

A NEW VIEW OF LESBIAN SUBTYPES: STABLE VERSUS FLUID IDENTITY TRAJECTORIES OVER AN 8-YEAR PERIOD

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Research has increasingly documented that the distinction between lesbian and bisexual women is one of degree rather than kind, and some researchers have therefore argued for an end to sexual categorization altogether. To the contrary, I maintain that researchers should explore alternative criteria for sexual categorization that might allow us to discern novel and meaningful subtypes of same-sex sexuality. Toward this end, I explore the usefulness of a typology that focuses on change in lesbian identification over time, using a sample of young sexual-minority women that has been observed longitudinally for a period of 8 years. Specifically, I contrast women who have maintained consistent lesbian identifications over this time period (stable lesbians) to women who have alternated between lesbian and nonlesbian labels (fluid lesbians) and women who never adopted lesbian labels (stable nonlesbians). The pattern of similarities and differences among the groups changes as a function of the specific phenomenon being assessed (e.g., sexual and emotional attractions, sexual contact, developmental histories), suggesting the value of using multiple, alternative sexual typologies as heuristics to guide future research into life span development of sexual orientation and identity.

The past 30 years have seen dramatic increases in the visibility and acceptance of same-sex sexuality in contemporary Western societies. Sexual-minority (i.e., nonheterosexual) men and women are regular topics of conversation, subjects of research, foci for legislation, and targets of media attention. Yet ironically, just as society has become more accepting of a sexual taxonomy that includes gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, scientists studying sexual orientation have increasingly come to question the usefulness of these categories in light of the increasing evidence for nonexclusivity and plasticity in sexuality, especially among women.

For example, although it is typically assumed that individuals with exclusive, early-appearing, and longitudinally stable same-sex attractions and behavior are the most common and representative “types” of sexual minorities, this does not appear to be the case. Recent representative studies of American adults (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and adolescents (French, Story, Remafedi, Resnick, & Blum, 1996; Russell & Seif, 2002) have found that individuals reporting nonexclusive attractions out-

number those reporting exclusive same-sex attractions, especially among women. Furthermore, psychophysiological research has documented that both lesbian-identified and heterosexual-identified women show genital arousal to both same-sex and other-sex visual sexual stimuli (Chivers, Rieger, Latty, & Bailey, 2004). Women also appear more likely to exhibit situational and environmental plasticity in sexual attractions, behavior, and identification (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2000, 2003a). Collectively, such findings demonstrate that the distinction between lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women is one of degree rather than kind.

On the basis of such findings, I would argue that researchers should systematically explore novel, alternative criteria for sexual categorization (although keeping in mind that the resulting categories are heuristics rather than “natural” types). In this article, I draw upon data collected from an 8-year longitudinal study of young sexual-minority women to explore the usefulness of a typology that focuses on change in lesbian identification over time. This research seeks to understand experiential and developmental differences between three types of sexual-minority women: those who maintain stable lesbian identifications once they come out, those who alternate between lesbian and nonlesbian labels after coming out, and those who never adopt lesbian labels, choosing instead to identify as bisexual or to reject identity labels altogether.

This approach represents a useful departure from previous research on lesbian identity development for two primary reasons. First, it takes fluidity between lesbian and

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bisexual identities and experiences—which has traditionally been treated as a source of error and ambiguity in sexual identity research—and treats it as a fundamental starting point for theorizing about typologies of female same-sex sexuality. Thus, whereas prior studies of sexual identity have assumed that “lesbians,” “bisexuals,” and “heterosexuals” exist as stable, natural types, simply waiting to be tabulated and assessed, the present research treats such identities as potentially and meaningfully variable across the life span, and focuses on identifying the unique attributes of women who do or do not migrate between lesbian and nonlesbian identities over time.

Second, whereas extant research on sexual identity development focuses only on feelings and experiences that occur prior to “coming out” (e.g., earliest recollections of same-sex attractions, as in Savin-Williams, 1998), the present research focuses on trajectories of experience that occur after a woman has come out (at least among a subset of women who came out in their teens and early twenties). This should not be taken to suggest that early experiences have no relevance for understanding the nature and development of same-sex sexuality. Rather, this approach seeks to redress the long-standing overemphasis on early sexual-minority milestones that has crowded out attention to slower-developing psychological processes which may require a substantially longer time scale for valid observation. This approach is particularly relevant for studying women’s sexual identity development, given the extensive evidence that this process has a more variable time course and a broader set of situational triggers among women than among men (reviewed in Diamond, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Because the current research draws from 8 years of longitudinal data on adolescent and young adult sexual-minority women’s attractions, identities, and behaviors, it provides a unique opportunity to examine “post-coming out” development as it unfolds over the course of adolescence and young adulthood, a period of time that is particularly apt for studies of transitions and adjustments in sexuality and identity.

