WHO ‘WEARS THE PANTS’?: BISEXUALS’ PERFORMANCES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Employing the concept of gender as a situated performance, my research explores negotiations of gender performances by bisexuals in interpersonal relationships and how such performances may alter due to the sex/gender of their partner. Previous studies of gender performance have primarily focused on heterosexual women and men. Also, the existing research on bisexuality has largely concentrated on the gender of bisexuals’ relationship partners, particularly the perceived differences between women and men. By focusing on the gender performances of bisexuals themselves, this research is a contribution to the budding academic literature on bisexuality as well as the sociological study of gender. I examine how bisexuals utilize traditional scripts of femininity and masculinity in their relationships with women and men. Also, due to the dichotomization of heterosexuality and homosexuality, male/female sexes, and the corresponding genders of masculinity and femininity, bisexuals must negotiate an alteration of traditional performances of gender and sexuality.

Approved:

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Also, I would like to express my deep appreciation for all the participants who volunteered to share their time and personal lives with me. I thank my respondents for making this research possible.
To my father, who taught in Bentley Hall long before me;
and to my mother, who makes everything possible.
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Part I: Overview of Research

Introduction

The concept of gender as a set of situated behaviors, or gender performance, has been generally accepted within contemporary sociology and various other academic disciplines. Vast academic literatures and research have explored this broad concept, and provide substantial support for social constructionist theories of gender. Social constructionist discussions of gender often attempt to deconstruct notions of sex (the purportedly biological categories of female and male) versus gender (the culturally determined and socially recognized representations of femininity and masculinity). Because patriarchal social structures that organize gender stratification—the unequal and gendered division of human labor and allotment of social status—are contingent upon dualistic conceptualizations of sex (female and male), theorizing gender is a politicized discourse about social configurations of power.

Many authors, particularly feminist theorists, have explored the heteronormative power dynamics inherent in the relationships of women and men and the gender roles that characterize them. Within sociological and feminist literatures, discussions of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, often extensively explore patriarchy and social class, but sexuality has been given limited academic attention. Sociological discussions of sexuality are lacking in comparison to the extent of academic research and debate regarding sex/gender. Yet, as sex/gender is a social institution that organizes the everyday interactions of individuals as well as social structural processes (Lorber 1994), individuals are also located within a social structure of sexuality (Connell 1997). Social
status and privilege are also awarded on the basis of gender as well as sexuality.¹

Sexuality is inherent in any discussion of gender and gender performance.

This research is a sociological analysis of the interrelationships of gender and sexuality. Specifically, this research explores the performances of gender by a unique group of nonheterosexual-identified individuals in a particular context: I examine the gender performances of bisexual women and men in their romantic relationships.²

Utilizing a feminist perspective towards the topics of gender performance and sexuality, I analyze the power relationships inherent in sexed/gendered interactions. This research contributes sociological insight to existing theories of gender and develops the relationship of gender to sexuality as performance.

Theorists of bisexuality currently debate whether bisexuality has the potential to challenge, or completely disrupt, heteronormative boundaries of gender and sexuality. Because bisexual-identified women and men may engage in romantic relationships with both women and men, some theorists argue that such desire and practice breaks the traditional dualism of heterosexuality/homosexuality (Garber 2000; Hall and Pramaggiore 1996; Hutchins 1996; Roberts 1997; Ross and Paul 2000; Storr 1999). As hetero- and homo-sexualities represent attraction to opposite- or similarly-sexed/gendered persons, some bisexual theorists claim that bisexual attraction is

¹ I attempt to avoid utilizing the terminology ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘sexual preference’ because I do not aim to suggest that sexuality is either inherently a biological ‘orientation,’ or an individual choice of partner ‘preference.’

² Respondents utilized their own meanings when discussing their ‘romantic relationships.’ I did not specify what constitutes a ‘romantic relationship’ or stipulate what sort of relationship qualified as relevant to this study. My respondents discussed their marriages, monogamous, nonmonogamous, and/or polyamorous relationships, both long- and short-term, that they had engaged in with female and/or male partners as they judged appropriate.
indiscriminate towards sex/gender and thereby locate it as operating outside of normative understandings of sex/gender. My research reveals that though some bisexuals may recognize the theoretical potentialities for bisexuals to engage in relationships that diverge from gender norms, bisexual women and men support traditional modes of gender performance and gender ideology in their lived experiences of romantic relationships.

**Inspiration for Research: The Bifurcation of Gender and Power**

I once engaged in debate with a friend about the roles of women and men in intimate relationships. He argued that in interpersonal relationships, individuals do not share equality: one partner will always have more power than the other, specifically more power *over* the other. I recognized this to be a gendered dynamic based upon the normative model of the monogamous heterosexual relationship (MacKinnon 2002; Segal 1997. My friend verified my assumption of the origins of such a notion as he then asserted that only one partner will “wear the pants” within a relationship. Though women contemporarily wear this bifurcated garment in public social spaces, the gender-bifurcated power dynamic referenced by this adage is by no means ambiguous nor archaic as it is obviously still assumed that the male partner (i.e., larger, stronger, protector, etc.) will enjoy the privileged and more powerful status position within the relationship than the female partner (i.e., smaller, weaker, dependent, etc.). The partner with a masculine external appearance, the normative heterosexual male, is configured as the dominant partner in a relationship with a heterosexual female. He is presumed to initiate with the woman (romantically as well as sexually), make decisions on behalf of
both he and she, and to generally exercise greater power of will and body within the relationship.

Taking issue with my friend’s expression of this generally assumed heterocentric configuration of power, I wondered if the same gendered dynamic held precedence in nonheterosexual relationships. How do lesbians and gays, for example, “do gender” in their romantic relationships (West and Zimmerman 1987)? My friend and I reasoned that the heteronormative model is upheld in some lesbian and gay relationships as represented by, respectively, butch-femme and top-bottom behaviors and identities. But how, then, might bisexuals perform gender in their relationships with women and with men? Do they utilize traditional gender scripts in both their same-sex and opposite-sex couplings? For instance, is the male bisexual who is traditionally masculine with a female partner also masculine with a male partner? This research is thereby concerned with: (1) the prevalence of normative constructions of gender and the potential fluidity of gender performances in a relationship context, (2) negotiations of power between relationship partners, and (3) intersections of gender and sexuality in bisexuals’ romantic relationships.

**Methodology**

To learn more about the ways bisexuals engage in the performance of gender in romantic relationships, I conducted one-on-one interviews with 20 self-identified bisexual volunteers. As definitions of bisexuality are numerous and highly contested, my respondents volunteered to participate in this research on the basis of their own definition of, and identification with, ‘bisexual’ sexuality. Respondents were not screened by any
preexisting definition of bisexuality held by the researcher, though I emphasized my interest in interviewing individuals who had romantic relationship experience with both women and men.

I interviewed 6 men and 14 women (including one woman who “doesn’t have a gender identity that’s one thing” but identifies as biologically female). Fifteen of the total respondents identified as “bisexual,” three identified as “bisexual” and/or “pansexual,” “open,” or “queer,” one presently “homosexual”-identified respondent previously identified as bisexual, and one respondent did not identify as any particular sexual identity. The racial/ethnic diversity of this convenience sample is limited as the majority of the volunteers were Caucasian (N = 18); the sample also included a Puerto Rican female and an African American female. The age of respondents varied from 18 to 62, with a mean of 27 and mode 19. The majority of respondents had at least some college education. For a brief summary of respondents, see Table 1.1 on the following page.

During the interviews, I asked a variety of questions that covered such topics as current relationship status, relationship history with women and men, and specific questions about gender roles in relationships; an interview outline is included as Appendix A. The interviews were semi-structured so as to allow the respondent to guide the conversation toward pertinent topics in accord with their personal experiences and to thereby aid in the collection of rich qualitative data. I did specifically discuss with each respondent whether they or their partners initiated relationships (the romantic and/or sexual aspects), who made more decisions in relationships, and whether the respondent generally behaves differently with women or men. I also asked questions regarding respondents’ gender performance and gender ideology about women and men in general.
Table 1.1 Summary of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Female or Male</th>
<th>Sexual Identity*</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.J.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Queer and/or Bisexual</td>
<td>Married to Female, also Male Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Married to Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donovan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helga</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female**</td>
<td>Bisexual and/or Pansexual</td>
<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>“Dating” a Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
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<td>Patrick</td>
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<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
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<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Open and/or Bisexual</td>
<td>Married, also Female &amp; Male Partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean Derrek</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Married to Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>w/Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Most respondents only hesitantly identify as bisexual; this will be further discussed in the following section, Caveats. Some respondents do not exclusively identify as ‘bisexual,’ but primarily identify as one of the other sexualities listed such as ‘queer’ or ‘open.’ Donovan previously identified as bisexual before he adopted his present homosexual identity.

** Helga identifies as biologically female, but “doesn’t have a gender identity that’s one thing.” She is included as female, to yield sample totals of 14 females and 6 males.
These questions specifically addressed issues such as whether the respondents perceived themselves as engaging in any masculine or feminine behaviors or having gendered personal traits, whether their physical appearance reflected their gender or their sexuality, and also how the respondent perceives femininity and masculinity. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours in duration, and were audiotape recorded. Respondents selected the pseudonyms that have been used herein as well as on all related materials; to protect the identity and privacy of my respondents, no real names have been used.

The interviews were transcribed and content analysis was performed based on the qualitative research methodologies/content analysis outlined by Neuman (2003). I first located initial themes in participant’s statements and assigned codes to these emergent conceptual categories in the process of open coding. Next, I performed axial coding: a secondary review of the initial coding categories. I began locating thematic linkages between codes and concepts at this time. The third step in the data analysis process, selective coding, entailed a general overview of all the codes and an exploration of the similarities and/or differences between the specific instances to which certain codes were applied. By the completion of the selective coding process, analytic generalizations had emerged from the data. Throughout the entire data collection and analysis processes, beginning with interviewing and proceeding through the course of this writing, I have written extensive analytic memos. These dated memos have served to record information about data codes and themes such as descriptions of each, their interrelationships with each other, and my general developments in thinking regarding each code as analysis progressed.
Caveats

This research is an exploratory study that utilizes a specific group of individuals for an analysis of the sociological concept of gender performance. This research is not representative to all bisexuals, nor are the findings intended to be generalizable to all women and men of any sexuality. My sample was composed of self-selected bisexual volunteers who received no material reward for their participation in the study. As such, the participants in this research are likely to be different from other bisexuals who did not volunteer to participate in that they were willing to talk with me about personal relationships and sexuality. Also, the lack of financial resources to aid this project limited the geographic range from which the respondents were obtained and this research was conducted in my college town. This context likely influenced the types of available persons who would be willing to participate in such research.

An additional contextual limitation of this research is the necessary succinctness of the data collection process. I conducted a single one-time interview with each respondent, and therefore this research can only supply a snapshot of time in the lives of the participants. As queer theorists have recently claimed that sexual identities are not stable dualisms (see Fuss 1991; Sedgwick 1990), many theorists from as long ago as Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) have proclaimed the fluidity of sexuality over the life-spans of individuals, and similarly others have focused on changes in social constructions of sexuality over time (D’Emilio and Freedman [1988] 1997; Foucault [1978] 1990). The overall young age of participants should in particular disallow any attempts at the generalizability of my results as a brevity of lived experience and the specific historical social contexts in which the younger respondents have lived influence their worldviews.
and relationship experiences (as differences in my older respondents were also apparent due to the eras in which they ‘came of age’ and developed their sexual identities, and what opportunities were available to them in terms of partner access). As such, the conclusions of this research can only apply to the historical context in which the lives of the participants in this research exist, as well as provide only a momentary view into the life course and sexual development of the individual interviewees.

As my respondents were often quick to point out, we were limited and sometimes unable within the interview to employ a nondualistic language when discussing gender and romantic relationships. In this sense, my research upholds the standard dualisms of fe/male, feminine/masculine, and in some ways heterosexual/homosexual due to the inability to formulate questions outside of these traditional dichotomies. In order to talk with my respondents about gender, particularly those not well versed in gender studies, we were frequently linguistically limited by either/or. I perceive this as the greatest limitation of my research.

Composing interview questions and writing final reports has also proven challenging as I have attempted to avoid generalizing across the group of respondents in light of the different relationship formations in which they were engaged. While designing interview questions, it was difficult to formulate statements that did not presuppose only two partners in any relationship (for example: “Which partner performed this role?” “Did you or your partner make these decisions?”). Two of my respondents were involved in continuous relationships with more than one partner, and I do not intend to ignore or devalue the polyamorous and other multiple-partner relationship arrangements of my respondents. However, this research is largely concerned with the
relationship dynamics of a romantic dyad, and negotiations of traditional gender scripts.

As my friend and I wondered, “Which one wears the pants?”

Similarly, though in writing I refer to my respondents as bisexuals, not all identify with the ‘bisexual’ sexual identity label. And some that do identify as bisexual, only do so hesitantly:

Interviewer: Do you presently identify as bisexual?

Respondent: ...I guess. I don't know. I don't really know how to put it but yeah, I'd say if I had to pick something, that would be it. If I had to give myself a label.

Interviewer: And if you didn't?

Respondent: Well if I didn't have to I'd just be, me. That's it. (M) –Bobby

Another respondent similarly said:

Interviewer: Do you identify as bisexual?

Respondent: Um, I don't think of myself as bisexual but when I think well I've had relationships with both genders and I've, you know, have a certain amount of attraction to both genders then, if that's a definition of bisexual then I am bisexual but I have to say I don't exactly think of myself as bisexual. I don't really think of myself as anything to tell you the truth. (F) –Dana

My respondents’ hesitation to identify as ‘bisexual’ reflects the various and sometimes contradicting definitions of bisexuality (e.g., Are bisexuals equally attracted to women and men? What if they prefer one or the other? Can someone be bisexual if they have desire for women and men but have not had sexual experiences with both? Do bisexuals have to be involved in simultaneous relationships with a woman and a man?). Garber (2000) cites an editorial announcement included in every issue of the bisexual magazine *Anything That Moves* which states that the magazine does not represent a definitive, universal bisexuality:
Do not expect a clear-cut definition of bisexuality to jump out from the pages. We bisexuals tend to define bisexuality in ways that are unique to our own individuality. There are as many definitions of bisexuality as there are bisexuals. Many of us choose not to label ourselves anything at all, and find the word ‘bisexual’ to be inadequate and too limiting.

(quoted in Garber 2000:56)

Also, some may be reluctant to identify as bisexual due to existing negative stereotypes about bisexuals as promiscuous disease-carriers (Rust 2003d; Rust 2003e; Vernallis 1999).

The limitations of my research have been extremely revelatory about the subject matter I set out to study. The linguistic and ideological limitations that I have struggled with in talking to respondents about gender and their romantic relationships have demonstrated full-force the omnipresence of normative conceptualizations of gender and the lack of any constructions outside of the traditional. The following excerpt demonstrates the limitations that Helga and I experienced about her sex/gender identity:

Interviewer: Do you identify with a sex or a gender, and if so, what?

Respondent: No. Not really. In, in most, I mean [laughs]. Most of the time, um, by appearance that's how we fit into the, you know, sociological category of like woman, but I think that's kind of outdated... Although I certainly like, I menstruate, I have breasts, you know, stuff like that. So um, physiologically I guess like you know I definitely identify with woman but mentally and in my social interactions I would hope that, I, I, yeah. No, I don't really have a gender identity that's one thing, so.

Interviewer: What do you do whenever you have to check a box either male or female?

Respondent: I usually let people check them, draw their own conclusions and just kind of check their own boxes. And beyond that, I mean, you know, because of my stature and the way that I look, it's, you know, I don't get away with drag per se you know. But um, yeah. I don't know. Uh, my gender identity, I don't know. Nine years ago it just kind of went out the window for no particular reason when I hit puberty and, it hasn't really come back.

[…]
Respondent: ...So it just seems like kind of, I mean, again you know like you know, like in a physical sense, I am female. I don't see myself as a woman quote unquote, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: Well I hope that some of my questions will make sense because for lack of any other language I've had to use words like masculine and feminine. But I hope we can do our best to navigate them

Respondent: We can probably. (F) –Helga

The dichotomization of sex/gender (and also feminine/masculine, male/female, homosexual/heterosexual) creates categorical limitations that my respondents and I struggled with in my interviews. After the interviews and during the data coding process, I realized that from within heteronormative conceptualizations of female/male and feminine/masculine, nearly every statement in each interview could be coded as “feminine” or “masculine.” As many theorists have described, linguistic and behavioral performances of gender are clearly unavoidable, and nearly every behavior can be assessed as to its apparent reflection of ‘femaleness’ or ‘maleness’ (West and Zimmerman 1987:137; Butler 1990, 1993). And so setting out to uncover how the traditional gender norms are negotiated in the relationships of bisexuals, I did in fact perceive that my respondents engage in traditional gender performances. But not only did I perceive much of my respondent’s ideologies and behaviors to be traditionally gendered, they also often utilized traditional ideologies and scripts to make sense of themselves, their desires, and their interactions with relationship partners.
Contextualizing the Research: Literature Review

This research draws from several different academic literatures. Extensive interdisciplinary efforts since approximately the 1960’s have amassed a vast body of literature regarding the concepts sex and gender. I will highlight some significant contributions that have been made to this field of inquiry, with a particular focus on sociological and feminist explorations of gender as a situated performance. Then I will highlight relevant literature that has been done in the sociology of sexuality. Lastly, I will review the pertinent research on bisexuality and gender, and some contemporary works by theorists of bisexuality.

The Sex/Gender Debate: Social Constructionist Theories of Gender

The latter half of the twentieth century saw the feminist politicization and academic exploration of the concepts sex and gender. Sociologists and feminists, in particular, have formulated social constructionist theories of gender and sex. These theories generally assert that ideas about females and males, and correspondingly femininity and masculinity, are cultural inventions. Social constructionist theories of sex/gender attempt to deconstruct the preexisting essentialist paradigms that provide explanations for ‘natural’ or biological dualistic differences between women and men. Social constructionist perspectives perceive the gendered power differentials between women and men are instead an effect of cultural and social structural developments that create the ‘two sexes’ as masculine and feminine people; gender is not a reflection of any inherent traits of males and females. Some critiques of biologically preordained dual sex theories attempt also, via their deconstructions of the male/female binary, to challenge
heterosexuality as the sexual norm. Questioning this dichotomous relationship of sex and gender opens up possibilities for inquiry into assumptions about inherent sexuality, and questions the dichotomy of male/female ‘opposites attract’ and the dualism of homosexuality/heterosexuality. I will begin below with some of the more influential works that have contributed to social constructionist perspectives on sex/gender.

A classic sociological exploration of sex/gender is provided by the work of the symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman. Goffman’s dramaturgical social analysis suggests that, like actors and actresses onstage, individuals engage in interaction through a variety of performances. The context- and audience-specific performances of individuals are perceived as genuine presentations of the individual performer as “…the character[s] one performs and one’s self are somewhat equated” (Goffman 1997:23). An individual’s “self-as-character” is often explained as a set of qualities intrinsic to the personality or essential composition of the individual (p.23).

Similarly, when an individual engages in performances of gender, or what Goffman terms ‘gender displays,’ their behaviors are socially interpreted as representations of an inherently sexed nature. “Gender is assumed to be an extension of our animal natures…” as biological feminine females and masculine males (p. 214). Goffman instead perceives that both sex and gender are socially constructed as meaningful categories, and that differentiation between women and men (and the feminine and masculine) is due to cultural contrivance. Goffman explains that “…sex is at the base of a fundamental code in accordance with which social interactions and social structures are built up” (p. 201). Women and men inhabit different status positions relative to social structure, or what Goffman terms ‘sex-class,’ and women and men also
engage in separate styles of interpersonal interaction in accord with the rules of gender display.

West and Zimmerman (1987) similarly assert that gender is meaningful in social interaction, as it is in fact constructed through social interaction. Following Goffman, West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest that gender is something persons do: gender is a performance, and therefore gender is not a natural or inherent quality within individuals. Gender performance is necessary since the doing of gender is the means through which individuals claim membership in a ‘sex category’ as male or female: gender is “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (p. 127). Thus, behaving in socially perceived feminine or masculine ways bolsters the claims of individuals to be female or male. West and Zimmerman (1987:137) perceive that “doing gender is unavoidable” as it establishes individuals’ perceived status as women or men and thereby situates them within a social organization based upon sex category.

West and Zimmerman (1987) expand from Goffman’s generally microlevel analysis of gender with their efforts to stress that mandatory, accountable performances of gender determine the placement of individuals within social structural arrangements of power. Individual-level performances of gender simulate and reaffirm the presumably innate biological differences between females and males, and thereby the differential treatment of female and male sex categories is naturalized and legitimized.

During their brief consideration of sex and sexuality, West and Zimmerman (1987) discuss the pervasiveness of dichotomous notions of sex/gender and how these dichotomies influence sexual pairings. They assert that in accord with the female/male
binary, heterosexuals seek recognition of their ‘opposite’ as a prerequisite for desire. Though homosexuals do not seek members of the opposite side of the binary, they remain within oppositional definitions of sex category as homosexual women or men with attraction to the same (p. 145). West and Zimmerman (1987) cite transsexuality as a prime exemplar of the authority of the female/male binary as transsexuals tend to situate themselves in one or the other sex category.

The above theorists’ discussions of sex and gender unfortunately lack any substantial considerations of the performance of sexuality. Like ‘sex category’ or ‘sex-class’ membership, membership in a sexual identity status also affects the relationships of individuals to social structural forces and to each other. Herein I will discuss performances of sexuality as claims to membership in an identity/status grouping as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or otherwise. Individuals interact with others not only on the basis of their gender performance (as a reflection of their sex as female or male), but individuals are also situated within social organization on the basis of their gender performance as a demonstration of sexuality. Performances of femininity and masculinity do not solely communicate the femaleness or maleness of individuals, but are also interpreted as communicating an individual’s status as homosexual or heterosexual. Compulsory heterosexuality, as a social institution, systematically denigrates and/or denies all other forms of sexuality (Butler 1990; Rich 1994). Performances of sexuality situate individuals within social structure and configurations of power via relationship to heterosexuality.

