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RE-CONCEPTUALIZING THE EXPERIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE EXPLORING
THEIR SEXUALITY

by

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Abstract

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING THE EXPERIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE EXPLORING
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The present study aimed to gain an understanding of the experience of individuals who are exploring their sexual identity. Participants represented an online convenience sample and included 84 adult individuals who are exploring their sexual identity. Participants completed a series of opened ended questions regarding understanding their experience of sexuality. Analysis indicated that participants were demographically diverse in their self-identified labels of sexuality, both prior to and during sexual exploration. In addition, not all participants shifted their identity labels and many reported patterns beyond the stereotypical movement away from a heterosexual label. Thematic analysis revealed four main themes related to participants' sexual exploration: 1) *openness*, 2) *not limited by*, 3) *exploring own identity*, and 4) *exploring identity through others*. Discussion focuses on the heterogeneity of participant's responses, the heteronormative assumptions that impact sexual exploration, and the way participants generally describe their experiences as positive. Implications for counseling are also discussed.

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Introduction

Sexuality research often conceptualizes individuals who do not endorse a fixed sexual identity as “questioning.” Sexual orientation questioning is often narrowly defined and, in turn, frames the experience in stigmatized ways. Our understanding of sexual orientation questioning has been primarily gleaned from participants recruited under heterosexual (Morgan & Thompson, 2011) and sexual minority (Diamond, 2005) populations. No research to date has focused on a sample of participants exclusively recruited on the basis of exploring their sexuality. The proposed study investigated the experience of individuals who explore their sexual identity and selectively recruited individuals on this basis. This research intentionally moved away from the terminology of “questioning” sexual identity to a less stigmatized and more inclusive terminology of “exploring” ones sexual identity.

Implications for Framing Questioning as an LGBTQQIA Experience

Research has typically labeled those who are exploring their sexual identity as “questioning” and often frames their experience as part of the larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender¹, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQQIA) community. This categorization, then, broadly understands questioning as a type of gender and sexual minority experience. Within this framework, sexual and gender minorities are conceptualized in opposition to heterosexuality (Morgan & Thompson, 2011) and assumed to be non-normative (Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015). Questioning is often seen as a transitory stage that will lead an eventual LGBT identification. Some research suggests that questioning your sexual identity is

¹ Consistent with past transgender research (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011) this study will use *transgender* as an all-encompassing term used to refer to people whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth.

a process that occurs due to environmental facilities and media exposure that can elicit feelings away from heterosexuality (Thompson, 2007).

Although questioning sexual identity has been established as a common developmental experience for sexual minorities (Thompson, 2007) the study of those individuals who are questioning their identity has rarely been the focus of research. Despite the acknowledgement that they exist, little is really known about the experience of individuals questioning their identity (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). However, when included among sexual minorities, our assumption about individuals “questioning” their identities reflects our assumptions about the LGBTQQIA community.

Often sexual and gender minorities are conceptualized in research under the larger LGBTQQIA umbrella, where they are assumed to be homogenous (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). In reality, participants often do not identify with the research category/label imposed on them (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). Categorizing sexual minorities under the umbrella term of LGBTQQIA disregards the differentiation of experience through gender, race/ ethnicity, social class, religion, disability (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007) and conflates sexual orientation and gender identity (Galupo et al., 2015). Sexual and gender minorities are often grouped together based on shared stigma or presumed gender non-conformity (Weiss, 2004) and because they violate binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation (Galupo, Henise & Davis, 2014). However, transgender individuals often experience increased stigmatization and a unique brand of discrimination, or transphobia (Hill & Willoughby, 2005) because of the societal, binary gender stereotypes (Galupo, Henise & Davis, 2014). Sexual minority individuals may also differ

on the basis of sexual orientation (monosexual vs. plurisexual²), gender identity (cisgender³ vs. transgender) and a range of identities that do not share the same experience or qualities (Galupo et al., 2015). Sexuality has been conceptualized in ways that are anchored on binary assumptions of sex and gender (male vs. female) and sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. lesbian/gay). In addition models of sexuality have assumed cisgender experience and identity (Galupo, Davis, Grynkiewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Tate, 2012; van Anders, 2015). These assumptions, then, all impact the way that sexual identity questioning/exploration is considered.

