not liking boys” as they were expected to. As one of the many participants in this group recalled, “I definitely noticed that I didn't feel as physically attracted to guys as I thought I was supposed to” [age 22, white, lesbian, rural, SSA in middle school]. This narrative is especially relevant to queer sexuality development for two reasons: (1)

same-sex attraction was consistently initially understood as “off” the norm, not like others, and “unusual;” and (2) same-sex attractions were initially imagined not as presence, but as absence; there was less discussion about liking girls and more discussion about *not* liking boys. While these descriptions of absence overlap with the embodied theme, these descriptions were categorized as social because they emphasize the social awareness of how attraction was “supposed” to look like and downplay the embodied qualities of what attraction felt like as seen in the embodied theme. Two examples capture these aspects of absence of attraction:

I had two past boyfriends that didn’t last for even, like, a week. And I was always, like, “Why is that?” You know, like, it just didn’t feel right to me, dating them. So I’d just be like, “What is wrong with me?” Like, other girls, you know, they date all the time, and it just creeps me out [age 23, Latina, lesbian, rural, SSA at 14].

Another example of uncertainty surrounding a lack of interest in boys came from a young woman’s early experiences at school:

I never found men to be visually interesting...other girls would have pictures up of like “hot guys,” in their locker when we were young...And I just never understood that at all, because I just never felt visually interested, you know?” [age 20, white, bisexual, urban, SSA at 8-9]

These initial recognitions of lacking the “correct” object of desire were also coupled with awareness of being “different” from other girls: “I knew that I wasn’t necessarily like every other girl who only likes boys” [age 21, white, bisexual, urban, SSA at “very, very young”]. This experience of difference was felt in other ways, such as avoiding popular playground games at school: “[I had a journal from third grade that wonders] why like I didn’t wanna chase after the boys like all the other girls kinda thing. Like I just didn’t understand why everybody else was doing these things” [age 24, white, lesbian, rural, SSA at 8]. This group of participants who described social conditions surrounding their initial experiences each shared an awareness with how others were influential to their attractions—others who were outside of themselves and their primary relationship. It was this awareness of these social factors that drew these accounts together.

The three contexts—embodied, relational, and social—are distinct in what each type of account prioritized, ranging from experiences which highlighted fantasies and bodies, to those that highlighted friendships and relationships, and lastly, those that highlighted social messages about the correct way to be a girl or social images that offered early objects of desire. These three groups illustrate that same-sex attraction does not appear or come to consciousness in the same way for all individuals and, in fact, appears to emerge in a wide variety of ways, at different time points in individuals’ lives, and often within social environments that are both small and large, intimate and at arm’s length.

Discussion

The concept of attraction remains a central, though under-examined, aspect of sexuality development. Assessments of attraction have been central to studies of LGBTQ identity development in which individuals are asked whether they have ever experienced same-sex attractions, and if so, at what age (Busseri et al., 2006; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Uneo, 2010). The conceptual nuances of attraction, however, have remained only thinly explored; researchers have often assumed that individuals similarly experience and understand the concept of attraction. In light of recent debates about the implications of using variables to measure same-sex attraction (Li, Katz-Wise, & Calzo, 2014; Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2014), it is especially important to develop theoretical and empirical work that can help clarify how individuals experience feelings of attraction so that this conceptual clarity can inform ongoing research and program development for individuals—of all ages and all sexual identities. With this theoretical background, we analyzed a sample of young women about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences that accompanied memories of the first time they felt same-sex attractions. Our findings offer insight into participants’ feelings about how old they were when they first felt attracted to another girl or woman, as well as the contexts in which these initial experiences took place.

Age of Initial Same-Sex Attraction

In this study, two age groups stood out as especially distinct from one another in their descriptions of how they knew they felt attracted to another girl or woman, how they felt about these experiences, and their relationship to feeling “normal” about these same-sex attractions. The two groups—one younger and one older—echoes previous research, which has found similar age groups using interview and survey research designs (Friedman, Marshal, Stall, Cheong, & Wright, 2008; Herdt & McClintock, 2000; Morgan & Thompson, 2006; Rosario et al., 2008; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2011; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Using interview data, we were able to examine how these time points were experienced by individuals. We found that those with childhood and later adolescent initial experiences of same-sex attraction described very different experiences: the assuredness of those with very early attractions was contrasted with confusion and fears of being “off time” when their attractions to women came in later adolescence.