The Potential Meaning of Identity Change

Note that I do not presume that a typology based on identity stability versus change is “better” or more accurate than the traditional lesbian/bisexual/heterosexual typology. Rather, my goal is to explore whether a typology that makes use of information about the consistency of a sexual-minority woman’s identification over time can reveal meaningful patterns of sexual experience and development that might otherwise be obscured. For example, considering the accumulating evidence for fluidity and plasticity in both heterosexual and sexual-minority women’s sexuality (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2003b; Golden, 1996; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994; Whisman, 1993), examining consistency may be a more effective way to examine how women construct and interpret their sexual self-concepts over time, partic-

ularly given the extant evidence that different women use markedly different criteria for labeling themselves lesbian versus bisexual (Golden, 1996; Rust, 1992, 1993). Some consider periodic attractions to men to be consistent with lesbian identification as long as they are not acted upon (Rust, 1992), whereas others maintain that periodic sexual contact with men is consistent with a lesbian label under certain circumstances (Diamond, 2000, 2003a).

Rather than viewing identity change as movement toward or away from a woman’s “true” identity, the current approach considers some of the factors that might make some women more likely to exhibit identity stability than others. One possibility, for example, is that women with stable patterns of lesbian identification will show the most exclusive and consistent patterns of same-sex attractions and behavior, given that such patterns easily lend themselves to the culturally accepted definition of lesbianism. In contrast, women with predominant—but not exclusive—same-sex attractions, or attractions that fluctuate over time, might find it more difficult to maintain a consistent lesbian label, and might transition between lesbian and other labels depending on their environments, relationships, and circumstances.

Another intriguing possibility concerns women who feel that their attractions are focused on “the person and not the gender.” There has been increasing documentation and discussion of this phenomenon in recent years (reviewed in Diamond, 2003b; see also Cass, 1990; Weinberg et al., 1994). Although some might presume that such women are “really” heterosexual, there is currently no basis on which to conclude that this particular pattern of experience is characterized by uniformly low same-sex attractions. Rather, such women might report predominant same-sex or other-sex attractions, depending on their current constellation of relationships. Either way, they might be particularly likely to exhibit change in identification over time, as their relationships change. Thus, focusing on trajectories of sexual identification, rather than single snapshots, might be particularly informative for understanding these women’s experiences.

Finally, this perspective offers new ways to consider sexual development. For example, it has long been presumed that bisexual orientations have a different etiology and developmental trajectory than lesbian orientations. As Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith (1981) noted, “[bisexuality is] much less strongly tied to pre-adult sexual feelings. . . . Exclusive homosexuality tends to emerge from a deep-seated predisposition, while bisexuality is more subject to influence by social and sexual learning” (pp. 200–201). This plausible and widely held supposition is echoed in the long-standing colloquial distinction between *primary/born* lesbians, whose same-sex sexuality is presumed more essential, early-developing, and exclusive, and *elective/bisexual/political* lesbians, whose same-sex sexuality is presumed more subject to external influence (Burch, 1993; Ettore, 1980; Golden, 1994; Ponse, 1978). Yet framing this distinction in terms of bisexuality versus

lesbianism may be misguided. Perhaps, instead, distinctions between “early-developing” and “late-developing” sexual-minority women have as much to do with the consistency of women’s identification than their overall distribution of sexual attractions.

The Current Study

In the present research, these possibilities were investigated by directly comparing patterns of attraction and behavior in three groups of sexual-minority women: (a) those who have maintained consistent lesbian identifications over an 8-year period spanning the transition from late adolescence to young adulthood (denoted *stable lesbians*), (b) those who alternated between lesbian and nonlesbian labels during this time period (denoted *fluid lesbians*), and (c) those who never adopted lesbian labels, despite acknowledging and acting upon same-sex attractions (denoted *stable nonlesbians*). Although this typology is exploratory, the following tentative hypotheses are advanced:

1. Given the cultural emphasis on consistency and exclusivity in same-sex attractions and behavior as a primary criteria of lesbianism, stable lesbians will have reported both more exclusive and more consistent same-sex attractions and behavior over the 8 years of the study than fluid lesbians and stable nonlesbians.
2. Because documented instances of sexual fluidity often involve the experience of unexpectedly becoming attracted to—or involved with—specific individuals, regardless of their gender, fluid lesbians and nonlesbians will be more likely to report that their attractions are more oriented to the person and not their gender.
3. Stable lesbians will report earlier sexual identity milestones than fluid lesbians and nonlesbians (i.e., earlier attractions, sexual contact, sexual questioning, and identification). Additionally, given the cultural presumption that lesbianism is more intrinsic than bisexuality, stable lesbians will be more likely than fluid lesbians and stable nonlesbians to report that they were born with their sexuality and less likely to feel that their sexuality was influenced by their environment or by personal choice.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 79 nonheterosexual women between the ages of 18 and 25 years old who were initially interviewed in person as part of a longitudinal study of sexual identity development among young women (Diamond, 1998, 2000, 2003a). The original sample contained 89 women; 10 women could not be located for follow-up. Three follow-up interviews were conducted by phone over the ensuing 8 years. At the first assessment, the mean and median age of the participants was 19; at the fourth assessment, the mean

and median age of the participants was 28. There were no significant age differences across settings or sexual identity categories. Three-fourths of respondents came from families in which at least one parent had completed college, and nearly two-thirds came from families in which at least one parent had a professional/technical occupation. In all, 85% of respondents were White, 5% African American, 9% Latina, and 1% Asian American.