Gender and Sexual Identity Exploration

Sexual identity questioning has also been framed in the research in the context of identity development. For instance, research has explored sexual identity development of heterosexual women and men through the presence and process of sexual orientation questioning (Morgan, Steiner & Thompson, 2010; Morgan & Thompson, 2011). Even from this framework, questioning sexual orientation is conceptualized as a movement away from a normative heterosexual label (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). It has also been suggested that sexual identity exploration is a struggle over identifying and authenticating subjective experiences of same-sex and other-sex attraction (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). Other researchers aimed to understand those who challenge the label they identify with by engaging in acts outside of the definition of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Diamond, 2005). In the context of sexual identity development, it is suggested that those who are questioning their heterosexuality would be higher on sexual

² We use the term plurisexual to refer to identities that are not explicitly conceptualized based on attraction to one sex and leave open the potential for attraction to more than one sex/gender (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, queer, fluid). We use the term plurisexual instead of non-monosexual throughout the article because it does not linguistically assume monosexual as the ideal conceptualization of sexuality

³ We use the term cisgender to refer to identities that are denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

exploration and uncertainty scales, have less sexual identity commitment, and feel more positive towards LGB individuals (Morgan & Thompson, 2011).

The research on sexual identity questioning from the framework of identity development, has mostly focused on women. For instance, Thompson (2007) noted that same-sex female friendships often mimic romantic qualities of heterosexual relationships because society often portrays a desirability of physical intimacy between females, regardless of same-sex sexual attraction. However, with the media portrayal of intimate female relationships, researchers suggest this causes young females to explore their sexuality and blur the lines between friendship and romantic relationships, which causes a confused identity formation and inconsistent identities (Thompson, 2007). Some researchers suggest that developing a sexual identity and exploring other labels is something distinct for women and often expected (Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

For men, the process of sexual identity is cast differently because of the way masculinity is conceptualized. Researchers touch upon the idea that heterosexuality is invisible/not explored because it is assumed and just “mandated of men from a young age through rigid masculine gender roles” (Morgan, Stienner, & Thompson 2010, p.425). It is suggested that women may move more fluidly and without as much conflict from one label to another; but for men, movement or simply acknowledgement of same-sex attraction challenges their commitment and integrity of being heterosexual (Morgan, Stienner & Thompson, 2010). In fact, researchers have noted the “one-time rule” for men, where one same-sex experience is equated with a gay orientation and that “one drop of homosexuality tells the truth while one drop of heterosexuality in a homosexual life means nothing” (Anderson, 2008, p.105). The drastic difference between women and men who are exploring their sexuality is rooted in hetero-masculinity, and the idea

that anything less than from 100 percent straight is associated with femininity, which defies the definition of manhood (Anderson, 2008).

For both women and men, questioning one's sexuality is conceptualized as a movement away from heterosexuality, which continues to carry a heteronormative assumption. This assumption creates a binary limitation on gender, depicts acceptability of sexual fluidity for women, but not men, and invalidates those who are exploring their sexuality by generating a stigma around the word questioning as a means to an end. Sexual minority groups have a diverse understanding of how they conceptualize gender, sexuality, and lived experience (Galupo et al., 2015), and therefore, it is vital to center on individuals who are exploring sexuality in order to fully understand the experience.

Statement of Purpose

The present study utilized a qualitative approach and aimed to describe the experience of individuals who are exploring their sexual identity. While attempting to gain a more accurate picture of this population, participants were broadly recruited using language that intentionally shifted away from heterosexist and binary assumptions of gender and sexual orientation; instead of “questioning” sexual identity we used “exploring.” Participants responded to a series of exploratory qualitative measures to further characterize sexual identity exploration. Because of the lack of research surrounding this population, the current study was aimed at describing this population as well as further understanding the experiences of individuals exploring their sexuality.

The purpose of the current study involved two areas of investigation. First, the study attempted to demographically characterize participants by investigating their self-identified labels of sexuality prior and during their exploration. Second, a thematic analysis of the participants responses to an open ended question was used to describe the participants lived experience and the meaning they made, regarding their sexuality.

Method

Recruitment

Recruitment announcements with a link to the online survey were posted on social networking websites and online message boards, and throughout the local community. More specifically participants found the survey through Facebook (42.9%), Twitter (3.6%), survey forwarded through email (11.9%), found link on a message board (4.8%), referred by a friend (14.3%), referred by a professor (6.0%), the Social Psychology Network (8.3%), and the Psychological Research on the Net (8.3%). Snowball recruitment was employed as participants were encouraged to share the survey with other networking sites or specific friends or acquaintances. The survey took anywhere between 30-40 minutes, including an informed consent and a debriefing form.

Participants

Participants were 84 adults, ages 18-63 ($M = 26$, in which 67% were under the age of 25 years old), who self-identified as exploring their sexuality. Participants represented all regions of the continental United States, including Washington, D.C., in which Table 1 represents the demographics of participants in the current study. A majority of participants self-identified as White/Caucasian, middle-class, women in higher education.