Other authors provide greater emphasis on sexuality in their work on sex/gender. Butler (1990, 1993) conceptualizes the ‘performativity’ of gender, and perceives both sex
and gender as cultural constructs. Butler asserts that femininity and masculinity are prescribed by institutionalized heterosexuality to reflect femaleness and maleness. She states that gender thereby becomes “…the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (Butler 1990:7). Not only is gender a social construction, but according to Butler (1990:7), notions of biological sex are constructs as well: “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.” Butler (1993:5) argues that through reiteration, sex “is replaced by the social meanings it takes on,” and thus gender “…absorbs and displaces ‘sex’.”

Unlike West and Zimmerman’s (1987) interactionist concept of gender as performance, Butler (1990, 1993) conceptualizes the performativity of gender through which gender is discursively produced. She suggests that in order to create the appearance of a gendered self, the discursive performativity of gender requires individuals to engage in a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1990:140; emphasis removed). “Discursive performances create the illusion of an inner core, but because gender is constituted through performance, it must be repetitiously performed to create this illusion” (p. 139). Though similar in their conceptualizations of gender as a set of actions, Butler’s (1990) theorizing also differs from that of West and Zimmerman (1987) as she promotes feminist challenge of hierarchical gender arrangements and compulsory heterosexuality (Moloney and Fenstermaker 2002).

Butler’s considerations of sexuality explore the structural arrangements that follow from ‘compulsory’ or ‘institutionalized’ heterosexuality. She names the
“heterosexual matrix” the set of cultural ideologies that naturalize, and thereby legitimize, certain bodies, genders, and sexualities (Butler 1990:151). The heterosexual matrix functions to exclude gender identities which deviate from or challenge dichotomous notions of femaleness or maleness, femininity or masculinity. “The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (p. 6). This system upholds dichotomous sex/gender and attraction to one’s opposite side of the binary.

Butler does not discuss the case of the bisexual. Bisexuals may or may not be attracted to women and men as gendered entities, and their sexuality does not necessarily follow from their own sex/gender as an either/or categorical desire focused on women or men: they desire both. What is the relationship of bisexuality to homosexuality and heterosexuality? Does bisexuality fit into, or outside of, this dichotomy? What do the gender performances of bisexual women and men consist of, and how do they relate to perceptions of sexuality?

**Sexuality and Gender: The Social Construction of Sexuality**

Gender and sexuality have, over time, become intertwined through essentialist notions of biology and desire that suggest these concepts are natural and innate to individuals. Also, the terms ‘woman’ and ‘man’ and their derivatives ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ have become situated as dichotomous opposites. Thus, feminine women are presumed to be sexually oriented towards masculine men, and vice versa. The case of
homosexuals is only slightly different, by this logic, in that feminine men seek masculine men, and masculine women seek feminine women.

Curiously, gender and sexuality often remain amalgamated in a literature that seeks to deconstruct each. Much of the sociological literature on gender treats sexuality as a topic subsumed within itself: authors who analyze gender have a tendency to gloss over any extensive discussion of sexuality by giving it brief mention (Pringle 1993). Gender does not necessarily reflect sexuality, at least not problematically; this is demonstrated by the experiences of bisexuals in romantic relationships. The intersections of gender and sexuality are intriguingly complex and relevant to continued sociological study. As Stein (2004:256) has suggested, there is room for greater efforts by sociologists to “…gender sexuality and sexualize gender…” This research is an addition to this area of inquiry, as it examines gender and sexuality within bisexual’s relationships. The following discussion is a brief review of selected previous works that examine sexuality and gender as socially constructed performances.

Gagnon and Simon ([1973] 2005) provide an early framework for the sociology of sexuality with their application of symbolic interactionism to the realms of gender and sexuality. They utilize role theory to argue that sexual behavior is not a process resultant from biological urges, but that sexual behavior is scripted behavior that makes the physical or biological acts of sexuality possible. Gagnon and Simon ([1973] 2005) assert that individuals learn ‘sexual scripts’ which define situations as sexual and outline the gendered behaviors that should occur in such contexts. The content of Gagnon and
Simon’s ([1973] 2005) *Sexual Conduct* is largely an extensive overview of the content of these scripts throughout the life course of individuals.

Most essentially, Gagnon and Simon ([1973] 2005:198) assert “that all human sexual behavior is socially scripted behavior.” Though Gagnon and Simon perceive a dominant sexual script for women and men, there are a variety of deviations from it. They note the cultural specificity of the context of sexual scripts, and the variability in scripts over time (Gagnon and Simon 2005: Afterword). They devote entire chapters to discussions of homosexuality and lesbianism, yet there is no mention of bisexuality in their work.

Gagnon and Simon’s ([1973] 2005) widely influential theory of sexual scripting has been utilized in a large amount of sociological and feminist literature on the social construction of sexuality (Blumstein and Schwartz 1989; Jackson 1996; Lorber 1994; Schwartz and Rutter 1998; Sprecher and McKinney 1993). A very notable study that employs sexual scripting theory is a comprehensive national study of sexuality, the National Health and Social Life Survey, which was performed by researchers at the University of Chicago. Numerous publications discuss the findings of this vast research (see Laumann et al. 1994; Michael et al. 1994).

Another theorist whose work on the social construction of sexuality has been highly influential was Michel Foucault. His genealogy of sexuality demonstrates how sexuality as a “historical construct” has been created by discourses of religion and science (Foucault [1978] 1990:105). Regimes of power have historically attempted to control human populations by repressing sexuality; however, discourses on sexuality have in fact facilitated its creation rather than suppression. Foucault’s ([1978] 1990)
history of the social invention of sexuality in the West includes a structural analysis of social institutions and power.

Foucault’s theorizing emphasizes the importance of social structural processes in studies of sexuality. His contributions elaborate on the more micro-level study of individual behaviors which characterizes the work of Gagnon and Simon ([1973] 2005) and the research of others that they have informed. Foucault’s ([1978] 1990) work on sexuality has also been highly influential in many academic disciplines including sociology, and most contemporary work on the subject of sexuality references his theories.3

Harding (1998) draws from Foucault and Butler to analyze borders created by private/public and in/out dualisms of sexuality. She suggests that since power is so centrally related to sexuality, a private/public binary connotes what is acceptable sexual behavior in relation to the sexual identity of individuals. Though sexuality is generally considered a private matter, it is dealt with as a public issue because sexual norms are perceived to reflect the norms of broader society (pp. 1-2). Despite the commonly held notion that sexuality is an intimate expression of an individual’s inherent sexual nature, Harding (1998:18) argues that “sexuality can never be separated from power.” Power relations construct sexuality as it regulates norms for individual sexual behavior, and sexuality is limited to the realm of culturally acceptable constructions.

3 Butler (1990, 1993) heavily utilizes the theorizing of Foucault, particularly his notion that discourses produce sexuality and sexed bodies. Also, though I do not thoroughly review her “genealogy of bisexuality” here, Hemmings’ (2002) notable work on bisexual and lesbian identities in Northampton, Massachusetts employs both Foucault and Butler.
Though social constructionist perspectives on sex/gender and sexuality have been widely influential, they are not without critique. R.W. Connell (Connell 1997; Connell 1999; also Connell and Dowsett 1993) asserts that, in efforts to argue against the notion of inherent feminine/female and masculine/male biologies of women and men, social constructionist theories often overlook or ignore the physical realities of the human body. Connell also critiques what he identifies as the poststructuralist tendency to view bodies as passive surfaces on which inscription of meaning occurs. Rather, Connell (1997:64) suggests that “[b]odies are in play in social relations, they are not surfaces or landscapes” onto which cultural meaning is passively ascribed. For example, Butler (1990, 1993) argues that the body is performative. Like all matter, Butler says that bodies are created over time by an illusion of constancy which is achieved through the reiteration of discursive performativity. In her view, bodies are entirely brought into being and determined by discourse.

Connell’s (1999) emphasis on the body is reflected in his elaborations on the social construction of gender and sexuality. Connell (1999) suggests that bodies are materially transformed through social processes, and such transformation is in part determined by gender. Through what he calls ‘body-reflexive practices’ “bodies are addressed by social process and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies” (p. 464). Yet theorizing sex/gender, Connell (1999) does not ignore the biological realities of human life. He terms the ‘reproductive arena’ the “…set of body-reflexive practices that respond to the reproductive division of humans into (mostly) males and females” (p. 464).

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4 Several other scholars have also made efforts toward revising gender theory to include the biological body: see also Fausto-Sterling 2000; Grosz 1994.
Sexual reproduction is at the base of the reproductive arena, but these arrangements involve much more than just human reproduction. Connell (1999:466) argues that “[s]exuality is not confined to the bedroom” as sexual behaviors are gendered behaviors, and gender is concerned with social relations of power and inequality. The binaries of female/male and femininity/masculinity purportedly reflect and in actuality sustain gendered social processes. Body-reflexive practices within the reproductive arena are the social products of patriarchal culture and institutions such as the economy.

‘Gender projects’ are the overarching historically-specific practices which structure body-reflexive processes, and contain even the capacity to change the reproductive arena, Connell (1999) asserts. Biological bodies are transformed by gender ideology and behavior through such practices as the use of cosmetic drugs such as steroids, plucking hair, and dieting. These gender projects are not just constructions of the gender (femininity or masculinity) of individuals, but Connell (1999:465) argues that such practices are more than appearances in that they are “…formative of reality.” He cites as evidence men’s gender practices which result in their lower life expectancies such as early death due to the belief that ‘masculine’ men do not seek medical treatment, and young men’s aggressive (and sometimes deadly) driving as a display of masculinity.

Like West and Zimmerman’s (1987) theory of gender performance, Connell’s (1999) formulation of sex/gender links the macro structures of social institutions to the individual level of body-reflexive practices. Similar to Butler (1990, 1993), Connell (1999) explores the ways in which sexuality is related to social structural forces. Yet, curiously absent from the above discussions of the polarization of sex (female/male), gender (feminine/masculine), and most particularly, sexuality (homosexuality/
heterosexuality), are any considerations of bisexuality and the gender performances of bisexuals. Connell (1999:464) proffers that “[l]esbian and gay sexualities, for instance, are gendered practices as much as heterosexuality is—they are sexualities organized with reference to women and men, respectively, as partners.” How is bisexuality organized by gender of partner choice, since bisexuals may pair with both women and men? What is the relationship of bisexuality to heterosexuality, and to heterosexually-prescribed dualisms of sex/gender and sexuality?

**Bisexuality and Gender**

In the literature regarding bisexuality and aspects of gender, the largest attention has been allotted to the sex/gender of bisexuals’ relationship partners. This trend is likely a reflection of the lack of any widely accepted definition of bisexuality and ongoing debates about the nature of bisexual attraction and practice. In particular, one aspect of this debate has arisen with queer theory—the question being whether or not bisexuality transcends preexisting dichotomous understandings of sex/gender and sexuality (Burrill 2002). Since bisexuals have the potential to be involved with both women and men, does bisexuality represent the ‘middle ground’ between two opposite poles, or does bisexuality transcend the “monosexual” (Garber 2000; Hemmings 2002) arrangements of both heterosexuality and homosexuality and their resultant social structures (Carr 1999; Eadie 1997; Hall and Pramaggiore 1996; Morris and Storr 1997; Weiss 2003)? The bisexual subject’s status as female or male and her or his gender performances often go unquestioned, but it is the bisexual’s noncategorical desire for both women and men that stirs greatest interest. Hence, the existing literature on bisexuality and gender reflects the
importance of the sex/gender of bisexuals’ relationship partners. Little previous research explores how bisexuals themselves negotiate gender and sexuality norms in their relationships with both women and men.

Beginning in the 1970s, research about bisexuality began to emerge and efforts toward bisexual activism were initiated in the late 1980s. The initial studies on bisexuality were generally concerned with promoting bisexual visibility and dispelling negative stereotypes about bisexuality through efforts at comprehensive studies of bisexual experience (Bode 1976; Fast and Wells 1975; George 1993; Klein [1978] 1993; Orndorff 1999). A particularly prominent and extensive study of bisexuality that is notable for its emphasis on gender dynamics in relationships was conducted by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) in San Francisco during the 1980s. The researchers conducted fieldwork at the city’s Bisexual Center, where they interviewed a total of 104 bisexual-identified women and men. The sample was composed of mostly college educated, white, Protestant bisexuals aged 25 to 44.

Though Weinberg et al.’s (1994) study covers a wide range of topics regarding bisexual identity and experience, gender (in myriad forms) was a specific area of inquiry. The concept of ‘gender schema’ guides the investigators’ analysis, and is employed to hypothesize the origins of bisexuality. Utilizing a social constructionist view of gender, Weinberg et al (19994:49) suggest that learned constructions of gender determine sexuality:

Ideas about gender and gender roles are crucial factors in how we think about our sexuality. As we develop sexual identities, our frame of reference generally is not sexuality per se. Instead of learning directly to eroticize one gender or the other, we learn to act as a woman or to act as a
man...Gender, not sexuality, is the encompassing framework through which we learn and process this information. This framework—this cognitive map—has been referred to as the ‘gender schema.’ The gender schema becomes the foundation for the meaning we give to our sexuality.

The authors suggest that bisexuals retain an ‘open’ gender schema which disconnects gender from sexual preference. Like everyone else, bisexuals learn to eroticize women and men, but bisexuals fail to unlearn what is erotic about one sex or the other because their open gender schema makes “one’s own gender … theoretically irrelevant to partner choice” (p.50; original emphasis). Weinberg et al. (1994) argue that a homosexual or heterosexual individual maintains a more ‘traditional gender schema’ that results in attraction to females or males based on the individual’s own gender and a rule of same- or opposites- attract.

Weinberg et al.’s (1994) research contributes more than a hypothesis of the origins of sexuality. The researchers also investigate gender dynamics in bisexuals’ relationships, and note that their findings in this area were somewhat surprising. Their original viewpoint was that since bisexuals do not necessarily follow the social norm of ‘compulsory heterosexuality,’ bisexuals might also diverge from traditional prescriptions for gender. However, the researchers found that their respondents did not in actuality behave in this way. The bisexuals in their study acted on traditional gender stereotypes in their relationships with both sexes. The researchers suggest that bisexuality may have more in common with other sexual forms than typically perceived, since bisexuals adhere to institutionalized gender scripts.

The findings of my research generally coincide with those of Weinberg et al. (1994) on gender dynamics within bisexual’s relationships. Yet my study explores the
gender and sexuality performances of bisexuals in detail, and uncovers that not all bisexuals accept dominant gender ideologies or passively follow traditional gender norms. In Part II, I will discuss bisexuals’ negotiations of gender in terms of ideology and behavior, highlighting the acceptance, hesitation, and efforts at resistance to traditional prescriptions for gender.

Another specific discussion of bisexuals and gender in their relationships is provided by Vernallis’s (1999) study of bisexuality and monogamy/nonmonogamy. Vernallis (1999) argues that the most important factor determining bisexuals’ relationship satisfaction is whether or not the individual bisexual experiences her or his own gender in the same way with female and male partners. She suggests that sexual identities are typically defined by the gender of ‘object choice’: homosexuals and heterosexuals prefer, respectively, the same and opposite sex/gender. But in the case of the bisexual, Vernallis (1999) asserts, such a definition of sexuality suggests that there is no discrimination between gendered object choices (female or male): the bisexual subject will presumably experience either sex in the same way, and therefore a female or male partner can be equally satisfying. However, studies such as that by Weinberg et al. (1994) have shown that bisexuals do experience men and women differently. Vernallis (1999:358) agrees that it is “…not surprising that the differences observed [by bisexuals regarding women and men] are reflective of common stereotypes.”

In light of bisexuals’ application of traditional notions of gender to their female and male partners, Vernallis (1999) argues that bisexuals also experience themselves differently when in relationships with women or men. She suggests the example of a woman feels herself to be more dominant when in a sexual relationship with a woman,
and more passive when in a relationship with a man. Vernallis (1999:359) asserts that such a woman will experience a loss of half of her sexual self-identity if she limits herself to monogamous relationships with only one gender. Bisexuals rely on the dualistic genders of their female and male (feminine and masculine) partners to experience themselves as different genders:

In spite of the fact that bisexuals bend gender stereotypes by disconnecting the traditional link between gender roles and heterosexuality, it seems that bisexuals, at least in their sexual experiences, often experience others in gender-stereotyped ways. Ironically, the reality of bisexual desires depends upon a rigid gender system and the capacity of that gender system to produce significantly different experiences of oneself keyed to each other. Bisexuality, in short, depends upon not just the traditional dualism of heterosexuality and homosexuality, but upon a dualistic gender system as well. (pp. 359-360)

Vernallis’s (1999) work is an interesting contribution to the study of bisexuality and monogamous and nonmonogamous relationship forms, and it additionally demonstrates the pervasiveness of traditional gender scripts in bisexuals’ relationships. The work of Vernallis (1999) and Weinberg et al. (1994), as well as others (Bode 1976; Shokeid 2002; Schwartz and Blumstein 1999; Weinrich 2000), have found that bisexuals incorporate traditional notions of gender into their relationships and sexual encounters with women and men. My research further examines how bisexuals’ performances of gender as well as those of their feminine/masculine female/male partners influence their relationships. I explore how bisexuals experience women and men differently in accord with traditional gender ideologies, and also how their gendered presentations of self are influenced by such ideologies.
Bisexuality: A Revolution of Gender and Sexuality?

Theorists of bisexuality currently debate the relationship(s) of bisexuality to sex/gender, fe/male, hetero-/homo-sexual binaries. The essential issue in this debate is whether or not bisexuality or bisexual politics have the revolutionary potential to break down dualistic categories of identification that are perceived as promoting structural power differentials between groups and controlling individuals through their behavior and desires. Hemmings (2002:22) perceives that ‘bisexual studies’ are partly structured by this split between: (1) the epistemology of bisexuality: how bisexuality generates meaning or is given meaning in specific contexts, inside or outside of other identity formations; and (2) bisexual identity: defining and locating bisexuality. Bisexual theorizing has shifted from identity-based approaches to an epistemological emphasis on the bisexual challenge to existing structures of sexuality and gender.

Theorists of bisexuality and bisexual activists have increasingly debated how bisexual theory should locate itself in relation to queer theory and activism (Alexander 1999; Burrill 2002; Du Plessis 1996; Rust 2000c; Storr 1999). Queer theory is largely concerned with opening up all existing identity categories to permit greater fluidity therein, and challenging “the regime of sexuality” which creates all bodies, identities, and desires within the heterosexual/homosexual dualism (Seidman 1994:174). Queer theory has been increasingly employed to debate the possibilities of bisexual practice and theory. Following the central arguments of queer theory, Hall (1996:9; original capitalization) proclaims that bisexuality is the epitome of fluidity: “BISEXUALITY= POSTMODERNISM EMBODIED.” Theorists of bisexuality who agree with Hall (1996) believe that bisexuality is revolutionary, as it erupts dichotomous categories of
identification and opens up new possibilities through fluidity of experience (Garber 2000; Hutchins 1996; Klein [1978] 1993; Roberts 1997; Ross and Paul 2000; Storr 1999). The nature of sexuality “…is fluid, not fixed, a narrative that changes over time rather than a fixed identity,” and bisexuality “…reveals sexuality to be a process of growth, transformation, and surprise, not a stable and knowable state of being” (Garber 2000:66). In accord with queer politics, Hutchins (1996:241) states that “[t]he open assertion of a bisexual identity affects everyone, not just the person identifying as bisexual, because it disturbs the set of assumptions that sexual orientations and attractions are binary, exclusive, either-or categories…”.

Yet other authors assert that bisexuality does not contain the possibility to break down dualist categories, nor have the inherent capacity to revolutionize sexuality. Like Vernallis (1999) quoted above, such critics suggest that bisexuality relies in various ways on the fixed categories of gender and sexuality that currently exist and that in fact, identity politics unavoidably reaffirm essentialist categories (Alexander 1999; Blumenfeld 1999; Burrill 2002; Morris and Storr 1997). They argue that by definition, bisexuality relies on the preexisting notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as current conceptualizations of sex/gender. Rust (2003e:475) asserts that because bisexuality exists within the current system of sexuality and gender, “[t]he bisexual person is therefore not [perceived as] holistically bisexual but dualistically half heterosexual and half homosexual.” As such, bisexuality theorists at present have a tense relationship with queer theory, and debate continues as to whether or not bisexuals should be encompassed within queer politics or remain outside.
This research echoes the findings of previous researchers on gender and bisexuality in that bisexuals greatly utilize traditional scripts for gender normative behaviors and appearances, as well as sexual scripts in relationships with women and men. I found that bisexuals constantly negotiate presentations of self within the dichotomies of femininity/masculinity and homosexuality/heterosexuality. That they are unable to organize their behaviors and romantic relationships in any other way does not imply that bisexuals are a disappointingly conventional and nonrevolutionary sexual minority, but rather the struggles that bisexuals face due to existing paradigms of gender and sexuality attest to the thorough pervasiveness and complete cultural conditioning of individuals to dominant cultural ideologies.
Part II: Gender Ideology: How Bisexuals Think about Gender

I began this research with an assumption similar to the original hypothesis of Weinberg et al. (1994) at the start of their analysis of bisexuals and gender. In debate with my friend about gender and power in relationships, I speculated that due to the noncompliance of bisexuals with heteronormative rules for gendered partner selection, bisexuality might also entail a nontraditional performance of gender. Like Weinberg et al. (1994), I too was initially surprised by the findings of my study which suggest that bisexuals’ attraction to potential partners and their behaviors in relationships are often informed by rigidly traditional definitions of sex/gender. For example, my respondents described women as passive, emotional, and delicate; men were correspondingly described as aggressive, emotionally unexpressive, and physically dominant over women.

Before discussing the behaviors of my respondents in their relationships, or gender strategies, I will first present their ideas about gender: their gender/sexual ideologies. “A gender strategy is plan of action” (Hochschild 1989:15) that is informed by an individual’s gender ideology, or “…set of beliefs about men and women and marital [or other significant relationship] roles” (p. 192). Gender ideology provides our ideas about who we are, who others are, and thereby guides behavior by providing expectations for interaction with others. My respondents were overall quite traditional in their perceptions of women and men, their self-identification as gendered persons, and their gender performances within relationships.