Initial sampling took place across a wide range of settings, including lesbian, gay, and bisexual community events (i.e., picnics, parades, social events) and youth groups in two moderately sized cities and a number of smaller urban and rural communities in central New York state (35% of sample); classes on gender and sexuality issues taught at a large, private university in central New York (36%); and lesbian, gay, and bisexual student groups at a large private university, a large public university, and a small, private women’s college in central New York (29%). This sampling strategy has known limitations. For example, organized community groups and activities tend to underrepresent sexual-minority individuals who do not openly identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Although this is less of a problem when recruiting from college courses on gender and sexuality, such courses typically overrepresent White, highly educated, upper-middle-class women.

In each setting, the principal investigator described the nature and aims of the research, explained the selection criteria (rejection or questioning of heterosexual identification) and distributed flyers describing the research. Interested participants provided their names and phone numbers to the principal investigator at that time or contacted the principal investigator by phone or electronic mail. Ninety-five percent of women attending lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth/student groups or community events volunteered for the study; those who declined to volunteer cited lack of interest as the reason. At the large group events, potential participants were approached individually, and response rates are based on the number of women who were approached. In smaller settings (such as the youth groups and college courses), announcements were made to the entire group. Accurate response rates for college classes on gender and sexuality are inestimable because it is unknown how many students in each class met the selection criteria. As with all research on sexual-minority populations, women who are uncomfortable with their sexuality or with disclosing personal details about their sexual questioning are likely to be underrepresented.

At the beginning of each interview, each woman was asked, “How do you currently label your sexual identity to yourself, even if it’s different from what you might tell other people? If you don’t apply a label to your sexual identity, please say so.” Lesbian- and bisexual-identified women were categorized according to their chosen identity labels. Women who declined to attach a label to their sexuality were classified as *unlabeled*. This included women who identified as “questioning” at the first interview. No women identified

Table 1

Percentages of Lesbian, Bisexual, Unlabeled, and Heterosexually Identified Participants at Each Assessment

<i>Label</i>	<i>Time 1 n (%)</i>	<i>Time 2 n (%)</i>	<i>Time 3 n (%)</i>	<i>Time 4 n (%)</i>
Lesbian	39 (43)	39 (43)	32 (35)	28 (31)
Bisexual	27 (30)	28 (30)	21 (23)	19 (21)
Unlabeled	25 (27)	12 (13)	20 (22)	26 (29)
Heterosexual	0 (0)	5 (5)	7 (8)	6 (7)
Percentage of Initial Sample		91%	88%	88%

as questioning in subsequent interviews. Over the course of the study, 7 women described their sexual identity using alternative identity labels, such as “queer,” “pansexual,” or “polyamorous.” When asked to describe what these labels meant, each of these women indicated that her underlying attractions were bisexual, but expressed reservations about the bisexual label because (a) it did not adequately describe the fluid and changing nature of their sexual feelings, and/or (b) it was associated with negative stereotypes, such as promiscuity. Because each of these women described her underlying attractions as bisexual, they were considered bisexual for categorization purposes. The percentage of self-identified lesbians, bisexuals, unlabeled, and heterosexual women in the sample at each assessment is presented in Table 1.

Procedures

Time 1 (T1) assessments were scripted, face-to-face interviews conducted with each woman by the primary investigator, approximately 90% of which lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. When possible, interviews were conducted in a university office. When this was not feasible, interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's choosing, usually her home. Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, interviews were not tape-recorded. Detailed notes were taken during the interview by the primary investigator and transcribed immediately afterward. The primary investigator reinterviewed participants over the phone two years later (T2) and again after an additional three years (T3) and another additional three years (T4). The T2, T3, and T4 interviews followed a standard script reassessing the major variables assessed at T1, and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Verbatim typed transcriptions were taken of the T2 interviews while they were being conducted; T3 and T4 interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Tape-recording was adopted for T3 and T4 because, given the older age of the participants, and the fact that they had already undergone two interviews with the same interviewer, the sensitivity of the interviews was judged to be less of a concern. Each participant gave explicit permission for the tape-recording.

Four lesbians, 1 bisexual, and 4 unlabeled participants could not be relocated at T2. At T3, an additional 3 lesbians

and 1 bisexual could not be located, but the 4 unlabeled women who had been missing at T2 were successfully recontacted. Two respondents could not be recontacted between T3 and T4 (one had identified as unlabeled and the other as bisexual at T1). One T1 lesbian who had been lost between T2 and T3 was successfully recontacted for T4. Thus, the final T4 sample size was 79, consisting of 89% of the original respondents. None of the women who were recontacted declined to be reinterviewed. During the consent procedure for each interview, women were informed that they would be asked about their prior and current sexual attractions, behaviors, and identification. The confidentiality of the interview was stressed, and each participant was instructed of her right to refrain from answering any of the interview questions or to terminate the interview at any time. None of the participants did so. At the close of each interview, women were given the opportunity to revise their answers to any of the questions or to add additional remarks.