Measures

Survey participants responded to three exploratory, open ended questions designed to broadly capture the experience of those who are exploring their sexuality. Participants provided self-generated data in response to two open-ended prompts; “Prior to exploring your sexuality what was the identity that you most associated with?” and “Now that you are exploring your sexuality what identity do you most associate with?” with each question having these examples

in parenthesis: *heterosexual, heteroflexible, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, etc.* Thematic analysis focused on participants' answers to a single open ended question: "For you, what does it mean that you are exploring your sexuality?"

Data Analysis

In analyzing responses to the third question (“For you, what does it mean that you are exploring your sexuality?”), a thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was utilized. This analysis appropriately maps onto this study because examining the experience of those who are exploring their sexuality has not yet been identified. The grounded theory approach utilizes thematic analysis that captures the lived experience of individuals in under-studied and under-represented groups, and is a very effective way to begin to understand individual experience (Braun & Clark, 2006). Braun and Clark (2006) suggested 6 phases for creating an effective thematic analysis, which includes (1) reading all responses before making codes, (2) generating an initial set of codes, (3) molding the initial codes into themes, (4) revising the themes, (5) operationally defining and labeling the themes, and, finally, (6) producing a detailed write-up that demonstrates evidence of the themes within the data.

For the present study the coding team included three people: the primary researcher (exploring/pansexual, cisgender woman), and an undergraduate research assistant (fluid/exploring cisgender man), while the faculty advisor (pansexual, cisgender woman) served as an external auditor. Following Braun and Clark’s (2006) six-step process, the research team engaged in a recursive process by which the researcher and research assistant coded and recoded the data several times until a final coding structure that best fit the data was agreed upon. The thematic structure was revised several times in consultation with the external auditor, before finalizing a four-theme structure. Prior to the final coding, the research team operationally defined the themes and created labels for each. Using the final codes, the primary researcher and researcher assistant re-coded the data in chunks of fifteen responses, independently, and then cross-referenced their codes throughout the process. After several meetings, through independent

analysis, group collaboration, and the emergence of defined and labeled themes, 100% interrater reliability was established.

Results

The analysis of this study focused on two main purposes. First to gain an understanding of how individuals identify or label their sexuality before and during their exploration process. The second purpose was to characterize what sexual exploration meant to each participant.

Patterns of Identification among Individuals Exploring Their Sexuality

Participants self-identified with a range of identity labels. Sexual identity data was self-generated, and participants were able to respond to the questions with the identity label that was most salient for them by filling in the blank. There was a diverse range of labels described, which can be seen in Table 2 and 3.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of specific labels participants used to describe their sexual identity labels at two time points; prior to exploring and currently. Participants reported a range of identities at both time points. Prior to exploring, participants overwhelmingly used monosexual identities (92.9%), where 80% were heterosexual. In contrast, participants were more likely to use plurisexual identities (78.6%) during their exploration. Participants also self-identified with asexual identities before (2.4%) and during (9.5%) exploring their sexuality and many provided multiple labels at each time point. These data emphasizes that participants identify with a wide range of labels, many of which fit outside traditional sexual orientation labels used in research (i.e. heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, etc.).

Table 3 represents participants' current sexual identity label in relation to their label prior to exploring their sexuality. No one pattern was universally seen across participants. A quarter of the participants did not change their sexual identity label (25%), while the majority of participants did (75%). These results indicate that not all individuals are shifting from a

heterosexual to a sexual minority label but that participants self-identified with a diverse range of labels through the process of exploring their sexuality.

Although these data provided a framework for understanding participant's identities, it is important to note that not all participants agreed with the implicit assumptions of these questions. For example one participant indicated that:

"I don't know how to answer questions like this, as if "sexual exploration" is something separate from what people experience right from the beginning of sexual feelings in adolescence. Sexual exploration is an ongoing and evolving relationship with your sexual feelings. Prior to having sexual feelings, as a child, I did not associate with a sexual identity. Now that I have sexual feelings, my identity fluctuates as I have new experiences that introduce me to new ways of thinking about my sexuality. You make it seem like sexual exploration is some kind of binary state." (Male, 23)

Thematic Analysis of Individuals Conceptualizations of Exploring Sexuality

The main purpose of the thematic analysis was to understand the lived experience of the participants (Braun & Clark, 2006), therefore the results of this study are organized around the descriptions found within the experiences of these participants. Four main themes, as represented in Table 4, emerged from participants understanding of what exploring their sexuality meant for them. Participants described their sexuality with regard to: (1) openness, (2) not limited by (3) exploring one's own identity, and (4) exploring one's identity through others. These themes are not meant to be mutually exclusive and most participant's responses exemplified more than one of the themes.