However, though many bisexuals do often readily employ dominant gender ideologies, I found that they may also critique gender norms and resist traditional
definitions of sex/gender. As Hochschild (1989:190) similarly found in her study on gender in marital relationships, individuals’ gender ideologies may be characterized by inconsistencies, or “surface fractures.” How an individual thinks about gender may not be a coherent set of ideas. Additionally, an individual’s gender ideology may also not be accurately reflected by an individual’s behavior, or gender strategies within a relationship. I found that many of my respondents’ gender ideologies and gender strategies were at times quite inconsistent with one another. In such cases I usually observed that an individual’s gender ideology might drastically diverge from dominant gender ideologies (for example, they critiqued the inherent inequality created by the current gender paradigm and instead suggested that women and men are equal because there are no substantive differences between them), yet the same individual’s gendered behavior in relationships, or enactment of gender strategies, might directly correspond with one or the other highly unequal gender roles that emphasize and/or create traditional differences perceived as existing between women and men.

Reflecting back on my original assumption about bisexuals and gender performance, it now seems reasonable that due to the presence of pervasive sex/gender distinctions utilized to organize social structural arrangements, everyone (including bisexuals) would “do gender” in accord with dominant ideologies (West and Zimmerman 1987). Or, it seems plausible that everyone’s behavior would be guided at least in some way by prevailing gender norms, even if an individual’s response is resistance to the norm. In his discussion of the historical construction of sexuality, Foucault ([1978] 1990:95) argues “[w]here there is power, there is resistance.” In their critical evaluation
of dominant paradigms of gender and sexuality, bisexuals demonstrate some resistance to structural arrangements of power.

Despite resistance to traditional gender arrangements, bisexuals do not have access to any other co-existing ideologies about sex/gender to reconceptualize themselves as women and men or reorganize their patterns of interaction with others. Bisexuals are socialized to the same cultural ideologies about sex/gender and sexuality as everyone else, and bisexuals often maintain traditional gender ideologies and enact standard gender performances. There is no other culturally intelligible ideology of sex/gender. As Sarah asserts below, the traditional gender paradigm reigns as norm:

Interviewer: Do you think that the traditional notions of gender apply to your life?

Respondent: Well, I mean to some degree, how can you escape them? I mean, as long as we live in a world where the traditional notions of gender apply to the majority of people's lives, then they are going to apply to mine because you know, I don't live on an island far away from everybody else. (F) –Sarah

Yet bisexuals do not passively accept all cultural prescriptions for gendered appearance, behavior, and desire. Similar to the women and men in Hochschild’s (1989) study, my respondents variously negotiate traditional ideas about gender and develop their own individualized gender ideologies that inform their gender strategies: some bisexuals readily accept traditional gender ideologies, some reluctantly utilize them, some claim to disregard them and negotiate their own interactions based on other traits than gender, others actively resist gender norms. Regardless of how bisexuals manage gender in their relationships, such negotiations are always set against the backdrop of the traditional cultural model.
Traditional Gender Ideologies

In this section I will begin an exploration of bisexual’s traditional gender ideologies that reflect dominant conceptualizations of sex/gender. I first describe how bisexuals perceive traditional (i.e., dichotomous, essentialist) differences between women and men. Next, I review how bisexuals readily apply traditional notions of gender to themselves in their self-descriptions as feminine women and masculine men. This section then concludes with bisexuals’ self-awareness of their utilization of traditional gender ideologies, and their inability to separate a personalized gender ideology from the dominant.

Traditional Differences between Women and Men

“Women are very different than men, and whether it’s because of biology or because of the way women are socialized, they’re just very different.” (M) – A.J.

The bisexuals in this study perceived many traditional differences between women and men in accord with dominant gender norms. These norms situate women and men, and correspondingly femininity and masculinity, as polar opposites. For example, Patrick explains broadly that what is masculine is “…mostly just the opposite of what feminine is.” My respondents described differences between women and men’s physical bodies, dispositions, and style of interaction with others.

In terms of physical differences, women are generally perceived as more delicate or frail, and men larger and stronger than women. Christine references romanticized notions of gender to describe masculinity and femininity:
"I guess I think, think of masculinity as being stronger, like physically stronger. And... I don't know. I think of just femininity as just being more delicate and, like a damsel in distress or something [giggles], I don't know."  (F) –Christine

Traditional dispositional differences were also cited between women and men. Women or feminine qualities in general, were described as emotional and caring, accepting, and maternal.  

"I think there’s a lot more room emotionally with women than with men."  (F) –Emily

“…[C]reation is a very feminine thing.”  (F) –Kathy

“Well I think basically being a mother is a basically feminine thing.”  (F) –Dana

Though women are perceived to be caring and concerned towards others, femininity is also strongly associated with concern about one’s own physical appearance.

Respondent: To me, femininity is, I don't know. Someone who, I don't know how to describe it. Like I would say girly girl.

Interviewer: What does that mean?

Respondent: …I think like the most extreme aspects of femininity would be, like the girl who is always looking her best. Like you know, her absolute best in high heels and can't go one day without wearing, like can't go one day wearing tennis shoes and sweat pants.  (F) –Marie

In contrast, masculine men were generally perceived to be not very concerned about their physical appearances. Men were also described as goal-driven decision-

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5 My respondents generally conflated ‘sex’ and ‘gender.’ In accord with essentialist notions of sex and gender, women were associated with femininity and men with masculinity. Talking about the category ‘woman’ was often equivalent to addressing the concept ‘femininity.’ For example, when Donovan says “I feel like I’m a boy,” he is [also] saying that he perceives himself as masculine.
makers, and less concerned about others than women. Masculinity was also associated with assertiveness and aggression.

“...[M]asculine guys who chew and eat peanuts and watch football...these people who are really masculine don't care about things. You know. They care, they care about looking as masculine as possible. Just you know, being in the Army and killing people and, hunting and the NRA and hating gays and lesbians not thinking about um, just feelings and stuff, I think is more masculine.” (M) –Bobby

“They [men] want to be the ones that are like, a lot of the time like, calling the shots...But, I think, I think men, you know for all that they claim to just want simple things or whatever you know, sex is much more fraught with power issues and the whole relationship has to be much more of a game. Women I think have a lot more of a tendency to just lay things on the table and, um, and want to communicate really like how they're feeling and what they're thinking.” (F) –Helga

The most prevalently cited difference between women and men was the tendency for men to be more interested in sex than women, and less emotionally involved with their partners. Men were generally perceived as being more aggressive sexually (and generally more aggressive in interaction with others), whereas women were seen as being more emotional than sexual.

“I think they [men] think about sex a lot more than women do.” (F) –Dana

“...[A] lot of the guys have a higher libido and a much more, um, a much more present sex drive than many women I’ve dated.” (M) –George

“Girls are better at relationships. guys are better at sex.” (F) –Sally

The findings of my study correspond to those of Weinberg et al.’s (1994) findings on bisexuals and gender. They specifically asked their respondents about differences in sexual experiences with women and men. More than four-fifths of their sample agreed there were different experiences along the three following themes: body texture and
physique, differences in behavior, and emotions. The physical differences reported were
general perceptions of women as small and smooth, whereas men were described as
larger and muscular. Female partners were perceived by both men and women as being
more emotional, and sexual experiences with women were described as slower and
gentler than those with male partners. Also, the women in Weinberg et al.’s (1994:51)
study often criticized their male partners as being “more genitally focused,” and both men
and women stated that men had a more difficult time expressing emotions. Though my
research explores general relationship dynamics in bisexuals’ pairings with women and
men and sexual experience was not a specific area of focused inquiry, the findings of my
study are consistent with previous research.

**Traditional Gender of Respondent**

My respondents overwhelmingly applied traditional notions of gender to
themselves, with the majority of respondents claiming a gender identity that reflected
their sex/gender identity as female or male.6 Though bisexuality may be commonly
associated with androgyny (George 1993), I found that bisexuals, in accord with
normative gender ideologies, described themselves as traditionally gendered women and
men. Respondents who identified as male often identified described many masculine
traits and behaviors about themselves, and female-identified respondents often described
themselves as feminine:

6 All but Helga identified as undoubtedly female or male. Jane experiences some uncertainty about her
relatively androgynous gender, but identifies as biologically female. However, note that all respondents
selected sex-appropriate pseudonyms.
“…[F]or the most part I'd say [I'm] definitely masculine. You know, I do karate and climb. I can't really make myself care about clothing all that much.” (M) –Patrick

“… I'm very feminine, um, I dance and I love jewelry, and I wear makeup and I, you know I go over to my friend's house and we always play with her kittens and we feed them and just giggle and. Um, I can be very nurturing sometimes.” (F) –Jen

In accord with essentialist explanations of sex/gender that declare gender a ‘natural’ expression of sex, some respondents perceived their gender (feminine, masculine) as stemming from their biological sex (female, male).

“And that would be about the best way I would, the best reason why I mean I consider myself more masculine than effeminate is just because I feel like I'm a boy. You know I don't feel like I'm a girl in any way shape or form. I don't feel weak or shy, you know.” (M) –Donovan

Interviewer: Do you perceive that there are any particularly masculine or feminine characteristics about you?

Respondent: You know it's so hard to say because I know that I'm female, so I think I tend to think anything that I am is by virtue of me being female also going to be female. (F) –Sarah

My respondents clearly entertain traditional gender ideologies, as they readily utilized traditional conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity to describe the traits and behaviors of women and men. They also applied traditional notions of gender to themselves, as they described themselves as traditionally sexed/gendered women and men.
**Awareness of Gender Ideology**

Though most of the respondents readily employed traditional gender norms for women and men and describe themselves as traditionally gendered persons, many did so with a certain degree of self-consciousness. The bisexuals in this sample were often readily aware of their utilization of traditional ideologies and common stereotypes about gender, and asserted that their own gender ideologies were learned through social norms. Though traditional ideologies readily inform bisexual’s notions of gender, they are not necessarily passively or unwittingly socialized as gendered people.

For example, George readily utilizes traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity to describe himself, though he recognizes the definitions he utilizes are what he has learned from society:

Interviewer: ...George, can you say that there are any particularly feminine things about you, and any particularly masculine things about you?

Respondent: ...Some, um, particularly feminine things, I don't really, maybe just being bisexual, or just you know talking about gender a lot with people who have a, a curious, a novel concept of what it is. But, when I say these things are masculine or feminine, it's not me that labels them but I'm just going by what, what I guess society tells me is masculine and feminine. Feminine traits, as I said I tend to be peacemaker....A feminine behavior, is the artistic, the creative. Constantly sketching, doodling, humming tunelessly or whatever. You know things like, things like cooking...

[...]

Respondent: ...Masculine traits, athletic. I can be aggressively competitive as long as the stakes really don't matter. I was, I was in the military for awhile. I, I was into a lot of sports. Into things like, auto repair, carpentry, as they say the list of things that you don't imagine typically being done in a dress. I guess if you want the capsule definition of what society considers feminine. (M) —George

Similarly, A.J. describes his successful socialization as a masculine man:

“I tend to be protective, I tend to make decisions, I tend to be wanting to take responsibility. And I'm a pretty strong person … And I think I was socialized as a hockey playing male, and that this is what guys do. So I think that the gender, the male gender script is probably a lot more firmly implanted in me although I hate
football, it is more firmly planted in me than other people. And I've come to recognize that.” (M) –A.J.

Jen describes a nontraditional (i.e., masculine) performance of gender in accord with social definitions of masculinity:

“…[T]o go back to the masculine side, one of my girlfriends you know, we go out. We went out to a concert and we were in a mosh pit and I was dancing but I also oftentimes had myself on the side of [her] wherever violence was starting to break out. Like real, like punch you in the head, elbows flying violence, and I would stand on outside and I would wrap my other arm like around her because I wanted to protect her. And that would be more of a masculine dynamic in a relationship I think, in the way they are understood by society.” (F) –Jen

The idea that notions of gender are learned often caused a struggle for bisexuals attempting to discover the ‘truth’ of gender for themselves, or attempting to develop their own ideas about masculinity and femininity. Many respondents attested to the pervasiveness of cultural ideas about gender: though they may not agree with them, they often realized that the ideas about gender that they had been socialized to were what they entertained. Social constructions of gender were inseparable from ‘their own’ gender ideologies. At the same time that respondents recognized their gender ideologies as a learned set of ideas about femininity and masculinity, they were unable to come up with new ways of thinking about gender:

“…I guess, see I don't know how to describe like [my own definitions of] femininity or masculinity. And I know that like a lot of what I would say would be, you know, what we're supposed to think about gender.” (F) –Emily

Respondent: …I don't know what feminine is really. Um, when you say feminine I'm thinking well does she mean the traditional sort of feminine, or does she mean her own definition, or does she mean what she thinks my definition is [laughs].

Interviewer: I'm hoping to uncover yours [that is, Dana's gender ideology].
Respondent: Oh. Okay. Okay, and I was thinking that you meant sort of more the femme-butch dynamic sort of thing or something, you know. No, feminine yes. I mean I love feminine women, if, if they're feminine in the sense that they're nurturing maybe and you know and, and, smart which I do associate, you know. I guess I would think of it, I can't separate the traditional idea of femininity from, from my ideal of femininity. (F) –Dana

Obviously successfully socialized to dominant gender norms, my respondents overwhelmingly utilized traditional notions of gender to describe women and men, and also applied such notions to themselves. However, many of my respondents voiced awareness of their utilization of traditional norms. Some degree of skepticism or critique regarding gender norms likely provided the motivation for individuals to attempt to separate their own gender ideologies from the dominant. Though bisexuals might accept dominant ideas about gender, they do not do so passively and without self-reflection.

**Resisting Traditional Ideologies**

Bisexuals critically assess traditional ideas about sex/gender. They are poignantly aware of dominant conceptualizations of sex/gender as social structures of power and the implications such structures have for individual members of the sex statuses ‘female’ and ‘male.’ Though some bisexuals accept the reigning essentialist dichotomization of sex/gender, others do not perceive that gender is rooted in human biology or natural design. The latter resist traditional prescriptions for femininity and masculinity, and hope that the existing gender paradigm will soon undergo vast ameliorative change in terms of ideology as well as at the levels of social institution and individual behavior. In this section I describe the critiques presented by bisexuals that challenge prevailing traditional gender ideologies. Then I review their anticipation for social change regarding definitions
of sex/gender, and possible avenues that bisexuals predict may be taken to effect such change.

**Critique of Dominant Gender Ideologies**

Rather than entertaining the normative ‘stereotypes’ about gender, some bisexuals attempt to separate their own individualized gender ideologies from the traditional gender ideologies to which they have been socialized. Many reject the negative gender stereotypes they perceive as being produced by the dominant ideologies, and resist the inherent inequality between women and men produced by gender norms. Resisting the dominant ideology causes a great deal of ambivalence for bisexuals, who often resort back to the traditional schema since there is no other available gender paradigm.

The following excerpt from my interview with Emily demonstrates her awareness of traditional gender norms and her reluctance to apply traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity to herself. Though she doubts the applicability of the dominant gender ideology, Emily is unable to access any other mode of thinking about gender:

**Interviewer:** What about you makes you feminine, Emily?

**Respondent:** Um, see I don't want to be like real particular. I, I like getting ready like when I go out. I dress really feminine. Um, a lot of lesbians I know have a hard time getting along with straight women, and I don't at all. Um, I like to shop [giggles], I don't know.

**Interviewer:** How about masculine characteristics about you? Do you think you have any of those?

**Respondent:** Yes. Um [pause], see I hate to stereotype. Um, I guess like, by societal standards I'm athletic. I like participating in sports. I like aggressive ones too. Um,

**Interviewer:** Do you see that as a masculine characteristic?
Respondent: No, I don't, but I know, some people, I don't, I don't know like where I truly stand with masculine characteristics. Um,

Interviewer: Could you define masculinity?

Respondent: No, I couldn't. It, I mean, I wouldn't know what to say to define it at all.

Interviewer: What about femininity?

Respondent: …I don't know how to describe like femininity or masculinity. And I know that like a lot of what I would say would be, you know, what we're supposed to think about gender. So I don't want to,

Interviewer: Is that not what you think about gender? The 'what you're supposed to think'?

Respondent: No, it, it is, um, I guess, I think, femininity, emotion has to do with it. Like, um, girls are typically more emotional. (F) –Emily

Emily does not agree with dominant stereotypes about gender. Though she “hate[s] to stereotype,” she does apply traditional notions of gender to herself and defines femininity in accord with normative definitions. There is no other gender ideology available to reference.

Other bisexuals more strongly critique prevailing ideas about gender, as they argue that existing gender stereotypes do not hold up in reality. They recognize traditional gender ideology as a compelling social design, but this awareness of gender ideology as socially constructed leads to a questioning of the origins and authenticity of gender norms. Also, many respondents reported that their own lived experiences did not correspond with traditional notions of gender, and this further caused them to question the biological foundations or social justifications for such norms.

The following interview excerpts reveal the various ways that bisexuals perceive ideas about gender are cultural constructions learned through socialization, and how they question the basis any such ideas may (or may not) have in ‘reality’:
Interviewer: Do...you identify these particular types of characteristics [about yourself] as being more masculine or feminine?

Respondent: Oh, decision-making is masculine and, you know, mothering is feminine. Classic definitions.

Interviewer: Do you agree with the classic definitions?

Respondent: No, I don't. I think that guys love children just as much as women do, and that they're discouraged from showing affection. But I think guys adore their kids and when given a chance, you know. Uh, I don't think there's anything unique about the mother-child bond. I think that it could be like that with dads too. More than one mother has driven her kids into the pond, so not everyone is obviously imprinted the same way, but I don't think there's anything magical about women and children. I think that's socialization. (M) –A.J.

The prescriptions of traditional gender norms were sometimes cited as erroneous due to their inapplicability to the individuals with whom my respondents are acquainted:

“I don't think that behaviors themselves have any real gender component to them. I think it's, it's a lot of hype and a lot of, social code that for some reason does something for people and they keep it around. I don't know. I've seen, I've seen women who can reassemble an engine in nothing flat. I've seen, uh, I've seen you know guys who like nothing more than to, than to cradle babies all day. I think the, I think a lot of the gender codes for behavior are just outmoded.” (M) –George

“I kind of rear away from being so stereotypical is really what I think give me a lot of conflict because I do find that especially amongst people that I know, it really doesn't hold true necessarily you know.” (M) –Donovan

And also, my respondents suggest that the biology of “real people” does not reflect the rigid categorization of women and men, and thereby also femininity and masculinity:

Interviewer: Can you explain how you perceive femininity and masculinity?

Respondent: I guess just the way I've been taught, you know.

Interviewer: Do you agree with how you've been taught?

Respondent: Um, not generally. I mean, I know, that that's, like no matter what I do I know that that's how I'm going to view it just because, that's how I'm born, you know into this society that teaches you that okay, well, this is the girl's section, this is the boy's section. But I think there's so much more in between than, with real people. That it just doesn't get divided into sexes and, I mean,
people don't even have two different types of chromosomes, I mean, you know. So I think it's funny that we divide ourselves so stringently...I definitely know that it's not just in our genes... (F) –Kathy

Traditional notions of gender are also critiqued as being “outmoded,” “old-fashioned,” and without any present-day application. As such, bisexuals present various critiques of traditional gender ideologies. They resist the negative stereotypes that such ideology promotes towards women and men. Some suggest that traditional notions of gender do not in fact have any basis in human biology, nor do such notions reflect the lived experiences of bisexuals and their observations of ‘real’ women and men.

**Anticipation for Change**

Some bisexuals that were critical of the inequality inherent in traditional gender roles hoped that the conceptualization of such roles would soon change to reflect contemporary gender relations and greater equality between women and men. These politicized viewpoints often demonstrated the feminist leanings of my respondents, who correlated gender with structures of power and sexism.

Many respondents expressed hope that gender relations, in particular male domination over females, would soon change:

“... [F]or a while I worked at an airport loading baggage and I would always get fewer hours than the men. All the women would get fewer hours than the men, and uh, you know we take it to our superiors and they'd be like sorry, but you all are smaller and you just get tired more easily, you know. Um, Jesus, what is it that, women make 74 cents for every dollar that men make. I mean that's garbage, that's total garbage. And that kind of stuff really bothers me and, I think dissolving gender would be a great way to get rid of a lot of that, you know. But it's dissolving 4,000 years of culture too, you know. I wouldn't have such a problem with being a woman if we weren't such a misogynistic society.” (F) –Helga
Interviewer: Can you explain...how you perceive femininity and masculinity? Can you explain to me what you think these terms or concepts mean?

Respondent: Oh, that's a hard question because, like, stereotypically I think people say women are better at being sensitive, a lot of times kinder, they express themselves much more better than masculine. A lot of times men can be very expressive. Um,

Interviewer: Do you agree with this kind of traditional or stereotypical descriptions?

Respondent: No I think it has to change for, for the world to become a better place to be. I think there’s, got to be an equality there not this, male dominating things. (M) –Sean Derrek

Some respondents not only hoped for definitions of sex/gender and gender relations to change, but predicted a gender revolution:

“I think our culture is very fucked up...There is something fundamentally wrong with the system that defines the roles of men and women in this country... And that has to be changed and it will only be changed by women. Men can’t change it.” (M) –A.J.

“And I think we have a lot of thinking to do about what those roles should look like. I think that women have often made the mistake of adopting men’s stuff, so now what happens to women? They get heart attacks just like men do, it’s like they took all the bad shit that men do, and they didn’t bring a new paradigm. And women need to bring a new paradigm, that’s my feeling. Women need to get off their ass and be revolutionaries. If our culture is really going to change I think it’s the leadership should come from women.” (M) –A.J.