This finding extends Diamond’s (2003a, b, 2005) previous research, which has critiqued models of gay identity development that dictate or infer that there are “normal” sexual identity trajectories. Because we were able to look at participants’ descriptions rather than simply take the mean age of first same-sex attraction, we could observe how these groups differed. These

differences mirror Rosario et al.'s (2008) finding that the later age group may not feel “as strongly” in their same-sex attraction; however, our finding offers insight into why this later age group might think of themselves as not as strongly attracted. We wonder about the role of idealized narratives about gay identity development in shaping how these young women thought of themselves and their attractions, creating early feelings of being “off time” and therefore “not normal”—even in young women still in their teens. A competing hypothesis might be that those women who develop initial same-sex attraction with an emphasis on their embodied experiences might report stronger attractions than those with initial attraction experiences within relational and/or social contexts. While we were not able to test this hypothesis in the current study, this would be an exciting area for future research and might open up questions about for whom embodied contexts are relevant, important, and perhaps underdeveloped.

Contexts of Attraction

The contexts in which young women described their initial attraction to other females were often within embodied, dyadic, and social conditions. Of note, we do not argue that these contexts are necessarily specific to the person (i.e., particular women experience embodied attraction, while others do not). Instead, we argue that the three patterns represent a range of possibilities that women might experience as same-sex attractions emerge and develop. With our focus on the experience of initial same-sex attraction, we were able to assess how these three patterns were both distinct and overlapping, with each providing potential pathways toward the experience of attraction. *Embodied* experiences offered insight into how attraction can emerge within the self as a fantasy, memory, or fleeting encounter, and for some, was emphasized by their visceral responses to other girls and women. *Relational* memories, rather than being recalled as originating within the person, were remembered instead as emerging within the relationship or experience itself, sometimes even emerging within another person entirely. These relational contexts were always dyadic; this differed from those memories where there were more broadly felt social conditions in which same-sex attraction was remembered. *Social* contexts emphasized the social awareness of how attraction was “supposed” to look like and downplayed the embodied qualities of what attraction felt like. These three contexts highlight several ways that feelings of attraction were experienced and offer researchers three potential ways that individuals might affectively and cognitively organize their own sexual experiences—and importantly—offers insight into the variety of ways that early experiences may shape subsequent sexuality development, including identity development, relationship connections, as well as sexual self-concept.

Embodied Contexts

Young women recalled embodied feelings that focused on how other girls and women sometimes made them feel, with references to physical sensations in “bellies” and “guts.” There were, in this study, no references to genitals in participants’ descriptions. This finding echoes decades of feminist research that has argued the reasons young women avoid an embodied focus when discussing their emergent sexual feelings is due to a lack of discussion of what female sexuality looks (Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002a, b; Ussher, 2005). In the current study, we found embodied memories often focused on how seeing other girls and women made participants feel more generally, with a less explicit focus on feelings of arousal or genital sensation.

Like previous feminist research in this area, we found that attraction sometimes arrived without language. And for some, even when they lacked the words to describe their own feelings, they were nevertheless acutely aware of how peers and adults in their lives might negatively judge their early sensations of same-sex attraction. This absence of available language signals an important form of “missing discourse” in the lives of young people (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006) and offers additional ways to recognize the disparate impacts of missing discourses relevant to youth experiencing same-sex attraction. The role of embodied pathways may be integral to understanding attraction for young women who lack language to articulate these early experiences: those who feel, but may not be able to describe what they feel (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014). Future researchers are encouraged to develop this area in terms of theoretical models, research designs, and supports designed for LGBTQ youth, with attention to previous work on “sexual silence” (Díaz, 1998) and other guiding concepts that highlight the effects of silence on sexuality development.

Additionally, this finding echoes what McClelland and Fine (2008) argued in their analysis of the concept of “want” which encouraged sexuality researchers to inquire into the development of desirous states that do not necessarily require an object of desire and are not (necessarily) directed at sexual behavior, but also focus on the physical, emotional, or material feelings in girls and young women. These moments are often less formed and uncertain—articulations of attraction and want may emerge as a question or early feelings of anticipation for arousal and sexual activity—or may be amorphous and unrelated to sexual activity of any sort. Feelings of attraction (both in terms of other- and same-sex attraction) may be murky, obscured, or even difficult to capture in language, yet essential if we are to develop models and theories of sexuality development that do not merely focus on sexual intercourse, but on how young people become sexual beings with a range of wants, desires, and behaviors. The concept of attraction is central to sexuality development because it opens up space for developmental processes that extend beyond “having sex” and move toward larger discussions across several

disciplines about what it means to develop a sense of oneself as a sexual person (Angelides, 2004; Herdt & McClintock, 2000; McClelland & Hunter, 2013; McClintock & Herdt, 1996; Robinson, 2012; Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Relational Contexts