Openness. The theme of openness was marked by participant's conceptualization that exploring one's sexuality means that you are open to understanding new things about yourself.

Examples for this theme are as follows:

"To be open to new ideas and information about myself." (Female, 26)

"I just have been exploring different ways to express my sexuality through being open to new things" (Male, 34)

Some participants conceptualized being open as trying something new or different with someone or being open to ideas and people.

"Being open to exploring different sexual desires, techniques, styles, toys, things & thoughts you have never done." (Male, 63)

"Talking to new sorts of people and exposing myself to new erotic images and pornographies." (Male, 23)

"To experience and learn new things." (Female, 27)

Overall, this theme suggested that these participants were conceptualizing exploring as being open to new ideas, understanding of themselves, different people, and having the freedom to explore things they have not previously been able to.

Not Limited By. The second theme involved participants recognizing that in exploring their sexuality they do not feel limited by societal labels or social conditioning. Examples of this theme are as follows:

"Trying to be comfortable with mostly constant but occasionally shifting sexual attractions. Unpacking what attractions of mine are 'biologically essential' vs internalized social constructions about beauty and gender." (Female, 28)

“Figuring out in what ways my desires and experience and comfort differ from social conditioning.” (Male, 23)

Other participants mapped onto this theme by explaining that they feel like are no longer limited to certain attractions based on previous insecurities. For instance two participants mentioned:

“It means to be attracted to whoever you want to be attracted to.” (Female, 22)

“To be having sexual experiences with those I am attracted to, that I might not have experienced before due to guilt or conviction.” (Male, 23)

One participant mentioned, *“It means to be flexible and comfortable in whatever way I feel, even if-or especially if- it is different.” (Female, 28)*, which emphasizes that they are exploring the things they once concealed due to feeling “different.”

Previous research has described the way cultural conceptualizations of sexuality are labeled and reinforced on heteronormative/ cisnormative assumptions (Galupo, Davis, Grynkiewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Tate, 2012; van Anders, 2015). This theme exemplifies the way participants were explicitly rejecting these norms as a basis for exploring their sexuality.

Exploring One’s Own Identity. The third theme exemplified the way some individuals exploring their sexuality saw the process as a way to understand their own authentic identity. For instance one participant stated:

“Come to understand and accept or address confusing feelings I have had all my life.

Basically I want to understand myself to the point where I can be fully comfortable with myself.” (Male, 27)

This theme captures participants who were talking about understanding who they personally are and what they want out of life in regards to their sexuality. One participants mentioned, *“Finding*

out who I am.” (*Genderfluid*, 23), while other participants conceptualized their sexual exploration in terms of how their sexuality is expressed in their life and choices:

“Thinking about my sexuality and what I want out of life/ a partner.” (Female, 19)

The theme was also represented by the internal conversations one may have while exploring their sexuality, such as the participant below:

“For as long as I've been aware of sexual feelings, I've felt sexually attracted to females. As I'm sure is the case with most people, figuring out what sexual attraction meant was confusing in adolescence, but now that I've had a few girlfriends and feel more confident expressing my sexual feelings with women, I feel like I have a relatively solid understanding of that aspect of my sexuality. Sexual attraction to males has been more confusing for me, initially because I perceived it as a problem, though that only lasted for a short time in my adolescence. More recently I find it confusing because of its short-lived and transient nature. In experimenting sexually with a gay friend, I've found I can be extremely attracted to him and aroused one minute and then inexplicably be turned off to the point where I actually feel disgusted by his facial hair or his penis. For me right now, exploring my sexuality means finding out where those limits lie and what the triggers are for these feelings. I want to know if it's possible for me to enjoy sex with men as well as women, and under what circumstances.” (Male, 23)

Exploring One’s Identity Through Others. The fourth theme was characterized by participants who describe understanding their sexuality through the identities and sexualities of others. Examples of the theme are as follows:

“I try think about my initial reactions to people more. When I see someone that I don't think of myself being attracted to because of their gender I try to think if that's because I

am really not attracted to them or if it's because I have trained myself to think of them as being not attractive. It's also about accepting that sometimes I am attracted to people I didn't think I would be.” (Female, 23)

“It means examining the way I’m attracted to people and to what extent I prefer being with men, women, and nonbinary individuals.” (Female, 21)

For other participants, the theme was represented in thinking about their interactions people and what they want for their future romantic relationships. Examples of this theme are as follows:

“Confusion. It has raised a lot of questions for me about my life and interactions with other people.” (Female, 25)

“I think it's a constant exploration, so for me it means never settling or assuming any sort of finality when it comes to considering my sexuality. Right now I'm exclusively interested in dating and having romantic relationships with women. But I'm sleeping with a man. Maybe I'll want to have a romantic relationship with him, maybe I won't. I'm open to things changing, but not necessarily seeking things out via active exploration or intentional boundary pushing.” (Female, 29)