Sarah foresees that with changing organization of labor, a new gender paradigm must emerge. She was the only respondent who perceives that change is in fact already heading in that direction:

“I can see where they [traditional ideas about gender] come from, definitely. You know and as adaptive strategies. I think some of them make a lot of sense. I mean division of labor is a really important thing. If a society is going to exist like there does need a division of labor. I think we've reached a point where, I think that division of labor no longer makes sense and I think the division of characteristics no longer makes sense. And even if they did make sense, I think so many people are unhappy with it and struggling against it that it's going to change. And I think we're going to sort of see a new paradigm emerge about what it means. I think we're in the middle of that right now.” (F) –Sarah
Later Sarah explains that she has observed not only women challenging assumptions about sex/gender, but that also many men of her generation “are really actively examining what it means to be male and masculine.” Unlike A.J., Sarah sees men as active participants in reorganizing gender, and that the process of redefinition is already in motion.

Reconceptualizing Gender

Many bisexuals do not passively accept traditional prescriptions for gender. They criticize existing sex/gender arrangements and yearn for a different paradigm of gender ideology and behavior. Respondents attempted to disagree with traditional ideologies and describe unique and individualized perceptions of femininity and masculinity. However, such efforts at reconceptualization were always confined by the standard model, and their ‘own’ ideas remarkably mimicked the traditional.

In one notable example Sarah looks to another culture to redefine gender, and references the Eastern concepts of yin and yang. When I asked if she could describe her gender ideology, Sarah explained:

“…I think at the base of it there is a different essence between men and women. But that the way that those things can manifest themselves are so, so, there's so much overlapping between the ways that they can manifest themselves. So I don't think you can look at, so much at, characteristics and say okay well, this is a male characteristic, this is a female characteristic. Because this male characteristic, it could be a manifestation of either or. I tend to, I think I tend to really like the idea of yin and yang, or a sort of Eastern way of looking at it where there is a little bit, there's a little bit of the male essence in me, and more of the female essence in me… And I think those essences are mysterious. Like it's something that I feel like I can, sort of, blindly say this is male, this is female and know what I'm talking about, but it's hard to put into words.”  (F)  –Sarah
Sarah’s effort was likely the most productive attempt toward the construction of a new gender paradigm. However, Sarah’s ideas parallel existing Western notions of gender in several ways: (1) she suggests that female and male “essences” are essentially different; and, (2) Sarah only conceptualizes two dichotomous (female and male) essences. Sarah’s descriptions of femininity and masculinity also conflate sex and gender, which reflects the essentialist notion that ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are naturally occurring and are therefore coherent with one another. Nonetheless, Sarah does aptly demonstrate the interest of some bisexuals in redefining traditional notions of gender and the difficulties they encounter in doing so.

A few other respondents recognize that, even despite their critiques and efforts at resisting the dominant paradigms, gender as it is currently conceptualized prevails. Some bisexual critics perceive that because sex/gender constrains individual behavior and stratifies women and men into groups with disproportionate access to social power, the role of sex/gender in organizing social life is paramount. Regardless of challenges to gender stereotypes and sex/gender inequality in general, gender remains “a remarkable organizational device” (Goffman 1997:203).

“Gender being, that being said, well I mean all my speech about gender labels you know just being meaningless, uh, there are of course practical, uh, practical matters in society which says you are either one or the other. Uh, there’s men's restroom, women's restroom… That I say these things are unfounded does not mean that they are insignificant. Um, uh, in, dealing with everyday life. But just I feel that whatever is behind them seems to be a bit overblown and self-perpetuating without a particular purpose or foundation in reality, like a lot of cultural stuff.” (M) –George

Though it now seems markedly obvious that everyone is influenced alike by dominant ideas about gender, one question specific to bisexuals has emerged: Are
bisexuals more cognizant of gender issues than others? If so, what is particular to bisexuals that results in their self-awareness of gender ideologies? Such questions cannot be sufficiently answered by this research on bisexuality, as my sample did not include the experiences of any heterosexual-identified individuals and included only one homosexual-identified man. I can suggest that a notable amount of self-consciousness about ideas of sex/gender and extensive critique of hegemonic norms by bisexuals has been observed. There seems to be a propensity for bisexuals to be highly aware of social constructions of sex/gender, and I speculate that this may be due to their hesitant positioning as the ‘middle ground’ of the dichotomy of homosexual/heterosexual (Du Plessis 1996; Ross and Paul 2000). The social location of this identity category situates bisexual women and men in uncharted gender terrain (Gagnon, Greenblat, and Kimmel 1999).

Respondent: I think that a lot, I mean, …it seems that I'm pretty indecisive about making a firm decision between masculine and feminine, male female you know, sexuality, and I think a lot of that may come with my being bisexual. I think if you were to ask a straight man some of these questions, he'd be very firm about it, or a straight female. Um, or even a lesbian or a gay person, but I think being bisexual does create a lot of confusion in gender roles and stuff. I don't really know why! [Giggles]

Interviewer: There's a link between the gender and sexuality?

Respondent: [Pause] I guess there it is. Because you've been told all your life you know men are attracted to women, women are attracted to men, and when you're attracted to both you start questioning yourself, and everything else around you and, I, I don't know about other people, but I can't sit down and make a firm answer. (F) –Jane

Jane was the only respondent in my sample who questioned her sex and gender and related such indecisiveness to her bisexuality in a direct way. Future research could extend away from the current tendency to focus on the gender of bisexuals’ partners, and
instead further explore bisexuals’ own gender identities. Unfortunately, there is no
previous research that I am aware of that specifically examines bisexuals’ performances
of gender in romantic relationships. The findings of this exploratory research suggest that
the gender of bisexuality may be uniquely undefined due to existing notions of gender
linking performances of femininity and masculinity by women and men with the
heterosexuality/homosexuality binary. Because dominant gender ideologies define
women and men (and femininity and masculinity) as opposites, sexuality is normatively
perceived as heterosexual opposite sex/gender desire (and homosexuality as deviant same
sex/gender desire) (Gagnon, Greenblat, Kimmel 1999). In these ways traditional gender
ideologies function to invalidate all nonconforming behaviors and identities such as a
bisexual identity (Butler 1990). In light of bisexuals’ unique negotiation of unmapped
gender performances, it is perhaps not surprising that some bisexuals may encounter a
dissonance with traditional gender ideologies and present such critique, resistance, and
hope for change to existing gender systems.
Part III: How Bisexuals ‘Do’ Gender in Romantic Relationships

The original question guiding this research concerned whether or not the gender performances of bisexuals in relationships changed due to the sex/gender of their partner(s). For example, if a woman performs traditional femininity in a relationship with a male partner, is she necessarily also feminine with a female partner? Does her performance of gender change, thereby demonstrating some fluidity within constructions of gender and the agency of the individuals who perform them? Do bisexuals negotiate gender with their same- and opposite-sex partners using traditional gender ideologies, or do they utilize some other conceptualizations of femaleness and maleness?

As discussed previously in Part II, bisexuals do generally entertain traditional notions of gender. They may at times question or criticize these notions, but generally bisexuals accept traditional ideologies due to lack of any other mode of thinking about gender. This same trend is true for bisexuals’ performances of gender in relationships: many ‘do gender’ in relationships with women and men in accord with traditional models of femininity and masculinity (West and Zimmerman 1987), and some pose greater resistance to the norm.

Some of my respondents are comfortable performing traditional scripts for gender and sexuality in relationships with women and men and may take for granted their doing so. The relative ease with which the traditional roles were assumed was particularly noted in opposite-sex pairings. For other bisexuals there could be a greater negotiation of gender performances in relationships, particularly within same-sex partnerships since there are no prevailing models for bisexuals’ gendered behavior in same-sex
relationships. This negotiation of gender was experienced by some respondents as a positive opportunity for greater individual freedom. Conversely, for other bisexuals the uncertainty of not having a script or model to guide behavior could be a negative concern causing stress within a relationship.

Some individuals, but far from the majority, express a profound flexibility in their gender performances. This flexibility attests to the agency of individuals to perform whichever gender script they select as appropriate in any given relationship context, and additionally affirms the socially constructed nature of gender: Gender is a performance, a set of situated behaviors, that an individual enacts as she or he determines appropriate (West and Zimmerman 1987). Yet, bisexuals demonstrate only a limited amount of freedom in their expressions of gender and their options for gender performance. Even for those who may alternate gender performances between relationship partners, this flexibility is the restricted freedom to choose between the two traditional roles: the feminine or the masculine.

**Traditional Gender Performances**

Within the romantic relationships of bisexuals, the enactment of traditional gender performances is immediately recognizable. Most of my respondents readily identify with a sex category as female or male. This identification lead many bisexual to enact traditional gender in their relationships in accordance with sexed/gendered identities: females performed traditional femininity, males engaged in traditional performances of
masculinity. I will first discuss those bisexuals who perform gender consistently regardless of the sex/gender of their relationship partners. I follow with a discussion of how taking on traditional gender performances, and thus enacting unequal power dynamics in relationships, comes easily to bisexuals and is often perceived as ‘natural.’ Then, I review the experiences of bisexuals who resist traditional gender on an individual level as well as in their romantic relationships.

**Always Feminine Women, Always Masculine Men**

As previously discussed in Part II regarding gender ideology, bisexuals clearly understand how to perform gender in ways that will produce appearances of femininity and masculinity, and many consistently perform the gender that corresponds to their sex category as defined by traditional conceptualizations of sex/gender. Within romantic relationships, some bisexuals perform traditional gender with *both* female and male partners. Their traditionally gendered self identity, as a feminine female or masculine male, remains consistent regardless of the sex/gender of their relationship partners. Therefore their performances of gender likewise do not change with the sex/gender of partners, as their gender performances are consistently constructed to reflect a self-identity as female or male.

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7 The bisexuals in this sample perceived sex as female or male as unchanging. Though some flexibility in gender performances may be noted, an individual’s sex category membership as female or male would not be perceived as changing. This understanding of sex/gender necessitates my occasional distinction between the common usages of ‘sex’ as biological female- or male-ness, and ‘gender’ as a social performance of femininity or masculinity.
For example, A.J. identifies as male and describes himself as the dominant partner in both his relationships with his wife and his male partner. He says this situation is “like having two wives”:

“…I am kind of the husband whether I’m in a same-sex relationship or an opposite sex relationship. I tend to be protective, I tend to make decisions, I tend to be wanting to take responsibility.” (M) – A.J.

In both his relationships with a female and with a male, A.J. maintains the traditionally masculine role. A.J.’s self-description as dominant and masculine demonstrates the power differential that is inherent between feminine and masculine performances: in relationships with both women and men, A.J. prefers to be the masculine partner. That is, A.J. prefers to be the partner with greater power. He wants to make the decisions and be held responsible for doing so. In contrast, Christine, who identifies as female, describes her feminine gender performance in relationships with both women and men:

Respondent: …I like being the girl if that makes sense. You know I like being taken care of.

Interviewer: What does that entail?

Respondent: Um… I guess just like [pause] just like having someone who can… protect you or, make you feel like is always going to be there to like protect you from everything or help you if you need help in any situation…I guess the more traditional of a female role in the relationship.

Interviewer: Is that how you feel right now with your boyfriend?

Respondent: Yeah. That's how I felt with my girlfriend too. (F) – Christine

Christine enjoys taking on “the more traditional of a female role” and being the less powerful partner in a relationship. She would prefer others protect her or help her when she needs it, rather than herself being the care-taker or guardian of her relationship partner.
Regardless of the sex/gender of their relationship partners, some bisexuals perform their own gender consistently the same. It seems that in this case it would become irrelevant to the bisexual as to whether or not her or his partner identified as a woman or a man, but that they may specifically seek a partner who would perform the corresponding ‘opposite’ gender to the performance that they themselves prefer to enact. In Part IV, I will discuss bisexuals’ attraction to women and men and the importance of gender performances by both bisexuals and potential partners.

**Traditional Gender Performances: ‘Easy’, ‘Natural,’ and ‘Obvious’**

Some bisexuals perform traditional gender regardless of the sex category membership of their relationship partner. However, as the dominant scripts for gender performances in relationships are based on the model of female/male power differential in heterosexual relationships, enacting traditional gender was most likely to occur in female-male pairings. Mirroring the heterosexual norm, traditionally gendered female-male relationships were seen as easy to navigate and caused less stress for respondents in terms of role negotiation. Bisexuals enacted the widely pervasive gendered scripts for female-male relationships with relative ease.

“...[W]ith a woman there are set patterns to fall into [so] that you can sort of relax, so that makes it a little bit less stressful in that regard because there's a set pattern to follow.” (M) –Patrick

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8 The amount of traditional gender performances by bisexuals in this sample is likely reflected by the number of respondents who were currently involved in female-male pairings: Half of the 20 respondents had one primary opposite-sex partner, and 2 more were married as well as in relationships with additional partners. Only 4 were involved in exclusive same-sex partnerships. See Table 1.1.
“Um, in some ways it's kind of a cop out because it's just easier with men. There's a script and you can follow it, and you know if you are interested in somebody, there's a script and you can follow it and you can make variations on it...I think I am pretty good at following that script of male-female interaction and attraction and where that goes. Like I'm, it's almost a fall back sometimes because I'm, I've done it for a while and I'm fairly good at it and, um, I, I used to do a lot more than I do now, but a lot of the signifiers of what it means to be like stereotypically female and pretty,...But, I think I definitely came across as very stereotypically pretty in the past, you know, and that aids the script. Um, and I looked very, oh I don't know, very nice and meek and you know all those things that really aid a very gendered script between a male and a female and how an attraction is going to happen. I don't think I have ever pursued a male.” (F)

–Sarah

When bisexuals follow the traditional norms for gender in relationships, it is sometimes taken for granted as the ordinary scheme of things that one partner will take a feminine role and the other a masculine role. Isabelle and Hillary emphasize their assumption that women and men will perform different roles in a relationship together:

“I feel like, even though me and my boyfriend have got this like, he's you know obviously in charge like I like him to be like, in charge of me and I always want him to be on a little bit of a pedestal just because otherwise what would I want, like I have to have something that is better than me to see and want.” (F)

–Hillary (emphasis added)

Interviewer: Do you behave differently in relationship with a woman or with a man?

Respondent: Um, I think, I mean it's obvious that I would behave somewhat different. But like, um, obviously with a man, I am more, like how do you say, like not really girly, cause I'm, like I was raised to be strong and stuff like that...

Interviewer: So in a relationship with a man do you expect him to be more dominant?

Respondent: Um, not all the time, but, um, he should be like, you know, a little more dominating than I am. Because like, I don't know it's just the way I feel. I mean, I want someone, I want like, I want someone to take care of me, you know. I want someone to be there to, you know, back me up as I need them to...

(F) –Isabelle (emphasis added)

Sometimes bisexuals may not even be consciously aware of taking on traditional gender roles, as these performances are enacted with great ease. For instance, after her
boyfriend’s mother passed away, Jane automatically began doing his laundry and cooking for him:

“I don't know I just feel this need to... to be with him and want to like take care of him. His mom passed away this summer, and right away without even thinking about it I started taking over some of the things she did for him. And, I didn't think about it. He mentioned it just a few weeks ago, and I was like oh! I just, I can't really explain it. (F) –Jane

Bisexuals who follow traditional gender performances in female-male relationships tend to note the ease with which such performances are undertaken. Gender performances that mirrored traditional prescriptions in accord with the respondent’s gender were often taken for granted or perceived as being the ‘obvious’ mode of behavior. Not only do such performances have the weight of the obvious (i.e., normative performances), but they are also supported by the notion that traditional gender performances are a result of the ‘natural’ scheme of things. Accordingly, George states that he takes on a gendered role in relationships without much conscious deliberation:

“...[I]t's one of those things where it feels completely natural at the time but it feels so weird even talking about it even in hindsight.” (M) –George

A traditional gender performance, in accord with George’s biological maleness, feels like the most natural behavior for him:

“...[Y]ou know, physically, physically I'm a man. Everyone sees that and reacts to me as they would to a man, however that happens to be. You know no one has ever called me ma'am... But in that people react to me, as they do you know most other, uh, biological males, uh, and it would seem kind of unnatural for me to affect anything, anything else. I'd feel like I'd, like I'd be onstage.” (M) –George

The most widely recognized or most obvious means of organizing gender in relationships correspond to traditional heterocentric essentialist understandings of
sex/gender. Taken-for-granted gender performances were often explained as the obvious, natural, or instinctual way of conducting oneself. In accord with an essentialist understanding of gender as an innate reflection of biological sex, many bisexuals perceive their gender performances are direct reflections of their sex category identity as female or male.

**Resistance to Traditional Gender Scripts**

Some respondents critiqued traditional gender performances in relationships, and were hesitant to perform the gender script that corresponds to their identity as female or male. Coinciding with those bisexuals who question the content of traditional ideologies about gender, some bisexuals resist traditional gender scripts and the inequality inherent in their perpetuation. Some resistance was on an individual level, such as A.J.’s experience as a stay-at-home father when his children were very young, or Simone’s interest in automobile mechanics following in the footsteps of her mother who worked as a welder. Bisexuals also resisted traditional gender norms in the context of their romantic relationships, particularly within female-male pairings. For example, Patrick’s experience reveals his reluctance to perform traditional masculinity in relationships with women. Patrick explains that he felt obligated in relationships with women to perform a rigid masculinity and take on the role of the decision-maker:

Respondent: I would say that um, in the, in the female relationships it was a bit more, I don't know, pressure for me to make more of the bigger decisions. Um, you know not, not to say that, you know, I just made the decisions and that's what happened, um, you know, but um, yeah. I'd say that definitely occurred a little bit more in the female relationships.

[...]

Interviewer: How do you feel about this?
Respondent: Um, I don't know. Sort of disappointed, I think. Um, that I let society's pressures sort of direct me in that way.

Interviewer: How do you mean?

Respondent: Well I mean, the pressure to make the decisions in a female relationship whereas in, I wouldn't say it's due to the personalities involved really, it's just sort of the, um, the roles that you feel you have to play with the person. And, I don't know. I'm sort of disappointed that I automatically get sucked into that. (M) –Patrick

Patrick would prefer not feeling “automatically” required to perform traditional gender in his male-female pairings, and notes that this does not occur as much in relationships with other men. Similarly, the men in Weinberg et al.’s (1994:51) study stated that they felt “…locked into a traditionally dominant role” with women, and often preferred the “greater role freedom” they experienced in relationships with other men. I will discuss the lack of prescripted gender performances in same-sex relationships in the following section.

The prearrangement provided by the traditional gender schema can limit an individual’s personal agency: individual women and men may feel obligated to fulfill traditional roles, particularly within female-male relationships. Though having an outline or script can relieve the stress of negotiating gender in relationships, some bisexuals perceive that female-male relationship patterns squelch any prospective change. Same-sex relationships are sometimes perceived as offering inherently greater opportunity to renegotiate or challenge gender designs. For example, Sarah explains the ease of gender performances in an opposite-sex relationship:

“Um, in some ways it's kind of a cop out because it's just easier with men. There's a script and you can follow it…” (F) –Sarah
In contrast, bisexuals like Sarah who are unable to circumvent traditional gender performances in opposite-sex relationships may perceive greater opportunity to do so in same-sex relationships:

“...Rhada and I, it was very much, like it was very conscious about gender and challenging gender or not challenging gender. You know what does it mean if I am comfortable with being female in a certain way and, you know, am I copping out of like the challenge?” (F) –Sarah

Sarah and her female partner actively negotiate gender in their relationship. She is often comfortable taking on a feminine gender performance with her female partners, but feels that she is “copping out” by doing so.

Not all resistance to traditional gender performances by bisexuals in relationships primarily concerns the dynamics between relationship partners. A same-sex relationship in and of itself can be perceived as resistance to traditional gender scripts as such relationships resist compulsory heterosexuality. Some bisexuals assert that their resistance to traditional gender/sexuality can also be a public and political resistance based on their choice of a same-sex relationship partner. Here, gender resistance becomes meaningful as a performance of sexuality.

"Like, and I kind of miss that like, pushing people to be like, when I was dating a woman, they had to recognize that, that I was bisexual and they had to recognize that everyday Jane can you know be this person. And I enjoyed that. I enjoyed um, you know people liking me and then finding out that I was gay or whatever and like, you know, like making people process it, it just, it's really important to me…” (F) –Simone

"Um, it's really not that exciting for me, you know for other people to view us like that you know, and, it's definitely easier like when we go to weddings, no one's like oh! You brought your friend! They're just like okay, you know a man and a woman are together you know, they have this sort of relationship you know. So, but you know the rabble rouser in me definitely misses explaining...you know like, no, Jennifer is my girlfriend [laughs], you know. Like that's always fun. I don't know, it's just culture smashing I guess. I do kind of miss that, you know. So, no.
I don't, I don't really enjoy whatever, whatever ease comes with fulfilling this. I think I would much rather have something that just kind of twisted people's perceptions all around, but, you know, definitely the fulfillingness of my relationship is better than the culture smashing potential [laughs] of like whatever theoretical relationship or not relationship.” (F) –Helga

Bisexuals seem to enjoy the “culture smashing” involved in resisting the norms of compulsory heterosexuality, and requiring others to “process” gender and sexuality:

“...[I]f I'm in relationship with a guy, and it's out in the open, it kind of demands that everyone be, uh, you know be cognizant of the politics, the cultural climate. And sometimes that can even be a thrill, mostly it's a pain in the ass but, but it can be a thrill.” (M) –George

Here bisexuals may not be resistant to traditional gender scripts in the sense of their self-presentations as female or male or their behaviors within relationships, but these bisexuals resist traditional gender norms via the sex/gender of their partner choice. They resist what traditional gender norms dictate in terms of sexual attraction towards one or the ‘other’ sex/gender. As demonstrated in the excerpts quoted above, since bisexuals engage in relationships with both women and men they may be particularly cognizant of the different public dynamics within same-sex and opposite-sex pairings. Also, to have the option to perform sexuality differently than prescribed by the norm may be a particular “thrill” since bisexuals are so commonly constrained to behave in accord with traditional gender norms.

In many various situations and relationship contexts, bisexuals enact traditional feminine and masculine gender performances that correspond with their sex/gender identity as female or male. Though this is more likely to occur in opposite-sex relationship pairings, some bisexuals enact their gender script in the same way in relationships with both women and men. This is likely due to bisexual’s general
acceptance of traditional ideologies regarding sex/gender and sexuality. Like any other
group of individuals, bisexuals have access to the dominant cultural ideologies about
‘who’ they are as women and men, and what interaction with women and men should
include. This knowledge is frequently enacted in their romantic relationships.