Measures

As described in the first report on this sample (Diamond, 1998), T1 interviews assessed the age at which participants first consciously questioned their sexual identity, first experienced a same-sex attraction, first engaged in same-sex contact, and first openly adopted a sexual-minority identity. To assess same-sex attractions, women were asked at each interview to report the percentage of their total attractions that were directed toward the same sex on a day-to-day basis; separate estimates were provided for sexual versus emotional attractions. This yields an estimate of the relative frequency of same-sex versus other-sex attractions, regardless of the intensity of these attractions or the total number of sexual attractions experienced on a day-to-day basis. This measurement approach has been criticized for its implicit presumption that same-sex sexuality varies in inverse proportion to other-sex sexuality (Shively & DeCecco, 1977), but prior research (Rust, 1992; Sell & Petrulio, 1996) has indicated that sexual-minority individuals themselves use this proportional approach when describing variation in sexual orientation. Prior research has established that self-reported percentages of same-sex versus other-sex attractions show excellent test-retest reliability (detailed in

Diamond, 2000). To assess sexual behavior, participants were asked to report the total number of men and women with whom they engaged in sexual contact (defined as any sexually motivated intimate contact) between T1 and T2, between T2 and T3, and between T3 and T4. This information was translated into percentages, so that 100% represents exclusive same-sex behavior and 0% represents exclusive other-sex behavior. Note that this variable is not equivalent to the relative frequency of same-sex and other-sex sexual acts. Questions regarding the number and nature of sexual acts performed with each partner were considered unnecessarily intrusive, given that consistency in overall same-sex behavior can be assessed without this level of detail. For example, a lesbian-identified woman who engages in sexual contact with a man clearly violates the traditional conceptualization of lesbians as wholly uninterested in other-sex sexual contact, regardless of whether the sexual act consists of genital fondling or full sexual intercourse. Women were instructed, however, to exclude sexual experiences that consisted only of kissing.

Finally, at T4 women were asked to rate, on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, their agreement with the following statements describing different aspects of sexual orientation and its development: "I'm the kind of person that's attracted to the person rather than their gender;" "I feel my sexuality is something I was born with;" "I feel my own sexuality has been influenced by my environment;" and "I feel my own lesbianism or bisexuality is something I chose."

RESULTS

Women who identified as lesbian at each of the four assessment periods ($n = 18$) were designated as stable lesbians; those who have claimed both lesbian and nonlesbian labels at different points in the past 8 years ($n = 25$) were designated fluid lesbians; those who never adopted a lesbian label at any of the four assessments, and instead selected bisexual or unlabeled identities ($n = 36$), were designated stable nonlesbians. This categorization therefore combines nonlesbians who identify as bisexual with nonlesbians who are unlabeled. The decision to combine these groups was made on the basis of similarity in the bisexual and unlabeled women's overall patterns of attraction and behavior, documented in previous assessment of this sample (Diamond, 1998, 2000, 2003a), and to focus specifically on the relevance of changes in lesbian identification. However, one might also ask meaningful questions about variations in the stability of bisexual identification.

Physical and Emotional Attractions

Hypothesis 1 predicted that across the 8 years of the study, stable lesbians would report the greatest and most consistent same-sex physical and emotional attractions. To test this hypothesis, a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with identity group as the inde-

pendent factor and self-reported percentages of same-sex physical attractions at T1, T2, T3, and T4 as the dependent variables. This analysis was then repeated with self-reported emotional attractions as the dependent variables. Both analyses detected a significant effect of identity group for physical attraction, $F(2, 72) = 76.56$, $p < .001$, and emotional attraction, $F(2, 72) = 40.24$, $p < .001$. There was no effect of the repeated factor (i.e., no significant change in attractions across the four assessments), nor was there an interaction between the repeated factor and identity group. As predicted, stable lesbians had the highest same-sex attractions and stable nonlesbians the least, with fluid lesbians intermediate between them (see Figure 1). To examine whether fluid lesbians were more similar to stable lesbians or stable nonlesbians, Bonferroni-corrected follow-up comparisons were conducted using mean levels of attractions across the four assessments (see Table 1). These analyses found that fluid lesbians had significantly greater physical and emotional same-sex attractions than did nonlesbians over the 8 years of the study, both corrected