One participant conceptualized exploring through others as a way to understand their own attractions and acting on those attractions: *“Exploring my sexuality includes examining who and why I feel attractive, and acting on those attractions. It also includes learning and experimenting with different relationship styles. Additionally, it includes exploring aspects of kink cultures.” (Female, 25)*

Discussion

Sexual Identity Labels: Framing an Understanding of Sexual Exploration

The present research focused on re-conceptualizing the lived experience of individuals who are exploring their sexuality. In centering on the experience of individuals exploring their sexuality, the present research allowed a conceptualization of this process outside of traditional frameworks that conflate sexual exploration with sexual minority experience.

When considering the sexual identity labels chosen by our participants, the population represented a diverse range of labels. For instance, not all the participants started as heterosexual and moved to a sexual minority label. For some participants, exploring their sexuality did not lead to a change in their self-identified label at all. These findings challenge the prior assumption that those who question their sexuality are just moving away from a heterosexual label (Morgan & Thompson, 2011), and that all who explore their sexuality will eventually choose a sexual minority label (Thompson, 2007). For example, one participant self-identified as *“lesbian, more heavily gynophilia”* prior to exploring and moved to a *“heteroflexible, bisexual, and androphilia”* (Female, 28) label now that they are exploring their sexuality.

These data also represent challenges to heteronormative assumptions, in which participants felt they needed to choose a heterosexual label prior to exploring their sexuality, even if that was not a salient identity for them from the start. For instance, when asked their previous sexual identity label, one participant said *“I guess heterosexual?”* (Female, 22) which reinforces the assumptions that everyone first identifies as heterosexual until they recognize that they do not fit that label (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). However, the diversity of labels before and during exploring sexuality reinforced the idea that those who may identify as a sexual minority have diverse, unique experiences in conceptualizing sexuality (Galupo et al., 2015).

There was not a typical or unanimous response among the participants, which suggests that individuals who are exploring their sexuality understand it on a subjective level that is unique to their own experiences. In regards to their distinctive understanding of sexuality, some participants also noted that they did not feel comfortable having to label the experience because it felt like an attempt to label something that is open and continuously evolving. These responses reinforce the societal need to label and categorize things (Vance, 1998) that, according to lived experience, does not need to be labeled.

Sexual Exploration: Challenging Heteronormative Assumptions

When considering the meaning participants ascribed to their experience of exploring their sexuality, four main themes emerged. Participants described their conceptualization of exploring their sexuality as open, not limited to social constraints, understanding their own identity, and understanding their identity through other's identity.

Through the first two themes participants conceptualized their exploration with regard to openness and limitlessness. The first theme of openness revealed that participants understood sexual exploration as being open to new experiences, such as people, genders, sexual experiences, or new labels for themselves. The second theme of "not limited by" was distinct and explicitly conceptualized sexual exploration against restrictive cultural assumptions of sexuality. Participants whose responses fell under this theme experienced their sexual exploration as a process of breaking societal restrictions and heterosexist assumptions that are inherent in our cultural conceptualization of sexuality (Galupo, Henise & Davis, 2014; Galupo et al., 2015). For example, one participant stated "*It means that I do not identify as exclusively heterosexual, which is the 'default' in our society.*" (Female, 21)

Through the third and fourth themes participants framed their understanding of exploring as related to their own identities and those of others. The participants who reported exploring as understanding their own identity, described their experience as a way to piece together what is going on in their mind, such as attraction to other people, thoughts that they are thinking, and finding more ways to be comfortable in who they are. The final theme of understanding identity through other's identity was represented in participants answers that included a partners changing identity, meeting someone with an identity they may have never known about, sexual experiences with others, and conversations with close friends who do not identify as heterosexual. These two themes reflect the way sexuality is dually conceptualized based upon identity of self and others. In order to choose a sexual identity label individuals must first define their gender and determine how well it matches with the gender of the individual or individuals they are attracted to (Galupo, Henise & Mercer, 2016; van Anders, 2015). It is not surprising, then, that individuals exploring their sexuality would describe their process as being focused on their identities and the identities of others.