AC/DC Gender Performances

Whereas some bisexuals are generally consistent in their performances of
femininity or masculinity in all their romantic relationships, others’ gender performances
are characterized by greater fluidity. In the following section I detail those bisexuals who
describe themselves as extremely flexible in their romantic relationships in general.
Depending on their partner(s), they sometimes may enact more traditional gender roles,
whereas at other times or in other relationships they may perform the ‘opposite’ role.
Then I review other individuals who switch between the traditional feminine and
masculine performances depending on the sex/gender of their relationship partner. I
observed the greatest flexibility in gender performances within same-sex relationships,
and most particularly those relationships involving two women.

Fluid Gender Performances

Some respondents regarded themselves as extremely flexible in their gender
performances within relationships. They did not seem to engage in romantic
relationships, or approach the process of relationship initiation, with any preset
performance of gender:
“...[I]n different relationships I’ve done, I’ve done different things.” (M) – George

“I’m very good at assuming whatever role I want to at any given time.” (F) – Jen

Within the relationships of such role-flexible bisexuals, their own gender performances are often adapted to that of their partner. They do not perceive their switching of gender performances as a reflection of sex/gender (of self or partner). Rather, they perceived their gender performances to be adapted to personality (of respondent or partner) and/or the context of the relationship (such as length of relationship, whether or not the relationship was a casual dating arrangement or a committed and long-term partnership, geographic location of relationship in one or other partner’s hometown, etc.).

For example, George and Helga are two respondents who described particularly flexible performances of gender in their relationships with women and men. Helga explains she is varied in the gender performances she enacts in her relationships, and such performances pivot on the individual characteristics of her partners and the relationship context:

“...[W]e both have, we always have a role. I can always see myself like taking a role, but the role itself is varied and it doesn't really seem to depend on gender as much as just the person and the circumstances. And I think that's why so many of my relationships with people have worked out so well is that I'm not looking for like one thing to fulfill like, I don't have like one thing that I can do, but I'm comfortable with a variety of like different situations. And I think that's also why I've been so successful dating a variety of genders, really, you know, is that I, it's, I can kind of you know roll with the punches or whatever.” (F) – Helga

Interestingly, Helga identifies her flexibility in gender performances as a contributing factor in her ability to have various relationship partners. Helga’s fluid gender in relationships may be a resource to her bisexual identity, as she states that it
enables her involvement with “a variety of genders.” She has been in relationships with feminine and masculine women and men, and also transgendered individuals. Because Helga does not rigidly identify as any gender (or sex), she is open to relationships with many different sexes/genders.

George is similarly flexible in his gender performances in the context of romantic relationships. He also adapts to the gender performances of his partners:

“I guess I kind of take on some aspects of what the other person, has and what the other person lacks. With the more masculine guys I guess I get a little more, more feminine. It’s hard to throw that in there without qualifying it. Uh, more emotionally expressive, more um, taking what is the typical, or the stereotypical female response when dealing with problems….with my current girlfriend, you know, she wants nurturing and support [laughing] and, and I’m offering just sort of rational solutions to everything. Then with the guys… I offer you know, sort of more emotional support.” (M) – George

George later goes on to assert that though his gender performances are variable, he will not be “cajoled into doing anything” that he does not want to do. George says, “…I’m not too much of a chameleon, but I do adapt”. His flexibility in gender performance is obviously a chosen set of behaviors rather than a reflection of some innate or immutable trait. But George asserts that he does have his own will and does not permit all his behaviors to be determined by his relationship partners. Though George will not allow himself to be required to do something that he does not want to do, he is generally quite flexible in his options for gender performance.

It seems plausible that bisexuals may experience greater fluidity in gender performances in their relationships than homosexuals or heterosexuals due to the fact that bisexuals may engage in relationships with masculine and feminine partners, women and men, heterosexual and nonheterosexual identifying individuals, and any identity not
specified by these dualisms. Therefore, bisexuals may experience a broader set of negotiations and unscripted possibilities than homosexuals or heterosexuals (Gagnon, Greenblat, and Kimmel 1999). But as this study only employed bisexual respondents (with the exception of one male who now identifies as homosexual) and no heterosexual-identified individuals, such a claim cannot be sufficiently explored herein and must remain a speculation of this research.

As the traditional scripts are so culturally pervasive, negotiations persist between romantic partners regarding who will perform the role of the feminine or the masculine. Some bisexuals may be extremely flexible in their gender performances in romantic relationships, and may base their gender performance on that of their partners. However, the flexibility of such bisexuals’ gender performances is in fact limited, as they are flexible between the only two (feminine and masculine) standardized versions of gender.

**Female Bisexuals’ Transitive Gender Performances**

Some bisexuals tended to switch between performances of traditional femininity and masculinity in their relationships, and exhibited gendered patterns in alternating their performances. In such relationships, the sex/gender of the bisexual respondent and that of their relationship partner influenced the respondent’s gender performance. Bisexual women exhibited the most distinct shifting in gender performances in accord with the sex/gender of their relationship partner. These women often followed a general pattern: they would switch between traditionally feminine gender performances with male partners to masculine performances in relationships with women. Sally’s experiences aptly demonstrate this shift in gender performance in accord with partner sex/gender:
Interviewer: Is it possible that you can say that you behave differently in a relationship with a man than with a woman?

Respondent: Oh, definitely.

Interviewer: And how is it that you behave differently?

Respondent: Um, when I'm in a relationship with a man I expect him to do things for me. Like, open doors, like if he's sleeping over he should sleep on the outside [of the bed] so that I don't fall out. […]

Respondent: …And when I'm in a relationship with a girl it's like the exact opposite. Like, I'm the one that will open the doors and I'll buy her stuff and I'll sleep on the outside so she doesn't fall off, and... [Pause]

Interviewer: Are there other things like that?

Respondent: Umm, [pause]. I'm trying to a, figure out how to phrase it, like... I guess I'm more dominant in a relationship with a girl. (F) –Sally

Several other respondents expressed a similar switch in gender performances between relationships with men and with women. For example, Isabelle demonstrates how her gender ideology informs her differential behavior: she asserts that men can take care of themselves, but women need protection. Therefore, she is more of a masculine guardian for her female partners than for her male partners:

Interviewer: Do you behave differently in a relationship with a woman or with a man?

Respondent: Um, I think, I mean it's obvious that I would behave somewhat different. But like, um, obviously with a man, I am more, like how do you say, like not really girly, cause I'm, like I was raised to be strong and stuff like that, …a man's purpose is just, not saying just, not just a purpose, but like, the way it's been like, um, I'm not like a little, you know, like prissy little girl...Like I can take care myself, so like I'm not always, you know, completely girly when it comes to that. And then, when it comes to, um, another female or should I say my girlfriend because that's all I have experience with, um, it tends to change. Like, even, even with any other female, like, I tend to be, um, like, more overbearing, protective of them, like, I will, like, like if it comes between a guy and a girl, like, say like, they have to wait alone, I'll, like a guy I'll just leave there you know, he should be able to take care of himself. (F) –Isabelle
Also, when I asked Dana about initiation in her relationships with women, she expressed a similar shift between feminine and masculine gender performances. Dana talks about her experiences as “a different person” in her relationships with women and with her husband, depending on her performance of gender and the sex/gender of her partner:

“...[W]hat's interesting to me is that I am not generally a very aggressive person and, however, I found that with women when I was with a woman I was more aggressive than I was used to being.... I found that I was a different person. You know I became, I did become more of the aggressor and more of the initiator and more dominant. And that's, I know that's what you're trying to get at, and that, that did happen. Um, not that I feel weak or powerless or anything with my husband, just that I definitely wasn't that, I mean he is not necessarily that either but definitely I was not that. I'd never really been that, and now I was that. And, you know, and I kind of liked it you know. I kind of liked, um, experiencing it from that side sort of. I kind of did feel, I didn't feel masculine, but I felt like I kind of understood more how men feel, probably most of the time you know in, as far as their negotiations with, with women or in relationships.” (F) –Dana

Dana’s performance of gender is highly variable depending on the sex/gender of her relationship partner: she becomes more dominant with women than with her husband. Because she takes on a more masculine role in her relationships with women, she feels that she also takes on a male perspective in interaction with women.

The experiences of bisexual women who switch between feminine performances of gender in relationships with men to masculine performances of gender in relationships with women reflect culturally dominant essentialist ideologies of sex and gender. For instance, Dana clearly conflates her performances of gender with her essence as a person. Though she identifies as female, Dana performs a more masculine role with women than with her husband and she feels “like a different person” experiencing (not the usual feminine role in her relationship with her husband, but) “how men feel” in their interactions with women. Also, that many bisexual women act like ‘men’ in their
relationships with other women reveals the heteronormative model of female/male relationship dynamics. When paired with other women, some female bisexuals fulfill the missing masculine performance required to emulate hegemonic female/male binary.

Female bisexuals who reported a shift in behavior between female and male relationship partners apparently entertain traditional gender ideologies about essential differences between women and men. Such gender ideology may lead to their differential treatment of partners of both sexes in relationships. For example, Jane perceives women as more emotional than men. In her current relationship with her male partner, she is “not really into the romantic stuff” such as candlelight dinners and receiving poetry. Jane predicts that her behavior in a relationship with a woman would be different, since she perceives women to be different from men:

Respondent: …I would actually make a candlelight dinner for a woman whereas I don’t think I would do so for a guy and I wouldn’t really care to get one of those from a guy. Or I’d buy her flowers and every once in a while where, I don’t like to receive them myself now. I think emotionally I would take on more of a female role, but outwardly, I would be doing some of the things that men usually do in a relationship. [Pause] If that makes sense [giggles].

Interviewer: So by romantic you don't necessarily mean to imply sensitive?

Respondent: I, I think I would be more sensitive with a woman. And, I think that's just because to me they seem more emotional, beings. (F) —Jane

It seems somewhat contradictory that if an individual perceives women and men as being different in accord with traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity, that they would not also interpret themselves into this gendered schema; thereby the bisexual would be expected to behave in accordance with traditional gender prescriptions without demonstrating any fluidity of gender performance. For example, though Isabelle perceives women as more delicate than men and in need of protection, she evidently does
not perceive herself as such a woman. Her own gender performance changes between the traditional masculine and feminine roles, which appears inconsistent with a traditional gender ideology. Likewise, Jane suggests that women are more emotional than men, though in her present relationship with a man she does not perform a traditionally feminine (i.e., emotional) gender. Here bisexuals’ inconsistent gender performances and gender ideologies exhibit “surface fractures” (Hochschild 1989:190). The gender performances of some bisexual women seem to reflect a traditional gender ideology as it is applied to other women and men, but they do not perform gender themselves in accord with such an ideology.

Who ‘Wears the Pants’ in Same-Sex Relationships?

The greatest overall fluidity of gender performances by bisexuals was observed in their same-sex relationships, both within a single relationship context and across various same-sex relationship pairings. Prescriptions for traditional gender in heterosexual (monogamous) relationships are culturally dominant and therefore widely utilized. Taking this into consideration, how do two women or two men negotiate gender in a romantic relationship? Without a prescribed arrangement, how is the relationship organized by gender (or via some other variables)?

The heterosexual relationship is the normative relationship model in which prescriptions for gender behavior are clearly defined. In a same-sex relationship, gender is not so strictly prearranged:

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9 See section *Batman and Robin: Beyond Sex/Gender* concluding Part III for a discussion of additional characteristics utilized to organize behaviors within relationships.
“...I think with a lot of the relationships I have with women, like we just don't have any role models so there's a lot of talking, a lot of figuring it out, a lot of trial and error, more than anything else trying to see what works. And sometimes what worked a month ago doesn't work now, so there's more trial and error. And it's, you know it's definitely a lot of mental processing, and emotional processing, and checking in and all of that.” (F) –Sarah

Interviewer: So [negotiating gender] is different with men?

Respondent: Well yeah, cause I mean, society automatically disapproves anyway, so there's not, there aren't really any roles there for you to take on anyway, you know. All of the stereotypical behaviors, you know female to male, and male to female. And there aren't really any, um, you know rules, that one has to follow. (M) –Patrick

Homosexuals may enact butch/femme, top/bottom dynamics in their same-sex relationships that mimic the heterosexual male/female norm for power differentials in relationships (Eadie 1997; Stasia 2003). For bisexuals, the lack of preexisting conceptualizations of gender performance in relationships leads to greater negotiations of gendered behaviors (Gagnon, Greenblat, and Kimmel 1999). Some bisexuals perceive the lack of a predetermined gender script as a positive characteristic of same-sex relationships because the partners may experience a greater ability to cooperatively define their behaviors in relationship to each other as they may choose. For others, the lack of a script for behavior in a relationship can be negative. Not only do the partners within the relationship have to forge their own paths in terms of gendered interaction and what this means to them individually, but the couple must do so in light of external pressures which insist that there should be one dominant partner and another more submissive partner. Who will “wear the pants” in the relationship?

Bisexuals experience the lack of a prearranged framework for gender in their same-sex relationships in different ways. I will first discuss those who find the lack of
gender structure in such relationships as positive, and who enjoy the freedom of opportunity presented by the lack of a predetermined model to follow. Then I will discuss those bisexuals who find the lack of gender scripts for same-sex relationships uncomfortable, as this could cause stressful negotiations in relationships.

The lack of preset gender scripts for partners in same-sex relationships was experienced as positive by some bisexuals. Many attempted to redesign gender performances to increase equality between partners, and felt that there was a greater possibility of this occurring in same-sex relationships. Women and men enjoyed greater freedom of role in relationships with same-sex partners:

“...[With] same-sex couples it's a little bit more open just cause, you know, you don't know straight from society which one's supposed to you know, [perform a specific behavior]..."  (F)  –Kathy

Some bisexuals enjoy reformulating gender in their same-sex relationships, or at least they enjoyed feeling that they had a more “open” opportunity to reformulate gender differently from the standard feminine/masculine dichotomous roles in opposite-sex relationships. However, the lack of prescribed gendered behaviors for bisexuals and their partners in same-sex relationships could also be a source of stress and negative tension:
Interviewer: So how is it different [emotionally] being with a woman and being with a man, particularly with regard to gender…?

Respondent: ...[T]here's more stress in being with a man because there are no scripted parts, like you can't just fall into the groove, you're constantly having to figure out well what do I do here, what should I do here, how should this work. [...] Respondent: ...[W]hereas with a woman there are set patterns to fall into that you can sort of relax, so that makes it a little bit less stressful in that regard because there's a set patterns to follow. Um, but then on the other hand it's a bit more stressful with a female because, um, like just by having experience being a man, I can read men easier. So, there's a lot less confusion in that regard with a man than with a woman, so. (M) –Patrick

In addition to the lack of a model for gendered behaviors, bisexuals also explained other difficulties in pursuing same-sex relationships due to a lack of scripts overall. For instance, Hillary describes struggling to learn how to “check out” potential same-sex partners, whereas it had been “natural” for her to learn how to check out men. Sarah expresses sadness at having lacked the language in adolescence to express her attraction to another woman. And also, numerous other respondents cited general difficulties flirting with same-sex potential partners. In Part IV, I further explore how gender performances of bisexuals and their potential relationship partners can encourage or deter romantic relationships.

Another factor that can cause bisexuals to experience negatively the lack of preset gender arrangements in their same-sex relationships is the influence of external forces which exert stress on relationship partners to conform to the heterocentric norm; specifically, there is great pressure to define a relationship in terms of dominant configurations of power. Here, tension in a same-sex relationship is not due to bisexuals’ or their partners’ uncertainty of how to organize the relationship by sex/gender, but rather tension results from the external pressures that attempt to force a same-sex relationship to conform to a heterosexual norm. In the following statements Kathy provides a description
of the universality of normative understandings of gender/power based on traditional heterosexual relationships:

Interviewer: Do sex roles ever get in the way, or do they ever make things work out better?

Respondent: ...[T]he fact that I fit into those roles [for feminine appearance] easier than other people I know, makes my life a little bit easier but it's also hard, um, because our society really does have these [roles] and in a woman to woman relationship it just messes with other people's heads because they don't understand, okay, well then who's going to be the dominant one, or there has to be a dominant one or, you know, who's the butch? Who's the man? You know, and things like that. They want to put a heterosexual life on a same-sex couple, and it, it's, I don't know, it's kind of confusing sometimes that way. (F) –Kathy

Kathy suggests that it does not make sense to expect a same-sex relationship to be like an opposite-sex relationship. However, Kathy lengthily describes the power differences in both her relationships with women and with men. And so defining a relationship with a same-sex partner could be quite a struggle, which often manifested itself as negotiations of power. As Kathy says, “Who’s the man?” Or, who “wears the pants”?

Bobby and his male partner demonstrate that gender/power is not easily negotiated in a same-sex relationship since both he and his boyfriend aspire to fulfill the traditional masculine gender role. Such an understanding of gender allows one partner greater power and control. Bobby explains that he and his current boyfriend often debate the future of their relationship and performances of gender within it:

Interviewer: So would you ideally live with your male partner? Or

Respondent: Yeah. We always, I mean we always tease each other about getting married someday. Um, and what that would be like, getting married.

Interviewer: What would it be like?

Respondent: Well we're like, would it be like, a church ceremony? Cause would someone walk down the aisle? And which person would it be? You know. Because it would, if someone walks down the aisle, then obviously that would make them be the more feminine partner. And neither of us want to be the
feminine partner; we both want to be the masculine partner. So it wouldn't be like that it would probably just be like a court ceremony of some sort. (M) –Bobby

Bobby and his male partner struggle with traditional dualistic notions of gender which suggest that only one partner can be the ‘masculine’ partner; therefore, the other must be the ‘feminine’ partner. To become the ‘feminine’ partner would be a threat to either man’s identity as male and their role in the relationship.

Some respondents generalized that there are negotiations of gender/power in any relationship. For example, Dana suggests that in a female-male pairing there is a model that can be followed, but there is no such model for a female-female relationship:

“So I think what happens is, this is my theory, is that who, there's always some sort of a power struggle in any relationship. I mean whether or not it's a struggle, there's some kind of a negotiation that happens, right. Somebody generally has a little more power than the other, or a lot more. So when you're kind of establishing this relationship and that's, you're going through the process it seems like, when they're, typically if it's a man and a woman there is more, it's more likely maybe that the man is going to maybe have that role. I don't know. I mean I don't know if I would generalize that but it seems, with two women it's not at all clear who's going to have that.” (F) –Dana

Dana’s assumption that power will be unequally divided between relationship partners reveals the hegemonic model of the heterosexual relationship: even same-sex relationships are expected to embody this feminine/masculine power dynamic which is perceived as an inherent “struggle” in all relationships. Is it true that all relationships must necessarily be characterized by a power differential? Do humans ‘naturally’ organize interaction in such a way? Or does this demonstrate a deeply entrenched ideology of gender and power based on the heterosexual norm? It is not feasible for this research to supply adequate answers to such questions.
Bisexuals demonstrate the compelling influence of traditional gender ideology by adapting their gender performances in relationships to the traditional norms despite the unequal power differentials created thereby. Without any other scheduled guidelines, bisexuals may attempt to organize same-sex relationships in accord with the traditional (heterosexual) model.

**Alternate Performances with Same-Sex Partners**

Though it is certainly true that gender performances/roles in relationships may be exchanged between opposite-sex relationships partners, I observed greater switching of gender performances in same-sex relationship pairings. There were two general trends of same-sex relationship role-switching: (1) switching roles between different relationships with same-sex partners, and (2) switching roles within one relationship with a same-sex partner. Women are more likely than men to demonstrate greater fluidity of gender performance in both of these ways.

The first trend I observed in switching performances of gender was bisexual respondents’ gender performances altering across various same-sex relationships. Many female respondents specifically compared past relationships that they had engaged in with different women and contrasted the dissimilar roles that they had assumed with each woman:

**Interviewer:** Any differences in gender roles [in relationships with women or men]?

**Respondent:** No um, maybe like, I think being with a woman maybe made me feel a little more tough. Like I was, I hate to use the word butch…[but] like I maybe took on more, some of the more masculine roles in my second relationship with a woman. But in the first one I was the one who was like staying
Simone suggests that her switch in gender performances “depended on the person” she dated. Similarly, Cat explains that her changing gender performance in relationships with women “depends” upon her partners’ gender performances:

Interviewer: Can you say that you behave differently, Cat, in a relationship with a man or with a woman?

Respondent: Um, it just depends on who it is. Like, like, the girl, the most recent one, like, I was more feminine than her, so I kind of took the more shy role of the girlfriend in that one. But then like, I didn't date anyone. I only went on a date once with this girl more recently but... she was more feminine than me, and I kind of felt like I took on the role of the guy. Like I even like in my demeanor I even felt it more. It was weird.

Interviewer: How do you mean in your demeanor?

Respondent: Like, normally girls sit with their legs crossed or something, like I sat just like however I would think a guy would. Like it was almost just like I took on that role without even thinking about [it].

[...]

Interviewer: Did your taking on a more masculine role have you doing different behaviors with the one woman than with the other? Other than just sitting with your legs wide?

Respondent: [Laughs] Um, I don't know. I guess I tended to be a little more outspoken when I was in the masculine role or whatever than when I was in the more feminine one ‘cause I felt like, I don't know. It's like I felt more vulnerable when I was in the feminine one than when I was in the other one. I don't know how to explain that [giggles]. (F) –Cat

Female bisexuals often adapted their gender performances to that of their same-sex relationship partners. This is in contrast to female bisexual’s gender performances in relationships with men, where the bisexual woman’s gender performance is more likely to be determined by her partner’s sex/gender as male. Here, female bisexuals’ gender
performances were predicated on the gender (the relative femininity or masculinity) of female partners.

As discussed above, alternating gender performances was most often explained in individualized terms such as being a reaction to a particular partner’s personality. In same-sex relationships, sex (in terms of female or male) was not likely to be considered an organizing factor of gender performances as there is no guide for gendered behaviors in same-sex relationships.