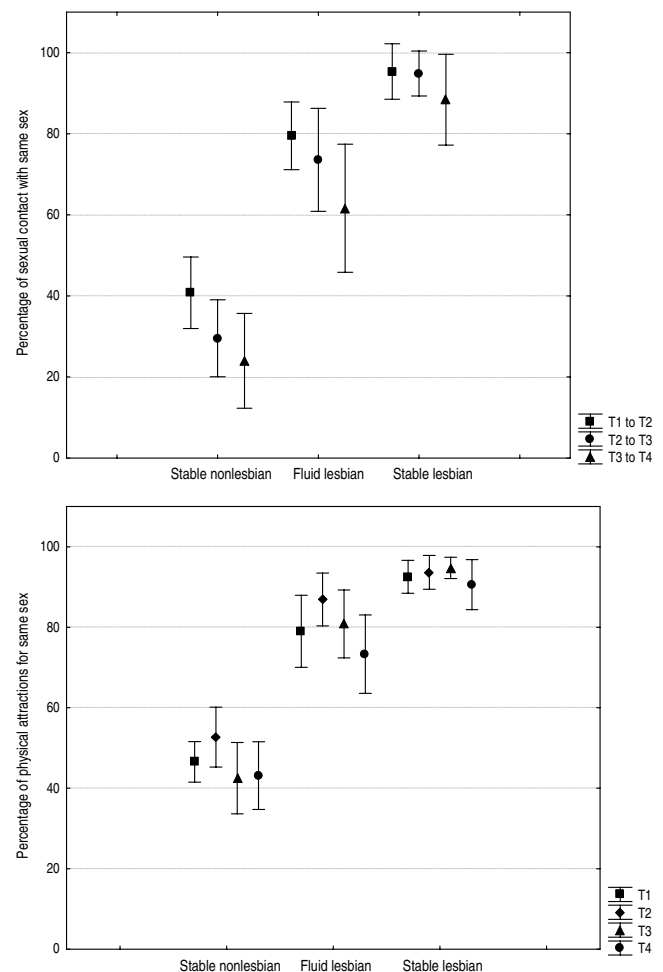


Fig. 1. Mean percentage and 95% confidence intervals for same-sex physical attractions and sexual contact at Time 1, Time 2, Time 3, and Time 4, stratified by identity group.

Table 2

Attractions, Relationships, and Developmental Characteristics of Stable Lesbians, Fluid Lesbians, and Stable Nonlesbians

Variable	Stable Lesbians M (SD)	Fluid Lesbians M (SD)	Stable Nonlesbians M (SD)	Total M (SD)
Mean percentage of physical attractions to same sex, T1–T4	93 ^{ab} (7)	81 ^{bc} (12)	45 ^{ac} (18)	69 (25)
Mean percentage of emotional attractions to same sex, T1–T4	91 ^b (9)	85 ^b (9)	50 ^a (25)	71 (26)
Mean absolute change in physical attractions between each assessment	6 ^b (5)	17 ^b (12)	16 ^{ac} (10)	14 (11)
Mean absolute change in emotional attractions between each assessment	9 ^b (9)	16 ^b (13)	17 ^{ac} (10)	16 (14)
Mean percentage of sexual behavior pursued with same sex, T1–T4	92 ^{ab} (13)	70 ^{bc} (23)	32 ^{ac} (22)	58 (32)
Mean percentage of romantic relationships with same sex, T1–T4	100 ^{ab} (0)	81 ^{bc} (24)	27 ^{ac} (28)	61 (39)
Mean absolute change in sexual behavior from T1–T2 to T3–T4	10 ^b (22)	32 ^b (29)	31 ^{ac} (25)	27 (27)
Mean absolute change in romantic relationships from T1–T2 to T3–T4	0 ^b (0)	25 ^b (30)	27 ^{ac} (33)	20 (30)
Age of first conscious same-sex attraction	14.6 (3.2)	15.3 (3.2)	15.2 (3.9)	15.0 (3.5)
Age of first sexual questioning	15.3 (2.3)	15.7 (2.7)	16.4 (2.5)	16.0 (2.6)
Age of first same-sex sexual contact	18.2 (1.9)	18.3 (2.4)	18.5 (2.3)	18.3 (2.3)
Age of adoption of sexual-minority identity	17.2 (2.0)	17.6 (2.3)	17.7 (2.1)	17.5 (2.2)

^aSignificantly different from Fluid Lesbian group using $\alpha < .05$. ^bSignificantly different from Stable Nonlesbian group using $\alpha < .05$. ^cSignificantly different from Stable Lesbian group using $\alpha < .05$.

p values $< .001$, but significantly less same-sex physical attractions than did stable lesbians, corrected $p < .02$. Thus, with respect to physical attractions, fluid lesbians appear to represent a fairly distinct group. Their emotional attractions, however, did not significantly differ from those of stable lesbians.

To test whether stable lesbians exhibited the most consistent attractions over time, absolute difference scores were conducted to represent changes in attractions from T1 to T2, T2 to T3, and T3 to T4. The mean of these absolute difference scores was then calculated to represent the overall magnitude of fluctuation in attractions across the 8 years of the study. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with identity group as the independent variable and mean fluctuations in physical and emotional attractions as the two dependent variables. There was a significant effect of identity group, $F(4, 158) = 4.48$, $p < .002$. Means for each group are presented in Table 2. Bonferroni-corrected follow-up comparisons found that stable lesbians showed significantly smaller fluctuations in physical and emotional attractions than both of the other groups, all corrected p values $< .05$, whereas fluid lesbians and stable nonlesbians did not differ.

Lastly, an ANOVA was conducted to test for group differences in the degree to which women felt that their attractions were directed to “the person rather than their gender.” There was a significant effect of identity group, $F(2, 76) = 10.25$, $p < .001$, and follow-up comparisons established that stable lesbians reported significantly less agreement with this statement ($M = 2.7$) than either fluid lesbians ($M = 3.7$) and nonlesbians ($M = 4.1$), both corrected $p < .01$. Fluid lesbians and nonlesbians did not differ from one another.