Sexual Exploration: A Positive Representation

Previous research suggested that individuals who are questioning their sexuality are struggling to identify and authenticate their non-normative experiences (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). This research assumed that sexual exploration is a confusing time and would demonstrate higher levels of uncertainty and low levels of identity commitment (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). However, the current research represented a more positive understanding of sexual exploration. Although some participants mentioned that there may be confusion during this time, participants emphasized that this experience has been about truly understanding and accepting who they are. For instance, one participant mentioned "*Confusion, it has raised a lot questions*

for me about my life and interactions with other people. But it has also taught me about accepting where I am and not forcing myself to know the answers about my identity.” (Female, 25) In fact, participants demonstrated that the negative aspects of sexual exploration came from existential factors and once someone is able to break through societal barriers, they feel positive towards exploring and evolving into who they wish to be. Examples of this understanding were seen through many of the participants’ responses, including this particular individual, *“It means to be flexible and comfortable in whatever way I feel, even if- or especially if- it is different.” (Female, 28)*

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our participants represented a convenience sample collected online. Although online sampling is useful for underrepresented populations, where privacy and access issue are unique from the general population (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005), online samples have been shown to disproportionately represent educated, middle class, White individuals (Christian, Dillman, & Smyth, 2008). Although there were no existing parameters to establish demographics for this population our sample demographics reflect this trend. A more diverse sample with more representation of racial and ethnic minorities may reveal more diversity and be more indicative of the general population.

Although qualitative and thematic analysis are appropriate for exploring the lived experience of underrepresented populations, the findings from this sample may not generalize to the population of those exploring their sexuality. This sample was self-selected, non-random and limited to those with access to the web. Thus, individuals of this population who may be more socially isolated need to be further explored.

We reframed language from questioning to exploring in order to avoid stigma and bias, however it is unclear the degree to which questioning and exploring overlap. It could be that in reframing our language we shaped the understanding of this population identity into something different than a “questioning” identity. Future research should consider the similarities and differences in individuals who self-identified as exploring or questioning. For instance, the positive outcome of the data may be reflected in change of language because prior research that used “questioning” as an identity was framed in a negative way, and therefore, using “exploring” may have already indicated to participants that this is something different and positive.

Implications for Counseling

Overall, this sample represented a positive view of what exploring sexuality meant to them and only mentioned negative experiences when trying to break out of societal norms and being comfortable acting in non-normative ways. Affirmation on the part of the counselor may help individuals exploring feel comfortable to face personal and interpersonal challenges and increase their well-being and to feel that there is no need to label their sexuality (Kaufman, 2008; Korell & Lorah, 2007). However, few helping professionals have been trained to give affirmative services to sexual minorities (Carrol & Gilroy, 2002), which emphasizes the importance of extending these services to this population.

Before working with clients who are exploring their sexuality, helping professionals need to address personal biases and assumptions that may halt them in providing an empathic and supportive environment. The findings of this study challenge the assumptions of prior research that those who are exploring their sexuality are in distress and/or that they will eventually change labels or adopt sexual minority labels (Morgan & Thompson, 2011). The data also represents that sexual minority individuals may explore and change or not change their labels. In fact,

researchers have suggested that more and more individuals are getting away from labeling their sexual experiences (Savin-Williams, 2005). Helping professionals can assist individuals who are exploring their sexuality by highlighting positive experiences, avoiding labeling their experience as a sexual minority experience or as fixed, and seeing sexuality as fluid.

Appendix

Appendix A

IRB Application # 1612012220

The IRB has approved your protocol "Understanding and Validating the Experience of Individuals who are Exploring their Sexuality" effective January 1, 2017

Your IRB protocol can now be viewed by your faculty advisor in MyOSPR. For more information, please visit: <http://www.towson.edu/academics/research/sponsored/myospr.html>

If you should encounter any new risks, reactions, or injuries to subjects while conducting your research, please notify IRB@towson.edu. Should your research extend beyond one year in duration, or should there be substantive changes in your research protocol, you will need to submit another application.

We do offer training and orientation sessions for faculty/staff, please sign up for one of the sessions:

<http://fusion.towson.edu/www/signupGeneric/index.cfm?type=OSPR>

Check back to that registration site frequently – we'll post additional sessions for January and spring semester soon.

Regards,
Towson IRB

Appendix B

Understanding Individuals who are Exploring their Sexuality



We are researchers from Towson University conducting research for a Master's Thesis on the experiences of individuals who are exploring their sexual identity. If you choose to participate in this research, you will be asked to complete a brief survey, which should take approximately 30-45 minutes. During the survey, you will be asked to rate how strongly you agree with statements about yourself and others regarding thoughts and experiences specific to your sexuality, as well as thoughts about your feelings and experience of others.

There are minimal risks associated with your participation. Risk may be more likely if you are uncomfortable thinking and answering questions about your sexuality. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are not obligated to respond to any questions that you are uncomfortable answering. The survey is designed so that you can indicate "no answer" for individual questions and remain in the study. You may also withdraw from the study at any time without incurring any penalties.