The second trend I observed in switching gender performances within same-sex relationships was a fluidity of performances within one singular relationship. In a particular context or at any given time in the relationship, partners may switch between masculine and feminine performances of gender. Feminine and masculine performances are shared between partners who switch roles over time and depending on situational context. Again, the majority of bisexuals exhibiting this behavior in same-sex relationships were women.

For example, Emily reports that decision-making and gender performance in general in her relationship with her girlfriend “goes back and forth.” Her girlfriend initially made more decisions in the relationship, but now Emily perceives that she does more decision-making:

Respondent: …[S]ometimes I'm like, the quote unquote female. And sometimes I take on the more masculine role. Like, she likes to...like provide for me as much as she can, um, and a lot of times like I guess I could say that I'm the more, um, domineering one, the more masculine one and the, being like, I'm more dominant and she's more submissive, basically.

Interviewer: Are there times that she is more dominant?
Respondent: Yeah. Like I said like, we do switch roles sometimes. Um, I guess at all depends on the case, on what's going on, I guess.

[...] Respondent: ...[W]e basically balance each other out all the time like, um, as I said before, it depends on the, um, situation at hand, um, like, I don't know. I couldn't even give an example, but we do switch roles an awful lot though. (F) –Isabelle

Sally describes a similar shifting of gender performances in her relationship with her last girlfriend:

Interviewer: How did you feel about [girlfriend initiating last relationship]?

Respondent: Um, well... It was... I did not mind at all. Cause like, on, like, on a sexual front, I like to be more submissive and she was more dominant in that area. So that was great, and I was just, like, OK! You know. You do your thing. And then, but I also felt, like, outside of that I could be the one that was, you know, more protective of her and, things of that nature. (F) –Sally

Sally explains that in different arenas of the relationship she and her female partner enacted different roles. Sally may be submissive in the bedroom, but that does not mean that she is always the feminine partner. Sarah also expressed a similar dynamic in a relationship with one of her female partners:

“...[W]e were both very conscious of gender, we were both very conscious of, on the one hand, there is this, how we relate to each other, um, and being very conscious of gender roles and being very conscious that we didn't want to fall into a butch-dyke dynamic, we were very clear on that. But sexually speaking, like um, I'm very much like the stereotypical female and she's very much like more aggressive in bed and assertive in bed. And so, so there was this dynamic between the two of us that when we were in bed there was this one way of being, there was this one language that we had that was just so much more coarse and much more raw. And when we were not, like there was just this whole different way and it was much more intellectualized.” (F) –Sarah

Although Sarah asserts that she and her partner were very aware of their intent to challenge traditional gender/power norms, Sarah explains that a traditional gender dynamic predominated in the sexual arena of the relationship. Outside of this context, Sarah goes on to explain that she engages in a “masculine” conversation style, and that
she is “very logical” in an intellectual discussion. Depending on the context within a relationship, a bisexual woman may perform gender in a more traditionally feminine or masculine manner.

In these ways bisexual women demonstrate a fluidity of gender performances within a single relationship, as well as progressively across multiple relationships with other women. Women may experience a greater flexibility in gender performance than men, such as in the ability of young women to be ‘tomboys’ without having their status as women doubted. Dana explains that men face much more rigid “gender expectations” than women, and that men are more likely to have to “choose teams”:

“...[A]s a girl you can act like a boy, you can dress like a boy no one's going to pick you out. But little boys want to dress in you know, other people don't deal really well with that, with people, um, so I just think that there is a little more pressure on boys from an early age to conform to that certain kind of behavior than there is for little girls. That's one of the advantages of being a female I think. We have a little more latitude, you know.” (F) – Dana

Due to the cultural dominance of the masculine/feminine (i.e., aggressive/passive) dichotomy, it is perhaps not surprising that bissexuals enact traditional sex/gender scripts in their romantic relationships. Even in same-sex relationships and the relationships of those bissexuals who are extremely fluid in their gender performances and do not fixedly enact either of the traditional scripts, negotiations are made as to which partner will enact which of the two traditional gender scripts. This trend demonstrates the pervasiveness of the heteronormative model of gender in relationships.
In this research on gender performance, I found that bisexuals’ performances of gender in relationships are not necessarily exclusively determined by gender or sex category membership. Whether an individual is female or male is not the only way in which gender performances (and accordingly, power/status) are determined in relationships. I have observed that bisexuals may utilize other individual characteristics to determine gender performances and power/status, particularly within same-sex relationships where the standard correlation of dichotomous sex and gender performance does not apply. Sometimes other social signifiers were used to determine roles simultaneously and in addition to traditional performances. I observed that gender performances in relationships were negotiated between same- and opposite-sex partners on the basis of sex/gender as well as the perceived extent of previous relationship experience of individual partners, age of relationship partners, as well as physical size or stature. The tendency for bisexuals to utilize these three characteristics demonstrates that there are other contributing factors, in addition to sex/gender, that determine bisexuals’ behavior in relationships.

The utilization of other traits to determine how interaction will be organized in a relationship clearly reveals that the aim of the social apparatus of gender is largely the division of power: determining who directs the relationship in particular contexts (i.e., initiates, makes decisions, takes care of other partner, etc.). Traditional gender scripts guide behavior so that there is an organized division of labor and interaction work, but also, and more broadly, a division of power. But particularly in same-sex relationships, the negotiation of roles and power cannot rely on dichotomous sex/gender and so other
systems of power/status differentiation are utilized. Yet the hegemonic heterosexual model is truly all-pervasive, most especially in terms of its connotations for power in relationships, as this culturally dominant relationship design is often upheld even in same-sex relationships. My data suggest that bisexuals’ relationships are often configured so that one person is more dominant than the other: the dominant is the more masculine partner, the subservient partner more feminine. In the sense that power is determined by gender as well as experience, age, and physical stature, and it is thereby awarded more so to one partner than another, these traits reflect a traditionally gendered power paradigm.

In fact, these three dimensions are also themselves commonly understood in terms of traditional gender. The relationship partner who is “older, wiser” and larger in physical stature is attributed greater power as age, wisdom, and size are all perceived as masculine domains. The larger amount of these traits connotes greater power (and masculinity), thereby reflecting traditional power paradigms. The following sections will discuss previous relationship experience, age, and physical stature as factors in the allotment of gender roles and power within bisexuals’ relationships.

**Previous Relationship Experience**

In a relationship where a difference in previous relationship experience was perceived as existing between bisexuals and their same-sex partners, whichever partner was believed to be more experienced in same-sex relationships was likely to take the traditionally masculine dominant and leading role. For instance, Cat describes the outcome of her assessment of discrepant relationship experience with a previous female
partner, and how her perception determined roles in the relationship even after her initial assumption was found to be incorrect:

Respondent: I guess I tended to be a little more outspoken when I was in the masculine role or whatever than when I was in the more feminine one 'cause I felt like, I don't know. It's like I felt more vulnerable when I was in the feminine one than when I was in the other one. I don't know how to explain that [giggles].

Interviewer: Do you know maybe why you felt that way?

Respondent: ...[W]ell I know with the, when I was in the feminine one, it was, I felt more that way just because she was more experienced than me. So it was almost like I put her up on a higher level than me so that was kind of, I don't know. I'm trying to think of how to put that into words. It was kind of... like almost in a learning position. Like I'm not going to be the one doing all the talking if I don't know what I'm talking about and I know you know more than me so I'm just going to kind of sit back and listen and just kind of, I don't know. To me that put me more in a, I don't want to say feminine role because that's not what I mean but,

Interviewer: Were you more experienced than the other woman that you felt more masculine with?

Respondent: Um, I thought so at the time but then I found out later that I wasn't. But it didn't change because I felt like I was, I don't know. I guess already having been in that role, I just kind of kept it even though I found out later that she was more than me. (F) –Cat

In a similar manner, Dana explained how her greater interest in a relationship with another woman created an unequal power differential between them. This dynamic was furthered by her lack of experience with other women, and her partner’s presumed prior experience in this regard. Dana found herself extremely motivated by curiosity, and explains her lack of power in her first relationship with a woman as being due to her greater investment in the new experience:

“...[The power differential between Dana and her partner] was probably because I wanted it more than she did or, you know sort of, you know I think I finally had sort of wanted to do that for a long time and I finally saw an opportunity and so I was really into exploring that and she had already explored that, I mean just sex with a woman you know, she had another relationship before that so she wasn't as, her motivation was different from mine I think, you know.” (F) –Dana
If both partners are perceived as having had a similar amount of previous relationships, factors other than previous relationship experience would be utilized to determine roles. In the following description of his relationship with his male partner, Bobby describes an equal playing field within the context of intimate behaviors on account of their similar previous experiences:

“...I wouldn't say there is one person more [dominant] than the other. I would say um, no, I wouldn't even say that. I was going to say me at first, but you know, he's had plenty of experience before me so, no I would say neither one is more dominant. I would say it's even.” (M) –Bobby

So when neither sex/gender nor previous relationship experience can be utilized to differentiate roles, relationship partners may refer to the relative ages or physical sizes of the partners.

**Age Difference**

A gap in the ages between relationship partners can establish the roles and relative status of one partner to the other. Age variance seems to be a potentially important factor in both same- and opposite-sex relationships, and may also be amplified with the element of previous experience.

Emily describes how her girlfriend initially made more decisions in their relationship on account of Emily’s timidity and lesser age:

“I was more timid in the beginning. I really liked her and, uh, I was nervous in front of her... Um, I felt intimidated, she's older...” (F) –Emily

Simone expressed a similar power differential in her relationship with a previous girlfriend who she described as “maternal.” When her girlfriend moved into the town
where Simone lived, tensions arose around space and the time spent socializing with her friends:

“She was [more dominant], yes, definitely. Yeah, she was more um, kind of parental in some ways [giggles] and I, like I felt like this town was my space. And so I felt, it was all like um, I had my friends here and we would go out and things like that and she was a little older than me so I think that she felt that I, because I was in this relationship that I should've not been going out as much or that I should've changed my lifestyle or something.” (F) –Simone

Substantial age difference between relationship partners can also free them from traditional designs for power in relationships. Helga’s experience provides a demonstration of this ability for age variance to be “freeing.” Helga explains that she was able to successfully pursue her boyfriend, and then maintain a more assertive role within the relationship with him because of her younger age:

“With him it was like…I think he was able to approach me different than a lot of women that he's been with. In fact he's even told me that, because of my age. I'm like 12 years younger than him. And, for whatever reason that's like released him of all his little gender roles that he was expecting and up until this relationship I think, that he was really perpetuating. And um, because I was so much younger that was like an excuse for him to allow me to do things like call up and say let's go see this show, this live music, you know. Or like, let's go here for the weekend. And um, maybe it was just cause instead of being like she is a woman, he could be like she is younger. I don't know if, I don't really know why that was so freeing for him, but for some weird reason it worked.” (F) –Helga

Helga suggests that her gender and age have combined to “release” her boyfriend from traditional ideas about gender in relationships. Or, perhaps on account of her partner’s traditional ideology, he may feel confident that he is the dominant partner in the relationship due to his much older age. Therefore, Helga’s initiations do not challenge his status or role in the relationship. Whether or not such relationship dynamics would be modified if the older partner was female seems to be a plausible possibility, yet remains a speculation of this research.
Lastly, I have observed that the relative size of relationship partners can determine their roles and status within the relationship. In accord with traditional notions of gender/power, the larger partner in a relationship is likely to be the dominant partner. This correlation of size to power is clearly a traditional understanding of gender (i.e., masculine male as large, strong, protector), but the same dynamic also plays out in same-sex relationships between females. For example, Sally explains how height represents power in her relationships with women and men:

Respondent: …I guess I'm more dominant in a relationship with a girl. Like I don't like to date girls that are taller than me. But I will only date guys that are taller than me.

Interviewer: What does height have to do with it?

Respondent: [Giggles]. Uh... I don't know it probably goes back to the dominance thing. I don't like, I don't like having to look up at a girl because I think you should, like, I don't know I guess I just like to be the more masculine partner, I guess. I think I like to be the protector, so I should be taller than her. (F) –Sally

Sally obviously adheres to traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity and their connotations for power relations. She aptly demonstrates how some bisexual women switch between traditional roles with their female and male partners, as Sally takes on a feminine role with male partners and she also engages in a masculine performance of gender with her female partners.

Other bisexuals maintain a constant traditional performance of gender, and select partners accordingly. For example, Christine’s traditional gender ideology is demonstrated by the size of her relationship partners. But, unlike Sally, Christine’s traditional gender performance is constant regardless of her partner’s sex/gender: she wants to be the feminine “one,” and that means to be the smaller one. Christine does not
Date anyone, female or male, who is smaller than she is because Christine wants to be skinnier and shorter than her partners:

“I like being the little cute one and having people who can carry me around and stuff like that.” (F) – Christine

Physical size can also play into power struggles within relationships. For instance, in Bobby’s relationship with his boyfriend, he states that they “…both want to be the masculine partner.”

Respondent: …I think he thinks sometimes I treat him like [a] little brother though…but I, I don't really um, treat him like my little brother because, I mean I'm tall and he's a little below average height. So, it really doesn't have anything to do with that but um, he thinks of it in that way and um, also, I just, I just care a lot about him and I get, I don't get upset but I just get worried…sometimes I think he thinks I treat him like a son or something more so than what I should be. […]
Interviewer: Would you say that because you're taller that you are more of the protector?
Respondent: No, I um…

Interviewer: How do you feel?

Respondent: Yeah, well you know I don't know how you, what you mean by protector? Like, yeah, I mean, like if there were an event with danger were to happen I would feel that I should be the one taking care of him instead of him because I'm bigger.
Interviewer: Is that how it would play out?
Respondent: I don't know. Probably. (M) – Bobby

Bobby further suggests that between his boyfriend and himself:

Respondent: …[I]t’s kind of like a Batman and Robin sort of thing [giggles]. I don't know.

Interviewer: A Batman and Robin thing? Are you Batman?

Respondent: Probably. (M) – Bobby
Because he is taller than his boyfriend, Bobby thinks that he is probably like Batman. On account of his larger physical stature, he perceives that he is likely the more dominant partner.

The manner in which I set out to discover a pattern of gendered behavior with this research proved too isolated, and in some ways the research itself manages to uphold traditional gender norms. By looking for gender, I utilized traditional ideologies and have thereby “discovered” what I was looking for. Yet I have also observed that the performance of gendered roles within a relationship is multifarious, as such roles can be determined by more than just the sex/gender of relationship partners. Gender performances may also differ within any relationship based on situational context (such as a public setting or the private bedroom), individual capabilities and talents (who knows how to cook or to fix the car), the involvement of other individuals in an interaction (which partners’ close friends of family members are present), and so on. Perhaps sex/gender per se is not the primary determinant of ‘gender roles,’ but that gender as a sociocultural framework gives meaning to all other personal characteristics and behaviors and thereby situates individuals into dominant (heterosexist) understandings of power and social organization.
Part IV: Before a Relationship Can Begin…

Finding a Partner

Though this research has been guided by questions concerning bisexual’s gender performances within romantic relationships, it has become apparent that performances of gender and sexuality are relevant even before a relationship occurs. Like anyone else, bisexuals advertise themselves as romantically available to potential partners. Gender often becomes utilized as the means through which sexuality is advertised. Dominant conceptualizations of sex/gender juxtapose homosexuality and heterosexuality, women and men, as well as femininity and masculinity. Performances of gender often complicate claims to sexual identity membership for bisexuals, as the relationship between bisexuality and gender is undefined.

The gender performances of heterosexuals and homosexuals are clearly outlined by traditional gender ideologies and rampant cultural stereotypes. Monosexuals have rigid guidelines regarding how gender performances correspond to sexuality: heterosexual women are perceived as being more feminine than lesbians, whereas gay males are perceived as being more effeminate than heterosexual men. Women and men who are attracted to their ‘opposite sex’ perform a traditional gender that supposedly inherently reflects their biological sex; women and men who are attracted to their ‘same’ ‘sex’ perform the ‘opposite’ gender. The latter deviations from normative gender performances do not in effect create doubt as to the sex of the performer: the butch lesbian, though she may perform masculinity, is still perceived to be female. Her
performance of the ‘opposite’ gender script effectively calls into question her sexuality. In this way her performance of gender also becomes her performance of sexuality.

Bisexuals face many challenges in performing their sexuality to advertise to potential partners. Bisexuality is commonly considered the ‘middle ground’ of two polar opposites: heterosexuality and homosexuality, as has been demonstrated by Kinsey et al.’s (1948, 1953) famous continuum of sexuality (Haeberle 1999; Rust 2000a; Udis-Kessler 1999). But bisexual women and men may engage in both opposite- and same-sex pairings, and thereby unlike heterosexuals and homosexuals, have no defined scripts for performances of gender or sexuality.

Not only are bisexuals’ performances of gender and sexuality relevant to romantic contacts, but similarly are the performances of their potential partners. Bisexuals may perceive the gender performances of others as an attractive aspect of potential partners, or such performances may deter relationships. Aware of the vital importance of gender to signaling availability and interest to prospective partners, bisexuals may purposively manipulate their gender to be more demonstrative of their sexuality.

**Dichotomous Genders and Sexualities: What is the Gender of Bisexuality?**

In Western societies, heterosexuality functions as a dominant feature of social structure and arrangements of power (Butler 1990; Foucault [1978] 1990). Heterosexuality is defined as the ‘natural’ and normative expression of sexuality, and all other forms of sexual expression are devalued and stigmatized as deviant aberrations. To define claims to power and privilege, the boundaries of heterosexuality have been clearly demarcated to distinguish those who follow its norms from those other sexual identities
who do not. Heterosexuality and homosexuality have come to be situated in a polarized dichotomy, and each requires its ‘other’ to exist as a category of meaning (Foucault [1978] 1990). Sexual identity politics have caused sexuality to become a defining characteristic of self similar to race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and sex/gender since much social power and potential discrimination is at stake.

Rigid performances of gender have emerged that signify claims to sexual identity membership. Heterosexual women and men must perform traditional femininity and masculinity, respectively, or else risk assessment as to the accountability of their performance (West and Zimmerman 1987). Similarly, lesbians and gays have developed stylistic gender performances which mimic traditional femininity and masculinity. A lesbian may publicly display her sexual interest and availability to other women by creating a more ‘male’/masculine appearance, and gays may utilize a similarly stylized and stereotypical performance of femininity. Because of dualistic conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality, gender performances reflect both one’s membership in a sex category and also one’s membership in a category of sexuality identity. Attraction to women is associated with maleness and masculinity, and attraction to men is associated with femaleness and femininity. In this sense, West and Zimmerman (1987) fail to elaborate that improper performances of gender—performances that do not reflect an actor’s sex category membership—not only have the potential to call into question the performer’s sex as female or male, but that such performances call into account the performer’s (hetero)sexuality.

Heterosexuality is the default sexuality; it is a compulsive norm encompassing all bodies (Butler 1990; Rich 1994). Nonheterosexuals who are interested in advertising their
sexuality and potential interest to prospective partners face a difficult challenge in light of
the assumed universality of heterosexuality. As Christine has said, “you figure
everyone’s straight.” Due to traditional performances of gender, bisexuals are often
assumed to be heterosexual. Also, most of my respondents said that they had previously
themselves identified as heterosexual “by default”:

“...[L]ike around age 15 somehow, I heard the concept [of bisexuality] somewhere and it seemed to fit. I had just always assumed I was straight but, because I didn't know that you could be anything other than straight or gay, so.”
(F) –Christine

Interviewer: How did you identify before you identified as bisexual?
Respondent: I guess as heterosexual but I didn't really think about it that way.
Interviewer: How did you think about it?
Respondent: I didn't really think about it I guess, I just had boyfriends and, that was normal. And when I actually started thinking about it, then I thought well maybe I am bisexual. (F) –Jen

Other research has shown that bisexuals often identify as heterosexual before adopting a bisexual identity (George 1993; Weinberg et al. 1994). This finding led Weinberg et al. (1994:47) to theorize that “for many bisexuals, homosexuality is an ‘add on’ to an already-developed heterosexuality.” Bisexual identity development, or the development of ‘dual attraction,’ is complete when an individual later incorporates same-

sex attraction with their previously established heterosexual identity.

However, the assumption of default heterosexuality in fact requires some qualification. Individuals are in fact only assumed by others to be heterosexual when proper evidence is provided and there is none to suggest the contrary. As Patrick asserts,
an assumption of heterosexuality is the “impression that everybody automatically gets
before they meet evidence one way or the other.” This evidence is often individuals’ performances of gender. Normative (i.e., traditional) gender performances connote normative (hetero)sexuality. Thus, the assumption of default heterosexuality in fact applies only to those who perform gender in accord with dominant norms. Dichotomous understandings of gender and sexuality suggest that a nontraditional gender performance, one which does not ‘follow’ from an individual’s apparent biology as female or male, connotes homosexuality. Also, a gender performance in accord with one’s apparent biological sex creates the appearance of heterosexuality. This reflects the belief that feminine women and men are attracted to masculine men, and masculine women and men are attracted to feminine women. How does a bisexual, then, perform a gender that will connote the possibility of dual attraction to both women and men without looking either homosexual or heterosexual?

“…I don’t think people, not that many people that I know, it doesn’t cross their mind to think that someone’s bisexual. They usually just put them in a category like gay or straight, you know.”  (F)  –Christine

Consequently, the challenge for bisexuals is as follows: Since gender performances are associated with heterosexuality or homosexuality, how can an appearance/gender performance reflect bisexuality? How can a bisexual person simultaneously demonstrate attraction to members of the same- and/or opposite-sex? If everyone assumes heterosexuality, how do bisexuals demonstrate opposite-sex romantic potentialities without simultaneously canceling out same-sex relationship potentialities? What would bisexuality look like? *What is the gender of bisexuality?*
Bisexuals frequently perceive that gender performances connote the sexuality of the performer. They readily apply dichotomous models of sexuality and gender to individuals by associating gender performances with an individual’s sexuality. However, my respondents are most likely to feel certain that the gender performances of others are more likely to be revelatory in this way, and that their own gender performances are less likely to be demonstrative reflections of their sexuality.