Sexual Behavior and Romantic Relationships

With regard to sexual behavior, it was predicted that across the 8 years of the study, stable lesbians would report the greatest percentage of same-sex sexual contact and stable nonlesbians the least, with fluid lesbians intermediate between them. This expectation was confirmed by a repeated measures ANOVA, in which the independent factor was identity group and the dependent variables were self-reported percentages of same-sex sexual contact between T1 and T2, between T2 and T3, and between T3 and T4. As predicted, there was a significant effect of identity group, $F(2, 75) = 50.77$, $p < .0001$. There was also a significant effect of the repeated factor, $F(2, 74) = 6.62$, $p < .001$, and a follow-up polynomial contrast detected a significant linear decline in same-sex behavior across the 8 years of study, $F(1, 75) = 11.98$, $p < .001$. There was no interaction between the repeated factor and identity group, indicating that this linear decline was observed in all identity groups. Figure 1 displays this graphically, presenting means and 95% confidence intervals for percentages of same-sex contact between T1 and T2, between T2 and T3, and between T3 and T4, stratified by identity group.

A similar pattern of findings was observed for rates of participation in same-sex romantic relationships. As with same-sex sexual contact, the repeated measures analysis detected a significant effect of identity group, $F(2, 70) = 51.85$, $p < .001$. In this case, however, there was no overall effect of the repeated factor. To examine whether fluid lesbians were more similar to stable lesbians or stable nonlesbians, Bonferroni-corrected follow-up comparisons were conducted using mean percentages of same-sex sexual contact and same-sex romantic relationships across the four

assessments (see Table 2). These analyses found that fluid lesbians had significantly greater percentages of same-sex sexual contact and romantic relationships than did nonlesbians over the 8 years of the study, all corrected p values < .001, but significantly less than did stable lesbians, all corrected p < .02.

To test for differences in the magnitude of behavior/relationship change, absolute difference scores were calculated representing the total change in same-sex sexual contact and in same-sex romantic relationships from T1 to T4. These difference scores were entered as dependent variables into a MANOVA with identity group as the independent variable. There was a significant effect of identity group, $F(4, 142) = 3.70, p < .01$. Bonferroni-corrected follow-up comparisons found that stable lesbians had significantly less change in sexual behavior than both of the other groups, both corrected p values < .05, but fluid lesbians and nonlesbians did not differ (see means in Table 2 and Figure 2).

Timing and Perceived Cause of Same-Sex Sexuality

A MANOVA was conducted to test for identity group differences in the ages at which women reported (at T1) having

experienced their first same-sex attractions, sexual questioning, same-sex sexual contact, and sexual-minority identification. There was no significant overall effect of identity group, and none of the univariate F tests were significant (see means in Table 2). An additional MANOVA was conducted to test for identity group differences in the degree to which women felt that they were born with their sexuality, that their sexuality was influenced by their environment, and that their sexuality was something that they chose. Again, there was no significant overall effect of identity group, and none of the univariate F tests were significant (respective means for stable lesbians, fluid lesbians, and stable nonlesbians were 4.2, 3.8, and 3.6 for “born with sexuality,” 3.2, 3.5, and 3.8 for “environment,” and 2.2, 2.2, and 2.4 for “choice”).

DISCUSSION

This research adopted a new approach to studying sexual identity development by replacing the standard question—“how do lesbians differ from bisexuals in their attractions, behavior, and developmental histories”—with a question that presumes (rather than ignores or problematizes) longitudinal fluidity in identity. Specifically, this research examined how young sexual-minority women who maintained stable lesbian identifications over an 8-year period from late adolescence to young adulthood differed from young women who adopted inconsistent lesbian identifications and from women who maintained nonlesbian (i.e., bisexual or unlabeled) identifications. This study sought to explore the relevance of considering longitudinal consistency in identification as a marker of important sexual-developmental phenomena among sexual-minority women that might otherwise go unexplored.

Do stable lesbians, fluid lesbians, and stable nonlesbians make up distinct groups? The answer to this question is both yes and no. Perhaps one of the most important findings of this research is that the differences and similarities between these three groups were not consistent across all of the assessed phenomena. In some domains, fluid lesbians more closely resembled nonlesbians, and in other domains they were more similar to stable lesbians. Such discrepancies demonstrate the inadequacy of straightforward “lesbian/bisexual” categories for modeling variability in sexual-minority women’s long-term identity development. In light of such findings, one might argue for an end to sexual categorization altogether, at least within the realm of social scientific research. Lesbian versus bisexual identity labels might be personally meaningful, but their scientific relevance for understanding the nature and development of female same-sex sexuality is increasingly unclear (see, e.g., Diamond, 1998). Yet, although replacing overarching sexual taxonomies with individualized, dimensional assessments of multiple sexual and emotional phenomena may be a more effective way to assess interindividual differences in same-sex sexuality, jettisoning all attempts at categorization seems