Completion of this survey signifies your voluntary consent to participate in this research and that you are at least 18 years of age and live in the United States. You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time by clicking "Exit this survey" in the upper-right-hand corner of the screen.

The Towson University Institutional Review Board has approved this study. If you have any questions regarding this research or its purposes, please contact the faculty adviser for this project, Dr. Paz Galupo, at pgalupo@towson.edu. If you have any questions pertaining to your rights as a participant, please contact Dr. Elizabeth Katz, Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, at (410)704-3072

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

M. Paz Galupo
Yelena Salkowitz
Towson University

*** By agreeing to participate in this study I acknowledge that:**

- 1. I am at least 18 years of age**
- 2. I live in the United States**
- 3. I identify as an individual who is exploring their sexuality**

I agree



The next three pages ask questions regarding basic information about yourself (e.g. age, gender). This information is used to understand the diversity of individuals who take this survey.

*All questions are optional (select no answer, or type 'na' if you feel uncomfortable answering)

* **Current Age**

* **State of Residence**

* **Socio-Economic Status:**

- Working Class
- Lower-Middle Class
- Middle Class
- Upper-Middle Class
- Upper Class
- Don't Know
- NO ANSWER

Other (please specify)

* **Race / Ethnicity:**

* **What is the highest level of education you have received?**

* **How did you hear about this study?**

* **Relationship status (check all that apply):**

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Single | <input type="checkbox"/> Domestic partnership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dating | <input type="checkbox"/> Open relationship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> In a relationship | <input type="checkbox"/> Polyamorous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Married | <input type="checkbox"/> Monogamous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Civil union | <input type="checkbox"/> No Answer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | |



* Please select your primary gender identity:

- Woman
- Man
- Other (please specify below)

* Please select the sex you were assigned at birth:

- Female
- Male
- No Answer



* Please list your primary sexual identity.

* Please list any other sexual identities you may have, if any.

Please answer the following open ended questions in as much detail as you feel comfortable.

* For you, what does it mean to be exploring your sexuality?

* At what time, or what specific event, led you to first recognize you were exploring your sexuality? (Feel free to explain in as much detail as you feel comfortable)

* Have you disclosed to others that you are exploring your sexuality?

Yes

No

* If yes to the previous question, how have others reacted? If no, how do think others might react?

* For you, what have been positive and negative aspects to exploring you sexuality?

* Prior to exploring your sexuality what was the identity that you most associated with? (e.g. heterosexual, heteroflexible, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, etc).

* Now that you are exploring your sexuality what identity do you most associate with? (e.g. heterosexual, heteroflexible, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, etc).



Thank you for taking this survey. If you have any questions or comments, feel free to e-mail the principal investigator at pgalupo@towson.edu

Please feel free to let others know about this survey. It can be accessed through:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ExploringSexuality>

We try to create studies that are inclusive and affirming of all individuals. We recognize that some of our questions may not fully capture your individual experiences. In order to improve future studies we welcome feedback. If you would like to offer a comment, but wish to remain anonymous, feel free to respond below.

Thank you!

Appendix C

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Gender	%
Women	70.2
Male	28.2
Gender Fluid	1.2
Race/Ethnicity	
Asian / Asian American	1.2
Black / African American	2.4
Hispanic / Latino	7.1
White / Caucasian	76.2
Biracial / Multiracial	9.5
No Answer	3.6
Education	
Completed High School or GED	26.2
Vocational School / Associated Degree	11.9
Bachelors Degree	40.5
Masters Degree	17.9
Doctorate Degree	2.4
No Answer	1.2
Socioeconomic Status	
Working Class	16.7
Lower-Middle Class	19.0
Middle Class	28.6
Upper-Middle Class	27.4
Upper-Class	3.6
Don't Know	4.8

Appendix D

Table 2. Frequency of Identities Before and During Exploring

	Before	Current
Monosexual Identities	92.9%	26.2%
Heterosexual	68	11
Gay	3	5
Lesbian	5	5
Homosexual	1	-
Androphilia	-*	1
Gynophilia	1	-
Plurisexual Identities	13.1%	78.6%
Heteroflexible	1	11
Bisexual	9	27
Pansexual	1	9
Queer	-	18
Fluid	-	1
Asexual Identities	2.4%	9.5%
Demisexual	-	2
Demiromantic	-	2
Asexual	2	3
Bioromantic	-	1
No Label	6%	4.8%
No Label	5	4
Questioning	0%	2.4%
Questioning	-	2
Alternative Identities	0%	4.8%
Polyamorous	-	1
Zoophile	-	1
Kinky	-	1
Submissive	-	1
TOTAL (N)⁴	96	106