Bobby’s experiences with his current male partner very aptly demonstrate this trend. Bobby utilizes prevailing understandings of the connotations of gender performance to sexuality to explain his boyfriend’s nontraditional gender performance as a reflection of nonheterosexuality. In the following passage Bobby provides a detailed summary of normative performances of heterosexuality and masculinity:

“...[T]here's a lot of things in this world today that men can attract themselves to [in order] to make themselves seem heterosexual. You know through violence, through sports through um, music, primarily music country, rap and heavy metal I would say... So I think you know, if you seem like an aggressive person, if you like sports, if you listen to country music, and if you are interested in cars you know, if you shy away from liberal politics and liberal charities and stuff like that, you'll be more masculine.” (M) –Bobby

For a man to appear masculine is for him to also appear heterosexual, Bobby explains, and vice versa:

“I guess that all goes back to being nice and caring about people because if you have that trait, it makes you less obviously masculine. Or obviously heterosexual.” (M) –Bobby

Later Bobby lengthily describes the nontraditional gender performance of his boyfriend that he observed when they first met. Bobby describes his boyfriend as looking
“metrosexual,” though he clarifies that this term is usually applied to heterosexual men who care very much about their physical appearances.

“...[H]e was very expressive in his speaking and, you know, I'm not big on stereotypes but he dressed really well. He was very neat and very, um, very, he cared very much about what he looked like.” (M) –Bobby

Bobby goes on to explain how he interpreted his boyfriend’s nontraditional (i.e., feminine) gender performance as a performance of nonheterosexuality:

“And also at the same time, I just knew. I know that sounds really cliché and really dumb, but I just knew. There was no way this kid didn't like boys, or males.” (M) –Bobby

Bobby is clearly aware of dominant understandings of gender, as demonstrated by his description of masculinity. Bobby also recognizes the dichotomization of gender and sexuality, as he “just knew” that his current male partner was interested in other men by his partner’s nontraditional gender performance. But despite such awareness, Bobby does not apply these associations of gender and sexuality to himself. Curiously, he does not perceive his own gender performances are reflective of his bisexuality and asserts that his gendered behaviors are unrelated to his sexuality:

“I don't think me being a nice caring person has anything to do with me liking boys. I think it's just me being a nice caring person. And I don't think it has anything to do with the fact that I have a boyfriend you know. Or that I could have previously had a boyfriend you know. I don't think it has anything to do with that. I think it's just who I am.” (M) –Bobby

Other respondents also perceive that the gender performances of others may be performances of sexuality, but that their own performances of gender are unrelated to their sexuality. For instance, Donovan perceives the ‘out’ public representatives of the gay rights movement as “real flamboyant” men who “come off more like preppy sorority
girls.” But Donovan, a masculine man who prefers other masculine men, asserts that gender performances may reflect sexuality “for some,” but “not in every case”:

Respondent: I think a lot of people um, put a lot of emphasis on that and even um, you know manipulate their persona or who they are just because you know there's um, you know when someone will come out of the closet and you know, be some flamboyant, intense, crazy, person. That sounds a little mean but, I mean not in every case. And I mean if a person really feels that way then by all means they should be who they are. I think a lot of people think that it's, comes with it which isn't so.

Interviewer: Do you mean that a flamboyant appearance comes with homosexuality?

Respondent: Right, right. That's exactly what I mean.

Interviewer: It does not work that way for you.

Respondent: Right. I mean for some it may, but, but not always. And a lot of people think that, you know the more stereotypical gay person is going to act, you know, feminine. (M) –Donovan

The majority of respondents overall, both female and male, did not perceive their own gender performances to be reflective of their sexuality:

Respondent: …Like they might not have to do with my gender, but they can still be traits that have gender, like stereotypes of gender roles [??], if that makes sense.

Interviewer: Do you think these traits reflect your sexuality?

Respondent: I don't think so. I don't know how to answer that question. Um, I don't feel like people can look at me and guess my sexuality, I mean by how I interact with people.

Interviewer: Does this combination of masculine and the feminine [traits that you demonstrate]…have anything [to do] with being bisexual?

Respondent: I think everyone has a mixture of these traits. I don't feel like I epitomize the bisexual person because I cook and change batteries on cars [giggles]. I just feel like those things make me an independent person, I can take care of myself. (F) –Simone

What may be occurring with such respondents is a separation of self from traditional gender ideologies, similar to the aforementioned “surface fractures” in Part III
regarding those bisexual women who switch between traditional roles in their relationships depending on the sex/gender of their partner. Though they may recognize the gendered behavior of others as conforming to stereotypes of sexuality, my respondents did not situate themselves within this conceptualization of gender and sexuality.

Most commonly, the gendered traits of individual bisexuals and their role-taking behaviors in relationships are rationalized as expressions of individual personality. As above mentioned, there is no gender associated with bisexuality—thereby, bisexuals are likely to explain gender as being, in fact, non-gender related. As Mills (1959) suggests, individuals are often unable to locate themselves within large social structural processes. Instead of being influenced by gender as a social structure, bisexuals explain gender as an effect of “personality”:

Interviewer: Do you feel that these traits or behaviors, [such as] your interest in the outside, aggressive games, and then also your interest in jewelry and makeup, do you feel that these behaviors reflect your gender?

Respondent: I think it’s just me. It’s what I like to do… (F) –Jen

And similarly, Jen later elaborates:

Interviewer: Well, I wonder if, um, these sort of masculine and feminine traits that we were talking about, if you feel that they reflect your sexuality?

Respondent: Maybe, maybe not. I mean there’s girls that are, that are heterosexual and they like to play sports and they’ll play rough. Um, I think it’s just my, the personal activities that I enjoy and I don’t have to be bisexual and according to society’s standards those are things that I’m going that are considered more like male activities or female activities. It’s just what I enjoy, personally. (F) –Jen
When I asked George if he prefers being the feminine or masculine partner, he replied:

“It just depends on, on the individual preferences of the person, just how the chemistry works out.” (M) –George

Bisexuals do not perceive their gender performances as reflections of social structural processes. They may lack what Mills (1959: 3-4) has famously theorized as the ability to see “…the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, …of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world.” Considering that bisexual visibility and cultural representation is extremely limited (Highleyman 1995; Ochs 1996), and bisexuality is a widely misunderstood and highly controversial sexuality (Firestein 1996; Hall and Pramaggiore 1996; Tucker 1995), bisexuals may have a difficult time defining a gender of bisexuality. Whereas bisexuals can easily apply stereotypes of heterosexuality and homosexuality to others, there is no stereotype of the gendered behavior of bisexuals to identify themselves with. What does a bisexual woman or man look like?

Look Both Ways: Looking Bi

Bisexuals encounter many challenges in attempting to appear bisexual, particularly in terms of expressing their bisexuality and advertising to potential relationship partners. But bisexuals face numerous issues in terms of visibility in general, including but not limited to the ability to locate potential relationship partners. For reasons which will selectively be discussed below, bisexuality is not an extremely publicly visible or socially recognized sexuality in comparison to homosexuality and heterosexuality.
In select circumstances, bisexuals do want to appear bisexual but struggle tremendously to do so. Bisexuals may aim to advertise their interest and availability to potential partner prospects. Yet when trying to advertise to potential male and female partners without limiting themselves to either option, bisexuals struggle due to the lack of a cultural image of bisexuality. There are no gender performances, symbols, stereotypes of physical appearance, or anything otherwise that is directly associated with bisexuality: “there are no popular characterizations illustrating bisexuals or their behavior” (Rivers 1997:337). Bisexuals are not readily identified, even by other bisexuals:

“...I don’t think someone could necessarily look at me and know that I’m bisexual, or, just because I don’t think I can look at someone and know whether or not they are bisexual.” (M) –Marie

“...I don’t know what somebody who is bisexual looks like.” (M) –Sean Derrek

“...I don’t have in my head an idea of what a bisexual looks like. I don’t think we have like a cultural thing for what a bisexual woman looks like. So I don’t think anybody could look at anybody on the street and say that [someone is bisexual] necessarily.” (F) –Sarah

For bisexuals who are interested in advertising their sexuality, particularly those who hope to attract potential partners but do not want to necessarily limit themselves to either women or men, going about appearing bisexual can be a dilemma. Pointing to the heart of the matter, Patrick describes his inability to conduct a performance of sexuality that would demonstrate his dual interest in both women and men:

“But I don’t really know any clear way to, you know, I don’t know how you could put out a bisexual signal other than just like, randomly going up to somebody and then kissing a girl and then kissing a guy or something. Um, so, that’s pretty unclear.” (M) –Patrick
Unable to demonstrate dual attraction to both women and men, the gender performances of bisexuals often cause them to appear to observers (including other bisexuals) as either homosexual or heterosexual. As there are no commonly recognized patterns of behavior nor any symbolism associated with this form of sexuality, bisexuals often go unidentified.

So how do bisexuals look? In my interviews, I inquired numerously into aspects of bisexuals’ physical appearance. As a component of gender performance, I wondered how bisexuals might construct gendered physical appearances as feminine or masculine women and men. I asked each of my respondents if they thought their physical appearance reflected their gender. With only two exceptions, my respondents said that they think their physical appearance reflects their sex/gender as female or male. Some asserted that they “could not possibly” be wrongly mistaken due to body hair or curvaceousness of their figure.

I also inquired about whether my respondents perceived their (clearly sexed/gendered) physical appearance reflected their sexuality. On this specific dimension of gender/sexuality performance, the overwhelming response (17 of 20) was that the physical appearances of my respondents did not reflect their sexuality in any way. Similar to the above discussion of gender performance and its connotations for sexuality, my respondents frequently asserted that though their own physical appearance does not demonstrate their sexuality, the physical appearances of other’s may sometimes do so:

Interviewer: Do you feel that your physical appearance reflects your sexuality?
Respondent: Personally, no. But with other people sometimes it can. (F) –Cat
As my respondents overall did not perceive that their own physical appearance reflected their bisexuality, they reported that others sometimes imprecisely attributed to them another sexuality. My respondents explained that though they may occasionally appear homosexual (especially when in public with a same-sex relationship partner), their regular gender performances overwhelmingly caused them to appear as heterosexuals. A few suggested that their external appearances may reflect some ambiguity about their sexuality in a nonspecific manner, but that this did not expressly connote bisexuality.

Bisexuals who asserted that their appearances do not reflect their sexuality often explained that others’ application of stereotypes regarding sexuality and gender often caused them to be misperceived as heterosexual. Since there is no ‘image’ of what a bisexual might look like, bisexuals negotiate between the culturally recognized “stereotypical” self-presentations of homosexual and heterosexual women and men.

“I don’t think anybody is easy to identify until you know them and they tell you… because you can’t, you can’t always tell. And some people act stereotypically gay and then they aren’t. Um, some people do act somewhat like the stereotype, um, the stereotypes that are out there but nobody’s going to like fit a mold… But not everybody is going to be obvious.” (F) –Jen

As previously discussed in Part III, bisexuals tend to perform gender in traditional ways, hence their conventional appearance as heterosexual.

“Um, I think it's easier for me just cause, you know, if I, were to look more butch people would probably know that I was gay or lesbian or bisexual or you know, um, and because I know those sex roles and I can follow them and I'm okay with that and that's just, it's just, how I express myself just wanting to be like that.” (F) –Kathy

“…[M]ost people wouldn’t know that I actually like girls unless I told them. Just because I don’t fit necessarily into a stereotype [of a nonheterosexual] or anything.” (F) –Cat
However, there were three female respondents who did believe their physical appearance might in some way reflect their sexuality. Their external appearances might signal *something* to onlookers about their sexuality, such as an ambiguity regarding sexual potentialities. They stress, however, that despite their perception that their appearances may connote some sexuality, *bisexuality* was not specifically evident in their appearances.

For example, Helga says that she attempts to advertise her sexuality, “but not what mode of sexuality.” She states that such ambiguous advertisement may lead people to incorrect conclusions about her sexuality:

> **Interviewer:** Well, do you think that your sexuality is reflected in your physical appearance?
> **Respondent:** Yeah, yeah, I think my appetite comes across pretty clearly in my face and I'm not sure, not just sexual, but sexual too. Certainly like in the way that I move and I dance. I think it's pretty obvious that I'm a sexual person. Uh, if you mean like who I am attracted to? I don't know. People have definitely jumped to the conclusion that I'm a dyke, and I've told them that they're right sometimes, and people definitely jump to the conclusion I'm straight, and they're right sometimes too, you know. And uh, even when you're right, you're still wrong you know [laughs]. … So, yes it can. But never completely, just as no appearance can ever totally explain like what something is or someone sees themself to be.

(F) –Helga

Similarly, Sarah does not think that anyone on the street could recognize her as a bisexual, but she feels that there are connotations about sexuality applied to her body type. She says that she is often perceived to be a sexual individual on account of her femininely “curvy” body:

> **Interviewer:** …[D]o you think that your physical appearance reflects your sexuality?
> **Respondent:** No, I don’t actually. I get very frustrated with my physical appearance because I am very frustrated with being a curvy woman. It makes me really frustrated because it, it sort of asserts a way of being sexual that I don’t
feel is my way of being sexual… I feel like my body advertises me as being a sexual being and I would like that to not be the case because I feel that, while I am a sexual being, I'd rather, there's this connotation … of somebody who is sexual as being easily available. And I don't like that... And so, I really try to find ways to minimize that or not be, not look like that, you know. (F) –Sarah

Finally, Dana also believes that her physical appearance may reflect her sexuality to some extent. Dana describes herself as a neither extremely feminine nor masculine woman, and suggests that her gendered appearance may demonstrate a degree of sexual ambiguity:

Interviewer: Could someone identify your sexuality from your appearance?

Respondent: …Um, they might think they could, I don't know. Uh, only in the crassest way, I guess in the most obvious kind of way where you look at somebody and say oh,…she must be a dyke. Or something like that, you know.

Interviewer: But you're not a dyke

Respondent: No, um, I'm just, right. Um, well I mean it's, I think it's, there's some correlation between, obviously if I were like a really feminine female, I mean I don't know. I suppose there are really feminine females who are lesbians, I mean [I] know there are some, but, so I don't know. I mean I guess my appearance would indicate a certain kind of ambiguity maybe, a neutrality, you know a certain, uh, attitude about my sexuality. (F) –Dana

These three women provide examples that demonstrate how a bisexual’s sexuality may be incorrectly interpreted from physical appearance. Helga believes that her appearance connotes a marked but unspecified sexuality; Sarah’s appearance may overemphasize her sexuality; whereas Dana’s appearance might suggest a subtle ambiguity about her sexual interest. Yet these examples in fact comply with the unanimous opinion that none of my respondents’ physical appearances demonstrate their bisexuality. Considering the lack of any culturally prevalent image of bisexuality denoting what a female or male bisexual looks like or how a bisexual behaves, it is no surprise that bisexuals do not perceive their sexuality is reflected by their gender
performances or external appearances in general. One must know what bisexuality looks like to know if one looks bisexual.

Additionally, the invisibility of bisexuality is in part due to bisexuals’ situated interest in not being recognized as bisexual. Bisexuals often do not mind if they appear heterosexual, and in certain contexts may purposefully choose to present themselves in this way. In light of cultural heterosexism and the social discrimination faced by all nonheterosexual-identified individuals, bisexuals may not aim to publicly demonstrate their bisexual identity.

“So I think having the label bisexual, you know, it does imply that you like both sexes but at the same time it's a hindrance because people will still think of you as gay and don't give you the amount of respect I think that you could receive…”  
(M) –Bobby

“…I don’t feel like personally it’s important for me to let people know what my sexuality is.”  
(F) –Dana

In comparison to homosexuals, bisexuals experience a greater amount of choice in determining whether or not to reveal their sexual minority status to others. Bisexuals have the ability (and interest) to engage in relationships with opposite-sex partners, and thereby may appear to be involved in a heterosexual relationship. Bisexuals who engage in more ‘heterosexual’ relationships have greater social power and status than those who engage in a majority of ‘homosexual’ relationships (Rivers 1997:337). Bisexuals also have greater access to “heterosexual privilege” than homosexuals (Ochs 1996; Roberts 1997; Vernallis 1999):

“…I'd say bisexuals can enjoy what they call the heterosexual privilege. But you know, there being no questions when you bring her home for Christmas whereas if I brought a guy home for Christmas I'd get a few cold stares. You know, that sort of thing's pretty minor, whereas if you're in a relationship, I mean if I'm in
relationship with a guy, and it's out in the open, it kind of demands that everyone be, uh, you know be cognizant of the politics, the cultural climate.” (M) –George

Performances of bisexuality are thereby very context-specific, as many of my respondents often attempt to appear heterosexual to their general audiences and will selectively choose with whom to reveal their bisexual identity. Several of my respondents were ‘out’ to their friends, for instance, but did not choose to reveal their bisexuality to their families. Within their families, some bisexuals would select specific family members with whom they would disclose their bisexuality, and resolve to conceal this information to other family members who continued to perceive the bisexual as heterosexual. Such trends of selective disclosure may be a reflection of the generally young age of this sample, as not many respondents were married and/or had not yet had experiences in long-term relationships, especially same-sex partnerships.

For bisexuals who are involved in monogamous and long-term relationships, appearing bisexual may or may not be a priority or even a realistic possibility. “In a culture that assumes that we are all either gay or straight, the presumed sexuality of an individual bisexual person is usually determined by the person with whom he or she is or has been known to be romantically involved” (Ochs 1996:225). Bisexuals who are involved in long-term relationships, especially those opposite-sex relationships that result in marriage, may not consider it personally important to demonstrate their bisexuality unless they are interested in seeking other partners.
Bisexuals in opposite-sex long-term relationships were more likely to try to appear bisexual if they entertained political notions about ‘gay’ rights. For instance, Simone describes her interest in “human rights” and states that it is important to her that her co-workers not “…make assumptions that because I date a man that I’m straight.” Simone takes a political stance towards demonstrating her bisexuality, and so even though she lives with her male partner she hangs a “gay pride flag” outside of their house.

For those bisexuals who seek secondary or subsequent partners in addition to their current relationship(s), concerns may arise about being misidentified as homosexual and/or heterosexual, depending on the sex/gender of their current partner. A misjudgment could potentially deter a bisexual’s access to future male or female partners, depending on whether they ‘look’ homosexual or heterosexual. For example, Patrick considered whether or not a public appearance with another male could restrict his relationship possibilities with women:

“Um, sometimes I wonder whether, um, you know if people see me with my boyfriend or something and then later we break up, they’ve already classified me as gay so if they’re a female they may have already stricken me out from any potential list. And so I wonder about that sometimes, and think it probably happens.” (M) –Patrick

So, for some bisexuals it is important in terms of political struggles of sexual identity that people not make judgments regarding their sexuality on the basis of the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\text{Only one-fifth of respondents expressed involvement or interest in gay rights activism and politics. Bisexuals are notoriously invisible within LGBT political movement. Suffering from what Ochs (1996) has termed “biphobia,” bisexuals experience double discrimination as they are excluded from both homo- and hetero-sexual communities.}\]
sex/gender of their current relationship partner(s). The sex/gender of current partners is also seen as a concern with regard to access to potential partners, since a public appearance with a same-sex partner could lead others to perceive both as homosexual, and an appearance with an opposite-sex partner could cause others to presume them to be heterosexual. “Once in a [monogamous] relationship, bisexuality literally disappears” as desire is assumed to flow in the direction of only one sex or the other (Stasia 2003:199).

Even though there is no unambiguous gender performance that is perceived to connote bisexuality, bisexuals recognize the importance of gender performances to claims of sexual identity. They acknowledge that to perform femininity or masculinity, depending upon any bisexual’s particular sex/gender, will ‘say’ something about the bisexual individual to any observers and reflect upon her or his perceived sexuality. Though often incorrectly mislabeled, bisexuals are generally comfortable being perceived as heterosexual.

**Signaling**

Bisexuals obviously encounter many obstacles toward advertising their bisexuality to potential female and male partners. Due to the norms of compulsory heterosexuality, everyone is presumed heterosexual by default. At least, that is, individuals are presumed heterosexual unless their gender/sexuality performance cues their audience otherwise. Nontraditional gender performances (i.e., masculinity by women, femininity by men) are commonly associated with homosexuality. Bisexuals struggle to advertise their potential interest to both women and men because of these cultural relationships of gender to monosexualities, and also due to the lack of any
culturally recognized ‘image’ of female or male bisexual embodiment. In the next two sections I will discuss the ways in which bisexuals attempt to employ nongendered modes of communication to identify themselves as bisexual to potential partners, and the ways in which bisexuals attempts to utilize traditional notions of gender to signal to partners.

**Signaling via Symbols.** Some bisexuals signal their interest to potential partners via the symbols established by various factions of the gay rights movement. The rainbow was the most commonly utilized LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) symbol by bisexuals, though its use is notably limited. My respondents would sometimes don rainbow patterned items such as scarves, ribbons, and the like or place rainbow flags outside their home and bumper stickers on their automobiles to publicly demonstrate their LGBT affiliation. Jen wore rainbow shoelaces in her “pride shoes” as a symbol of her bisexuality. Overall, my sample reported limited wear or use of rainbow-patterned items, though this was the most common symbol utilized to signal bisexuality.

Interviewer: Do you feel that your physical appearance reflects your sexuality?

Respondent: It's hard to tell from the outside. I don't, I don't see how it could signal in anyway... Um, if I would wear rainbow colors that might suggest something to some people. (F) –Jen

Bisexuals are not very likely to utilize rainbows, or any other form of signaling to attempt to publicly demonstrate their sexuality. Sarah was the only respondent who reported that she has used a pink triangle to demonstrate her sexuality. Helga said that if she had “any pink triangle stuff” she would use it to signal her sexuality. Pink as well as black triangles are symbols that have been appropriated by lesbian-feminist activists;
both were used by the Nazis during World War II to label homosexuals and “undesirable”
women, such as prostitutes (Conner, Sparks, and Sparks 1997:325). Yet such LGBT
symbols as triangles and the rainbow do not specifically connote bisexuality as they
imply lesbianism or nonheterosexuality in general and, in the case of the rainbow, may
even signal the wearer’s or owner’s ‘ally’ status as a supportive heterosexual. None of
my respondents reported using any sort of symbol to exclusively express their
bisexuality. There is a lack of any commonly recognized distinct symbol for bisexuality:

Interviewer: Do you ever use any symbols or any signs to try to express [your
bisexuality]?