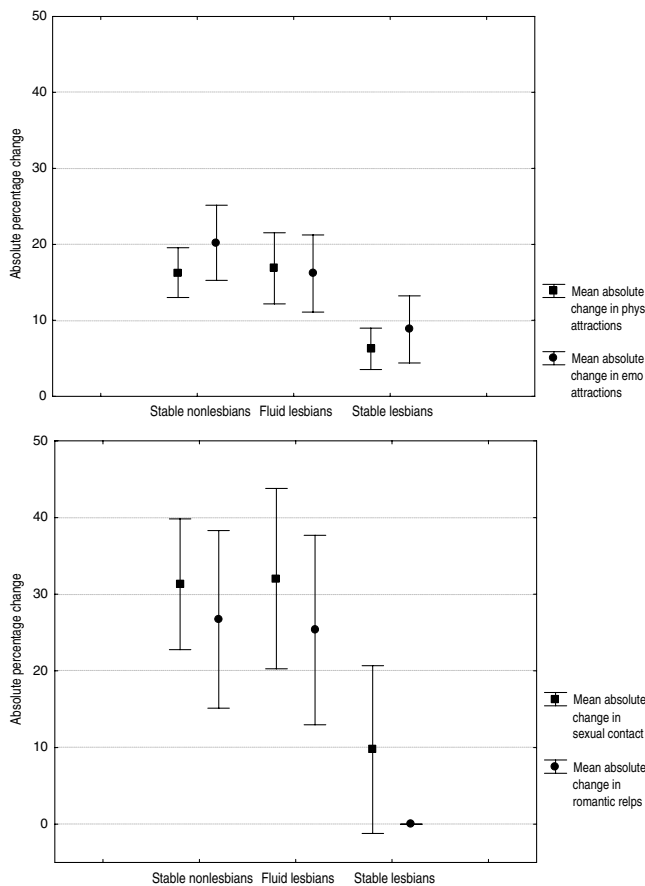


Fig. 2. Mean absolute change in same-sex physical and emotional attractions, sexual contact, and romantic relationships between T1–T2, T2–T3, and T3–T4, stratified by identity group.

unwarranted. Rather, the present research suggests the usefulness of exploring a range of alternative typologies. Not only might this approach serve to better elucidate the nature and development of different trajectories of same-sex experience over the life course, but it also makes explicit the degree to which all such typologies are relatively artificial and cannot be presumed to represent natural types.

Attractions and Behavior

The pattern of results regarding physical/emotional attractions and sexual/romantic behavior confirms the expectation that women with nonexclusive attractions and behavior are less likely to maintain a stable lesbian identification over time, even when their attractions and behavior are predominantly oriented toward women. It is notable that in this regard, fluid lesbians emerged as a fairly distinct group, reporting more same-sex sexual attractions, contact, and romantic relationships than nonlesbians but less than stable lesbians. Over the 8 years of the study, fluid lesbians reported experiencing approximately 80% of their physical attractions for women and 70% of their sexual behavior with women, compared to 93% and 92%, respectively, among stable lesbians and 45% and 32%, respectively, among stable nonlesbians. Thus, their unique pattern of identity fluctuations directly corresponds to their liminal status in these domains.

The picture is somewhat different with regard to changes in attractions and behavior. Here, stable lesbians emerged as the distinct group, reporting smaller absolute fluctuations in their physical and emotional attractions from assessment to assessment (approximately 7 percentage points) than either fluid lesbians or nonlesbians (approximately 17 percentage points). Similarly, stable lesbians generally disagreed with the characterization "I'm the kind of person that is attracted to the person rather than their gender," whereas fluid lesbians and nonlesbians showed similar degrees of agreement with this characterization. The correspondence between this pattern of results and the findings regarding attraction/behavior change is particularly notable given prior research suggesting that "person-specific" attractions and relationships often catalyze abrupt—but sometimes temporary—transitions in sexual experience and identity (Cassingham & O'Neil, 1993; Diamond, 2003b).

These findings have important implications for understanding the distinction between lesbian and bisexual orientations, which has become a topic of increasing debate (see Rust, 1992) given the increasing evidence for fluidity and plasticity in female sexuality (Baumeister, 2000). After all, if female sexuality is fluid, one might argue that we shouldn't bother distinguishing between lesbians and bisexuals to begin with: Perhaps all lesbians are "potential bisexuals," and vice versa. Yet this would make sense only if all women appeared to be equally plastic in their sexuality, and the findings of this study suggest that this is not the case. Rather, some women appear to experience (and per-

ceive the possibility for) greater change in their attractions and behaviors than others, and these women appear most likely to adopt nonlesbian labels or to change labels over time, even if they are predominantly attracted to women. This pattern is exemplified by the following participant, who identified as lesbian at T1 and T2 but relinquished this identity for an unlabeled identity at T3, and remained unlabeled at T4. At the four assessments, she described herself as, respectively, 100% attracted to women, then 90%, 70%, and 50%:

After I graduated from college... I found myself, not necessarily only attracted to both sexes, but also slightly more open-minded to the notion that maybe... maybe I can find something in just a person, that I don't necessarily have to be attracted to one sex versus the other... since then I've been in, let's see, a couple of different long-term relationships with women and I've had lots of sex with men and currently I'm in a long-term relationship with a man that I find very, very, very enjoyable and, um, fulfilling so it's hard for me to identify so therefore I kind of prefer to not identify or just kind of... kind of joke about it and say, "I'm not bisexual or homosexual, I'm just sexual."