Relational encounters with female friends provided some of the first incidences of emotional and sexual intimacy for young women in this study. These relationships, as well as social experiences including the role of gay and lesbian peers, feminist politics, and other “non-sexual” contexts, have also been found to significantly shape women’s sexual attractions (Cassingham & O’Neil, 1999; Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison, 2001; Diamond, 2013; Gagnon, 1990). Similar to the current study, in her study of sexual minority women’s friendships, Diamond (2000, 2002) found that some participants reported unexpected same-sex attractions for friends. These friendships often transformed into a young woman’s first sexual relationship and accelerated the process of sexual questioning. Given the importance of passionate friendships in the lives of young queer women (Diamond, 2000; Morgan & Thompson, 2006; Thompson, 2006) and our finding that same-sex friendships were pivotal for women in the exploration of sexual attraction, we argue that sexuality development models need to more acutely consider the unique conditions within same-sex friendships and the resources that these relational context provide young women. Research with older women has also found that attractions to and/or sexual experiences with female friends are often instrumental to the development to lesbian identities later in life (Cassingham & O’Neil, 1999; Diamond, 2008; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). At present, we have few tools in sexuality research to understand the liminal space between friend and lover, yet this space is consistently found to be instrumental in the sexuality development of young queer women (and perhaps across the life span). This seems especially relevant given the recent research on the complex forms that relationships can take in young adulthood, ranging from friends with benefits, hookups, and other forms of sexual friendships (Bauermeister, 2014; Katz & Schneider, 2013; Lehmler, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2011; Owen, Fincham, & Manthos, 2013).

Social Contexts

Turning from friendships to media contexts, we see that there are also few tools in sexuality research to theorize the role of media images of gay and gender non-conforming characters in the sexuality development of young people (see Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Driver, 2007). In the current study, young women became aware of the cultural meanings ascribed to sexuality through subtle cues during childhood—romantic relationships on tele-

vision between a woman and man, discussions with parents at the dinner table, or peer crushes on boys during playground games. Ussher (2005) has thoughtfully argued that the lack of cultural imagery concerning lesbian desire has an important and under-theorized role in keeping sexual minority women at arms length from their own sexual urges and desires since they are not given opportunities to see and imagine what the early signs of feeling desire look like. This, she argues, may result in sexual minority women being unaware of and suspicious of their own sexual feelings:

[R]omantic fiction and Hollywood films provide us with representations of women feeling ‘nervous’ in the presence of men as a sign of sexual attraction. . . For young lesbians, there is a dearth of such imagery. One consequence of this for the women in the studies was that it was only when an unequivocally sexual encounter occurred that they could recognize their feelings towards another girl to be those of sexual desire (Ussher, 2005, p. 28).

The role of media in the development of same-sex attraction links with prior research on the varied social environments in which young people develop (Ward, 2003). Our findings highlight the role of media in shaping same-sex attraction, as well as the myriad of ways that heterosexuality is learned as natural and normal. Sexualized media (e.g., pornography, film, and advertisements) may be an avenue through which young people learn about bodies, behaviors, and situations that sexually inspire or excite. Discussions surrounding sexualized media have often centered on the fear of its negative effects for adolescents, including the proliferation of misogynist, sexist, and objectifying attitudes toward women (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). However, these outlets may also encourage feelings of empowerment that make sexual experimentation both desirable and plausible (Albury, 2014; Attwood, 2011; Gill, 2012). Conversations surrounding sexualized media often assume a heterosexual viewer; however, media outlets may be an important entrance point for young queer women wishing to explore their desires and may allow young queer women to visualize a variety of sexual situations during their emergent sexuality development.

This move is important for understanding subjectivity and the role of heteronormativity in young people’s lives (Blaise, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000). Theories and models of sexual attraction must follow suit; researchers must recognize that attraction does not always simply emerge or develop, but is brought about (or hindered) by a number of contextual dimensions. Without attention to these social conditions, attraction risks being theorized as if it exists in isolation—without influence, as naturally occurring, or as merely an individual phenomenon that operates in a vacuum. Researchers interested in sexuality development issues are encouraged to develop theories that can better describe this highly interactive, highly social part of the developmental process.