⁴ Total exceeds 84 because some participants supplied multiple labels

*- Represents zero participants identifying as that label at that time point

Appendix E

Table 3: Movement of Identity Before and During Sexual Exploration

	<i>(n)</i>	<i>%</i>
Stayed the Same		25%
Heterosexual to Heterosexual	10	
Gay to Gay	3	
Multiple Identities to Multiple Identities	5	
Bisexual to Bisexual	1	
No Label to No Label	2	
Heterosexual to Monosexual		2.4%
Gay	1	
Lesbian	1	
Heterosexual to Plurisexual		53.6%
Queer	8	
Bisexual	17	
Heteroflexible	8	
Pansexual	4	
Fluid	1	
Questioning	1	
Multiple Identities	6	
No Label to Sexual Minority		1.2%
Queer	1	
Sexual Minority to Sexual Minority		13.1%
Bisexual to Queer	2	
Bisexual to Pansexual	2	
Bisexual to Multiple Identities	1	
Lesbian to Bisexual	1	
Lesbian to Pansexual	1	
Lesbian to Queer	1	
Multiple Identities to Bisexual	2	
Multiple Identities to Pansexual	1	
Asexual Identities		4.8%
Heterosexual to Demisexual	1	
Heterosexual to Zoophile	1	
Bisexual to Asexual	1	
Asexual to Bisexual	1	
TOTAL	(84)	

Appendix F

Table 4. Thematic Structure

Themes	Percentage
Openness	34.5%
Not Limited By	47.6%
Exploring Own Identity	66.7%
Exploring Identity through Others	11.9%

Note. Because participants responses could exemplify multiple themes, percentages exceed 100%

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Updated on May 15, 2017

Yelena S. Salkowitz

Education

Master of Arts *August 2015-May 2017*

Towson University, MD

Program: Counseling Psychology

Research Interest: Gender and Sexual Identity

Bachelor of Science

August 2011-May 2015

Towson University, MD

Major: Psychology

Research Interest: Emerging Adulthood

Teaching and Mentoring Experience

Teaching Assistantship

August 2015-May 2016

Towson University, MD

Department: Psychology

Professor: Dr. K. Shifren

Course: Human Development

- ◆ Gained knowledge in subject matter in order to effectively run large and small group review sessions before each exam, teach lectures, and aid students in one-on-one tutoring through the semester.

Graduate Assistantship

August 2016-May 2017

Towson University, MD

Department: Academic Achievement Center

Supervisor: Tabatha Beck

- ◆ Mentored students with one-on-one academic coaching to help with time management, skills development, and academic anxiety.
- ◆ Independently and co-lead workshops to large groups of undergraduate students about various topics on how to succeed in the classroom, outside of the classroom, stress management, and general problems a majority of college students face.

Counseling Graduate Intern

August 2016-May 2017

House of Ruth

Department: Counseling Services

Baltimore, MD

Supervisor: Julie Miller, LCPC

- ◆ Chosen to be a Master's intern at House of Ruth Maryland in order to gain first-hand experience as a counselor for individuals who have gone through inter-partner violence.
- ◆ Acquired a minimum of 20 personal clients and helped guide them through difficult times in their lives
- ◆ Received thorough supervision from a board certified clinician in order to learn and grow as a future clinician

*Undergraduate Teaching Assistant**August 2014-May 2015*

Towson University, MD

Department: Psychology

Professor: Dr. J. Mattanah

Course: Abnormal Psychology

- ◆ Developed and taught a lecture on Childhood mental health disorders and created a case study to help students conceptualize and diagnose a child client.

Research Development*Master's Thesis**August 2015-May 2017*

Towson University, MD

Department: Psychology

Research Focus: Gender and Sexual Identity

Mentor: Dr. M. P. Galupo

- ◆ Self-directed research on understanding and validating lived-experience of individuals who are exploring their sexuality.
- ◆ Created an online survey using adapted quantitative measures and new qualitative open ended questions.

*Undergraduate Honors Thesis Program**January 2014-May 2015*

Towson University, MD

Department: Psychology

Research Focus: Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood

Mentor: Dr. J. Mattanah

- ◆ Selected by the Honors College to participate in a year and a half long program to learn advanced statistics and develop and present a self-directed thesis.

*Society for Research in Child Development Presentation**January 2015*

Philadelphia, PA.

- ◆ Selected to present a poster on self-guided research on Marital Conflict, Romantic Relationship Competence, and Life Satisfaction Among Emerging Adults.

Training and Leadership Development*Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program)**January 2017*

Towson University, MD

Department: Institutional Review Board at Towson University

- ◆ Hour and half training on the ethical proceedings and history on the importance of safety and procedure for research with human participants