Thus, whereas the conventional lesbian/bisexual/heterosexual typology concerns itself only with the degree of a woman's same-sex attractions (exclusive/mixed/nonexistent), the present research suggests that we should consider the plasticity of a woman's same-sex sexuality (including identity, attractions, and behavior) as an orthogonal dimension. This plasticity, of course, would mean that there are fluid and stable subtypes of bisexuals and heterosexuals as well as lesbians. This understanding is an important point, as it challenges the common presumption that bisexuality is by definition a state of flexibility and plasticity. To the contrary, some bisexual women may experience their pattern of nonexclusive attractions as relatively stable, whereas others may experience the same pattern as flexible and situationally influenced. To understand the implications of such differences for women's subjective experiences of their sexuality and their identity over time, future research should systematically assess the degree of women's self-perceived sexual plasticity in concert with conventional assessments of their same-sex attractions and behavior.

Timing and Perceived Cause of Same-Sex Sexuality

Consideration of fluid versus stable subtypes of sexual-minority women raises obvious questions about whether the initial expression or long-term development of their sexuality differs. The results of this preliminary investigation suggest few differences among stable lesbians, fluid lesbians, and nonlesbians with respect to the conventional sexual identity milestones of first same-sex attractions, first same-sex sexual contact, first sexual questioning, and first

sexual identification. Furthermore, these groups did not differ in their perceptions of the essential versus environmental/chosen nature of their sexuality: fluid lesbians, stable lesbians, and nonlesbians were equally likely to report feeling that they were born with their sexuality, that their sexuality had been influenced by their environment, and that they chose their sexuality. Thus, despite the fact that stable lesbians had the most consistent and exclusive patterns of same-sex attraction and behavior, there is nothing to suggest that this particular sexual profile expresses itself at earlier ages, or is subjectively experienced as more essential and less subject to change, than less exclusive and less stable patterns of sexuality. For example, one stable lesbian noted:

[C]ertainly being with a woman feels the most comfortable for me . . . but I guess I can also see how if things were different and I felt that I couldn't for some reason be comfortable with a woman that it's certainly possible that I could be with a man. So, I don't know, I do feel like I've been able to make a choice for myself even though these feelings are here anyway.

The fact that the distinction between stable versus fluid patterns of identification did not correspond with the distinction between essential and chosen/situational same-sex sexuality is counter to many common assumptions about the nature and development of lesbian and bisexual orientations, and suggests that when viewed from a life course perspective, initial sexual identity development and long-term sexual identity development are quite different processes that may be shaped by substantially different forces. This point is particularly notable given that prior research on sexual identity development has focused almost exclusively on the period of time before individuals first self-identify as sexual minorities, assuming that once this milestone is achieved, little subsequent development takes place. Not only is this supposition incorrect, but the present findings demonstrate that the types of sexual-developmental pathways women follow after coming out may tell us more about variability in the nature and experience of same-sex sexuality than the pathways women take to coming out. Another factor to consider is the historical context of self-identification. Contemporarily, there is more open and active questioning of fixed identity labels than was the case in the 1970s, '80s, and early '90s. This perspective creates more opportunities for post-coming-out changes in identification than was the case for earlier cohorts. Future longitudinal research on how women with different sexual profiles manage the fit between their private experiences and public identities at different stages of the life course is clearly necessary.

Limitations and Conclusions

The alternative approach to sexual categorization taken in this article is not meant to replace traditional lesbian/

bisexual/heterosexual distinctions, but to highlight the value of parsing the phenomenon of female same-sex sexuality in novel ways to reveal different facets of its nature and development. With that in mind, it is critically important to note characteristics of the present sample of sexual-minority women that might hamper the generalizability of these findings to the broader population of sexual-minority women. Specifically, the current study relies on a convenience sample of respondents drawn from gay, lesbian, and bisexual activities and organizations, as well as college courses on gender and sexuality, and comprises predominantly White, middle-class, and highly educated women. The degree to which similar patterns of identity fluctuation would be observed among samples with larger proportions of ethnic minorities, individuals living in rural or isolated environments, and individuals of lower socioeconomic status is unknown. Furthermore, all of the women in the current sample began to question their sexuality before reaching the age of 23, whereas some sexual-minority women do not do so until middle or late adulthood (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). The degree of longitudinal stability in lesbian identifications adopted at this stage of life, as opposed to late adolescence and young adulthood, is unknown, and warrants future investigation. Prior analyses of this sample (Diamond, 2000) found that younger participants did not report significantly greater change in attractions, behavior, or identity, but comparisons with much older women might reveal different patterns. Alternatively, perhaps time since first questioning is the more relevant developmental variable than chronological age. These are important areas for future research.

Despite these limitations, the present research makes a unique contribution to the existing literature on lesbian identity development. Specifically, it demonstrates that the prevalence of plasticity and nonexclusivity in female sexuality does not mean that we must abandon all attempts to describe and explain systematic profiles of same-sex experience and development. Rather, by formulating and testing typologies that move beyond the traditional lesbian/bisexual distinction, and that take into account a longer time scale for the process of identity development, we can reveal novel and meaningful patterns of same-sex sexuality that productively challenge long-standing assumptions about subtypes of sexual-minority women. Such research can set the stage for provocative new investigations into the multiple ways that sexual-minority women's identities, attractions, relationships, and self-concepts change and intersect with one another at different stages of the life course.

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