Sexuality Development and Research

Building on previous work that has theorized the role of social factors in sexuality development, we link our findings with feminist work that has labored to make clear the social arrangements that support and restrict how young people learn to develop a sense of desire (Fine & McClelland, 2006). As MacKinnon (1987) explained, “[desire] is taken for a natural essence or presocial impetus but is actually *created* by the social relations, the hierarchical relations, in question” (p. 49, emphasis in original). Sexuality research that theorizes and models how individuals develop and respond to other people, social structures, and public policies has been a major component of research for the last few decades (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973/2011; Kimmel, 2007; Longmore, 1998); however, psychological research has been slower to adopt and develop this perspective. Findings from the current study, as well as the larger body of research that focuses on the social landscape of sexuality development, encourage a set of research questions and methods that must attend to the contexts and conditions of sexual thoughts, behaviors, emotions, and cognitions rather than treating these as produced within and by individuals regardless of social conditions.

Sexuality in all forms is, of course, situated within cultural contexts; however, same-sex sexuality is situated in a context that values both public and private forms of heterosexual intimacy (Allen, 2003). For young women who are developing their sexuality, recognition of same-sex attraction in a culture steeped in heteronormativity can bring with it an “out-of-placeness” and a sense of difference (Tuori & Peltonen, 2007). Ussher (2005) and Ussher and Mooney-Somers (2000) have alerted researchers to the heteronormative structures that often invisibly shape sexuality research, including embedded silences, missing discourses, and the potential moments of loss incurred when one asks young queer women to describe their sexual wishes and experiences. Heteronormative conditions may make it difficult for individuals to categorize their initial experiences of attraction; this is a key part of sexuality development research. Asking “are you attracted to females” may be insufficient methodologically as these questions do not attend to the obstacles some young people face on the way to recognizing their own experiences as desirous or attracted. Increased attention is needed to develop methods that can address how difficult it can be for some to name, describe, or even notice that which has remained silent, been covered over, and for some, disparaged.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study relied on retrospective accounts of attraction. As a result, participants’ narratives may be biased in favor of coherence and may be affected by the passage of time. However, the sample is young and in some cases, the amount of time between participants’ initial memories of same-sex attraction and the interview was quite short. This may diminish issues of retrospective

data for some, but not all participants. In addition, the study’s recruitment strategy may have meant that some experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and queer young women were missing, which resulted in not capturing the full spectrum of same-sex attraction. This study focused on the experiences of younger women, which offered on the one hand, coherence among the age cohort, but on the other hand, overlooks the experiences of older women whose initial experience of same-sex attraction may come much later in life (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). In addition, for some, the interview design which involved describing these initial experiences to a researcher may have under-represented experiences that were not (yet) available to be described using language, as well as those who may not have felt comfortable describing these experiences.

This study does provide unique strengths as a result of using interview methods to investigate meanings with a sample of young adults diverse by race, location, and sexual orientation. Although our findings speak specifically to the experiences of young LGBTQ women in Michigan around the turn of the twenty-first century, these early moments of attraction may provide insight into sexuality development more broadly. This is not to say that gender, sexual orientation, age, and cohort differences are not integral to understanding the diversity of these pathways. By focusing on these moments of development, we move towards a greater nuance in sexuality development as an important and normative process for all young people (Diamond, 2006; Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

In the current study, we did not address other elements that may have been important in these early experiences, including participants’ gender identity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Levy-Warren, 2009) and how individuals’ gender identity and/or expression may have influenced experiences of early attractions or how others responded to them as individuals throughout their lives (as children and as young adults). Future researchers are encouraged to develop studies that examine these important dimensions to individuals’ sexuality development and how these elements may interact with individuals’ feelings of same-sex attraction.

Conclusion

Sexual attraction is an important concept in sexuality research. Not only for its relationship to sexual orientation, but also in terms of the extent to which attraction captures important information relevant to sexuality development. Initial moments of sexual attraction offer important windows into the development of the sexual imagination, an imagination that could potentially affect a person throughout their lifetime (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009). These genesis moments may have important influences on later identity decisions, experiences of stigma, and how young people develop expectations for sexual and relational wellbeing over their life course. With this in mind, we focused on initial moments of feeling same-sex attraction and the contexts in

which these initial attractions were experienced. These memories hold enormous potential for contributing to the evolving discussion of sexuality development for all adolescents and LGBTQ youth in particular. This is especially true as evidence accumulates about the strains introduced by merely feeling attracted to same-sex individuals in a heteronormative environment. The experiential aspects of same-sex attraction examined in this study may help guide the development of more refined measurement tools for researchers hoping to sample sexual minorities and can contribute to developing more effective supports for individuals who experience same-sex attraction but may not adopt LGBTQ identity labels and, as a result, are routinely missed in outreach efforts.

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