Respondent: No, not really. Perhaps I should but, um, I don't. And I'm not entirely
sure how I'd go about it. (M) –Patrick

One male respondent had devised his own personal ‘symbol’ of bisexuality
through ear piercings. A.J. has one ear pierced once and the other twice, and so I inquired
about it:

Interviewer: I noticed that you have your ear pierced, are they both pierced?

Respondent: Well this one was pierced, and uh, a long time ago, and I have this
[other ear] pierced. And this, you know people wonder why do I have two
earrings in my right ear and I don't tell them, but I'll tell you. That's kind of a
symbol of my bisexuality, if you will. So I put them in my right ear because I'm
predominantly queer but I also like women. So I've got an earring for each.

Interviewer: Is this a symbol that you've seen worn on other people?

Respondent: No. Not at all; it's mine. (M) –A.J.

How successfully A.J.’s ear piercings pronounce his bisexuality to others is unclear. For a
male to have ear piercings is possibly still considered a somewhat nontraditional gender
performance, but this depends on the social context and age of the wearer, and whether
one or both ears are pierced. Regardless, ear piercings on men may or may not have
anything to do with sexuality. As Bobby explained, having both of his ears pierced once each is “…just more of a thing trying to look cool than trying to express who you are in bed.” Such piercings may, however, reflect an ‘alternative’ identity of some sort, a noncompliance with standard prescriptions for male gendered appearance that could potentially be affiliated with one’s sexuality.

**Signaling via Performances of Gender.** Other means of signaling a potential interest or availability to future partners more specifically involve bisexuals’ performances of gender. My respondents clearly recognize dominant ideologies regarding gender/sex and sexuality. Though they do not necessarily personally adopt the dominant paradigm without question, they may occasionally exploit traditional notions of sex/gender and sexuality to their benefit. Through a purposive manipulation of gender performances, it may be possible for bisexuals to “provide a clue” about their sexuality to potential partners.

Gender performance becomes a performance of sexuality when gender is utilized to send a signal of availability or relationship interest to prospective partners. Performances of sexuality rely on preexisting associations of an individual’s gender performance with their sex and sexuality. Overall my respondents assumed very traditional gendered appearances, and reported that they were often mistaken as heterosexual. Engaging in a nontraditional gender performance would make them appear to others as homosexual, and this would deter opposite-sex relationships (the most frequent relationship form for my sample) and possibly encourage social harassment or
discrimination. Bisexuals do not generally mind performing the gender in accord with their sex category and appearing heterosexual.

“I think bisexuals are more feminine than lesbians are. Just because they need to be attractive to boys and girls.” (F) –Sally

“I would rather be considered, I don’t know, I [would] probably rather be considered straight because then I think I’d look more girly…” (F) –Sally

Interviewer: How would you feel if um, someone was walking down the street and...assumed you were heterosexual, and then they spoke to you about your heterosexuality. How would that make you feel?

Respondent: Um, I don't know. I'd just sort of take it in stride. Because I would assume that that's the, uh, impression that everybody automatically gets before they meet evidence one way or the other. So I, it's just perfectly normal. And unless I was making a special effort to know the person, I probably wouldn't clue them in that it was any different. That would create unnecessary hassle. (M) –Patrick

Bisexuals are very aware of connotations of gender performance to sexual identity, and speculate about adapting their gender performances to better reflect their potential sexual interest in women and men.

Interviewer: Do you think your physical appearance reflects your sexuality?

Respondent: Not really. Which kind of bothers me sometimes. Um,

Interviewer: How so?

Respondent: Well it, I mean you can't just, um, in terms of, um, letting guys who might potentially be interested know that it's possible that I could be attracted back. You know there's not, with, you know, um, sort of a heterosexual attraction thing it's sort of automatically assumed that if they are of the opposite sex then they're at least able to be attracted. But then in terms of um, you know sort of a homosexual attraction then, um, there aren't really any clues unless you do it deliberately in some way, and so in that sense then sometimes I think that I should try to appear to be more feminine just to provide a clue [giggles], you know. (M) –Patrick

Respondents like Patrick contemplate whether enacting the ‘opposite’ gender performance may be a successful approach toward signaling to partners, yet such
nontraditional gender performances (especially for male bisexuals) seem likely to remain a speculation. In the next section I will explore the complications of bisexual men’s gender performances and the difficulties traditionally masculine men in particular experience attracting other masculine male relationship partners. I will also explore how bisexuals’ performances of traditional gender in accord with their sex category membership increases opposite-sex relationship possibilities.

**Gendered Access to Potential Partners**

Bisexuals’ performances of gender affect access to potential partners. Partner availability is a gendered dynamic that depends upon an individual bisexual’s sex/gender and the sex/gender of her or his prospective partner(s). Overall, bisexuals’ gender performances conform to traditional models of gendered behavior; that is, they perform the gender which is perceived as corresponding with their apparent femaleness or maleness. Such gender performances are associated with heterosexuality in women and men, and accordingly, bisexuals experience greater availability and frequency of opposite-sex relationship partners. For instance, though Jen says that her level of interest in women and men is the same, she has “…never had exclusive relationship with a female”:

“I think the attraction is equal [to women and men]. Um, I end up being with more guys because they’re easier to get with. Um, I can’t seem to not have a boyfriend somehow.” (F) – Jen

“…[I]t's easier to meet men. Like I said I'm like, like with men it's like I have to be really selective. With girls I'm almost desperate, because I don't meet that many girls [who are interested in girls]… ” (F) – Hillary
Greater access to and involvement with opposite-sex partners leads to less access and involvement with same-sex partners. Because traditional performances of gender nullify performances of same-sex sexuality, bisexuals experience a problematization of efforts towards the self-advertisement of dual interest in same- and opposite-sex pairings.

“It's a little different, it's kind of, it's harder to flirt with girls because you don't always know how they're going to react. So I'm more shy about it cause a lot of times people without thinking about it will assume that the person that they want to flirt if they're of the opposite sex, then they're heterosexual. It'll be received well as long as they think they are good enough to get this person's attention, um. With girls, you think that usually they're not bi, or lesbian, but they might be and so you look for clues.” (F) –Jen

Accordingly, the bisexuals in my sample tend to have much greater present and past experience with female-male relationships. All but Jane also had at least one same-sex relationship experience, but overall there were much less same-sex pairings, especially long-term same-sex relationships. This again may be a reflection of the generally young age of my sample. At the time of interview, fourteen of my respondents were involved in a relationship with one other person. Ten of the fourteen were female-male pairings, and the remaining four were same-sex. Other studies on bisexuality have also demonstrated the “heterosexual leanings” of bisexuals toward opposite-sex pairings (Weinberg et al. 1994:46; also George 1993).

**The Masculine Male’s Dilemma**

One particular group of bisexuals experiences an extremely problematic conflation of gender performance with sexuality performance which influences gendered access to potential partners. Likely the most problematic performance of gender in terms
of advertising bisexuality to potential partners is the situation of masculine men seeking masculine male partners. Rigid masculinity is associated with heterosexuality in men. If the strict boundaries of a masculine performance are not aptly carried out, a man may risk being declassified as feminine or un-male.

The struggles faced by the masculine man seeking similar others is a two-fold complication of gender performance and the performance of sexuality it supposedly connotes. Masculine men struggle to identify others who might be interested in a same-sex pairing, and are also unable to give off any such signal of their own. Thereby, the masculine male’s performance of gender interferes with his performance of sexuality:

Interviewer: Do you think your physical appearance reflects your sexuality?

Respondent: Not really. Which kind of bothers me sometimes. Um,

Interviewer: How so?

Respondent: Well it, I mean you can't just, um, in terms of, um, letting guys who might potentially be interested know that it's possible that I could be attracted back. You know there's not, with, you know, um, sort of a heterosexual attraction thing it's sort of automatically assumed that if they are of the opposite sex then they're at least able to be attracted. But then in terms of um, you know sort of a homosexual attraction then, um, there aren't really any clues unless you do it deliberately in some way, and so in that sense then sometimes I think that I should try to appear to be more feminine just to provide a clue [giggles], you know. (M) –Patrick

The dominant system for understanding performances of gender as performances of sexuality is so all-encompassing that it allows for no alterations and no effective resistance. Donovan is one unique respondent whose ability to locate relationship partners was particularly affected by this. Donovan describes himself as a masculine man and currently identifies as homosexual, though he previously identified as bisexual. He strongly prefers masculine male partners, and says that he just does not “...know how to
find them.” Finding another masculine male to pursue a relationship had become such a challenging situation that Donovan reported he had all but given up on attempting to acquire a partner:

Interviewer: Would you be attracted to a flamboyant or a feminine man?

Respondent: Not as much. I mean um, I'm definitely attracted to, you know more masculine guys which really sucks sometimes [laughs].

Interviewer: How come?

Respondent: Oh, because there's really not a lot of masculine gay people around, or people, I mean, or so that I've met. Maybe there are, maybe just not [here]. But um, I mean yeah. I would be attracted to one who was more effeminate if they were a cool person, if I had interest in their personality. […]
Respondent: I don't even know how much I'm looking anymore darlin', but, you know,

Interviewer: Is there a shortage you say?

Respondent: Um, from my point of view. Maybe I'm just not in the right, you know, crowd or what have you. Um, it's pretty um, brutal for me and pretty lack thereof you know. Um, I just think, yeah, it's pretty hard you know. A lot of the gay people that I meet, I mean probably aren't even that interested in me, I mean and just, on the fact that I'm you know. I, I have kind of a, a pretty brutal sense of humor at times, you know pretty abrasive, … And I think that you know a lot of the gay people I run into are kind of scared or intimidated by it, you know, 'cause they're not quite that way but, I mean I'm sure there are some somewhere. (M) —Donovan

The performances of gender by bisexuals (and as represented by Donovan’s situation, homosexual men’s performances of gender) can in such ways act negatively as performances of sexuality that effectively curb possible involvement with males or females. But also, the gender performances of potential partners, such as masculine men who also seek masculine male partners, can affect access in the same ways as well.

Bisexual’s differential involvement with same- and opposite-sex partners can be partly explained by their gender performances and the resultant differential access to female and male partners (depending on the sex/gender of any individual bisexual).
However, this certainly is not the only issue that influences access to potential partners. Bisexuals tend to experience unequal desire for women and men (George 1993; Weinberg et al. 1994). Also, social norms regarding gender and sexual politics concerning same-sex relationships may change over time, as in the recent popularity of female-female attraction (Rust 2000c; Wilkinson 1996). Other social structures may additionally influence gendered access to and involvement with potential partners. Weinberg et al. (1994) describe how access to sexual partners (particularly same-sex) may be determined by gender and social structures such as in the gay bath houses, underground clubs, and same-sex bars that they studied in San Francisco in the late 1980s. Bisexual men had much greater access to same-sex partners in this social context.11

Many bisexuals report easier access to opposite-sex partners, probably due to potential partners’ association of bisexuals’ traditional performances of gender with heterosexuality. The lack of an image of what a bisexual ‘looks like’ problematizes their ability to signal a bisexual interest, that being, potential interest in both female and male prospective partners. The less socially stigmatized and accepted (i.e., nonhomosexual) gender performance, and perhaps the most effective in obtaining relationship partners, is the traditional gender performance prescribed for one’s sex category.

11 Two respondents reported greater access to same-sex partners. Kathy’s involvement in sexuality politics provided her an avenue to meet women interested in relationships with women. Sean Derrek has been married to his wife for thirty-four years, and she has been his only female sexual partner. He prefers “…play the bisexual, the gay role instead of trying to hook up with a woman.” Sean Derrek cites a lack of self-esteem, as well as a traditional gender ideology as explanation for his behavior: “You know there has to be more than just quickie sex with women. I’m sure there has to be an emotional thing there.” Since Sean Derrek no longer has sex with his wife, his casual sexual encounters with other men are arranged via the internet and men’s public restrooms.
Attraction: The Gender/Sexuality Performances of Potential Partners

As made obvious in the previous section, not only are bisexuals’ performances of gender and sexuality relevant when seeking a partner, but the performances of potential partners may also be very influential factors in such circumstances as well. When asked about what they found attractive in women and men, my respondents often expressed their attraction towards women and men who perform gender in specific ways. As discussed above, traditional performances of gender/sexuality by both the bisexual subject and a potential partner can hinder a relationship by deterring it from the start. On the other hand, some bisexuals prefer women and men who perform traditional gender and whose physical appearances match the standard norms for females and males. Others asserted greatest attraction to women and men who perform gender in nontraditional ways, or who resist traditional norms for gender and gendered appearance. Still yet, other respondents asserted that gender was not a significant deciding factor in their selection of relationship partners: they are attracted to such partners as individual persons, not (primarily) as feminine or masculine women or men.

Attraction to Traditional Gender

The majority of respondents preferred traditionally gendered women and men. In this way, bisexuals sometimes may break from the rule of ‘opposites attract’ as some masculine men are attracted to other masculine men, as well as feminine women being attracted to feminine women.

When expressing attraction to individuals who engage in traditional gender performances, physical differences between women and men were the most often cited
characteristics by my respondents. Those expressing attraction to ‘feminine’ women described such women as small, with petite physical frames and longer hair. Attraction to ‘masculine’ men was often described as desire for men of large physical stature, most especially tall height, and athletic musculature. Some respondents preferred both feminine women and masculine men in terms of such physical characteristics:

Respondent: …Going back to the attraction, um, physical attraction, I just realized something that does attract me to girls is when they look feminine too.

Interviewer: How so?

Respondent: I like girls when they, like tend to like, like makeup their hair and just make it up pretty somehow like maybe pigtails or like, just that way where you can put it up in the back with a claw and it sticks out everywhere. And um, makeup and just a smaller frame and not necessarily like, um, weight. It’s just that they are more, their actual frames are more petite.

[…]

Respondent: [Also if]…she's just, has a more feminine frame like you know the shoulders are smaller and their nose is smaller and their face and like just a more feminine shape rather than you know like masculine broad shoulders, um,

Interviewer: Do you prefer the broad shoulders on men?

Respondent: I think I do. Yeah. Because I've, I've seen some pretty small guys and they just look like I could break them. And that's not very attractive [giggles].

Interviewer: So do you prefer the male being bigger than you?

Respondent: Yeah. I like that. (F) –Jen

For some bisexuals who preferred traditionally gendered partners, strict guidelines in terms of height governed their attraction for potential relationship partners. Most often such size stipulations by bisexual women and men maintained that males be taller than females.

“Um, they [women] can't be taller than I am. Um, you know maybe like an inch or so that's, you know, that's fine but for some reason, I haven't though much about it, it just doesn't work quite as well.” (M) –Patrick
Interviewer: How about men? What do you find attractive with men?
[...]
Respondent: Yeah, they have to be taller than me, they have got to be taller than me. Um, like 5’8 is too short.

Interviewer: How tall are you?

Respondent: I'm 5’8. Five 8 is too short because if I'm wearing two or three inch heels then I'm going to be taller than him. So, they've got to be like 5’10, 5’11.” (F) –Sally

As discussed previously at the end of Part III, a gendered power dynamic is expressed in ideals for partner size. Those bisexuals who prefer that their partners perform traditional gender also mimic the traditional female/male power dichotomy in their stipulations for size difference: the larger male partner is expected to act as the strong protector, whereas the female enacts the role of the delicate and helpless damsel in distress.

The musculature of men was also often cited as a desirable characteristic for those bisexuals who prefer traditionally gendered men. Enormous muscles were generally perceived as not very desirable, and the normative preference was instead for “athletic” or “normal” musculature of men. For example, Sally describes the appeal of well-developed arms of the “frat boy” male type that she prefers, and remarks: “If they can bench press me, that's great!”

Attraction to traditional gender performances demonstrates the bisexual’s acceptance of traditional ideologies regarding differences between women and men. Gender and physiological differences between females and males are recognized and sustained, often as the ‘natural’ scheme of things between ‘opposite’ sexes/genders. Several respondents were adamant about their attraction to strictly feminine women and
masculine men, and expressed a gender preference which mimics essentialist notions of
gender: men ‘should’ be masculine, and women ‘should’ be feminine:

Interviewer: Do you look for a certain degree of masculinity or femininity in your
romantic partners?

Respondent: Uh, yes. If you are going to be a girl you need to be feminine,
because if you're too much on the masculine side, I see it as I might as well be
with a guy then. And then guys need to be very masculine or else, like if they go
too much the other way then I might as well be with the girl, so. (F) –Cat

Respondent: …I don't want a guy who's like a girl, because that kind of defeats
the purpose of having a guy.
[…]
Respondent: Yeah, I mean, why don't I just date a girl, or go out with a girl if I
want them to do that, so. (F) –Hillary

These statements assert an essentialist dichotomization of females and males, and
demonstrate the conflation of sex/gender via the presumption of innate femininity and
masculinity in women and men. Though bisexuals with such preferences may
acknowledge that there are masculine women and feminine men, they maintain
traditional gender norms in their partner preferences. Men are expected to be masculine
and women are expected to be feminine. Thereby, some bisexuals may choose a partner
not solely with consideration of potential partner’s (apparent) sex as female or male, but
on account of their appropriate performance of gender.

However, apparent sex category membership as male or female can also
constitute an element of consideration in attraction to potential partners. Most
respondents’ relationship histories were similar to George’s account below, in that most
had only been involved in relationships with “people who are stereotypically one gender
or the other,” or unambiguously female and male.
Respondent: ...I haven't had any, any romantic experience or really much social contact with anyone who is transgendered, intersex, or of, uh, of any alternate [sex/gender].

Interviewer: Do you mean that you've traditionally dated feminine women, in that old sense of the term, and that you've dated masculine men? Or do you have a particular preference?

Respondent: Not so far as that and I really have a, a particular preference. Just more, more that you see them walking down the street and, that's a guy, that's a girl within the, just the commonplace, just the commonplace views of looking at sex, sex and gender. I've typically gone for people who are obviously male, people who are obviously female. (M) –George

Though George has dated masculine women and feminine men as well as their more traditionally gendered counterparts, George has perceived all such individuals as apparently female or male. Nontraditional gender performances of partners were more likely to be reported than nontraditional or ambiguous sex category membership. Only two respondents, Helga and Sarah, discussed having previous relationships with transgendered individuals.

This focus by some bisexuals on the gendered and physiological differences between women and men lends itself also to attraction to women and men as different sexual beings. In this sense, one’s gender ideology becomes a sexual ideology. Those bisexuals attracted to women and men who perform the traditional genders perceived as corresponding to their femaleness or maleness may also recognize essential sexual differences between women and men. In Part II, I discussed how a traditional gender ideology supports notions of inherent biological differences between women and men, such as women’s greater maternal emotions and men’s greater interest in sex. Such an ideology can also lend itself to an association of dichotomous gender and sexual anatomy:
“Me personally? Like, what I am or what I want? What I am? I’m feminine. And when I’m, I want femininity in a girl, and I want masculinity in a guy. I don’t want them to mix it up because that’s not cool. Yeah so, everyone associated dick with masculinity, yeah. And uh [giggles], just the same as vagina goes with femininity. Yep, can’t make changes.” (F) –Hillary

Hillary clearly explains that women’s and men’s anatomies are very different, and this has various effects on her sexual involvement with women and men. Such differences can encourage or deter relationships bisexuals engage in. For example, Hillary further explains that her realization that she enjoyed sex with women partly promoted her interest in women in general, most especially at a time when she “hated the penetration part” of sex with men.

“…I don’t like giving blow jobs [to men]. I think it’s part of the reason why I started liking girls too because I’m like, wow! I like going down on girls! It’s not hard at all and I like it; it’s fun.” (F) –Hillary

My respondents often expounded upon the sexual differences between women and men. In the following excerpt Hillary clearly differentiates her sexual experiences with women and men, and asserts that she has desire for both that the other cannot satisfy:

“…[Bisexuality is] more of a sex thing for me than, I mean I like having sex with both sides and it’s like, it’s different things, different like, and just because I’m having sex with a guy doesn’t mean you know that I’m satisfied. Like I still want sex with a girl because it’s different, it’s totally different. And then like when I’m having sex with a girl it doesn’t mean I don’t want sex with a guy, because guy sex is different and they’re both different.” (F) –Hillary

Similarly, Dana also cites numerous differences in gender and sexuality between women and men. She enjoys women’s greater flexibility in sexuality than the “limited” sexual possibilities with men:

“…[M]ost men, their, you know their sexuality is different from women’s and they, they generally just sort of, I don’t mean kind of like the top-bottom thing or uh, I just mean there’s kind of a, the orientation is different you know. It’s kind of like,
the way men you know achieve orgasm and all that it...I don't find it as interesting or as appealing as women, because I think women's sexuality is a lot more diffuse and a lot more complex, you know. I mean, men can be great lovers and they can do lots of stuff but basically, you know, they come the way they come. ... I just find it sort of, seems kind of boring to me. I don't understand how men can live with themselves you know just have that, like need sort of that seems so limiting and so, it seems to dominate them in some way that I don't think women's sexuality dominates us in the same, in the same way you know."

(F) – Dana

Bisexuals’ sexual interest in women and men may be very different from that of homosexuals and heterosexuals, particularly when an essentialist sex/gender ideology motivates a bisexual’s sexual desire for both female and male partners. Such a bisexual will not be satisfied in a monogamous relationship with either a woman or a man (Vernallis 1999) and may desire sexual involvement with both. However, similar to homosexuals and heterosexuals, bisexuals may be motivated to acquire female or male partners on account of the perceived different sexual potentials of women and men, without regard for potential partner’s gender performance. They may prefer women as women and men as men, thereby distinguishing potential partner’s sex category membership in a manner similar to that of both homosexual and heterosexual attractions. Sex difference, and not gender, can determine attraction.

Gender and sexuality thereby become inextricably linked, particularly in the context of bisexual’s sexual relationships. Essentialist notions of sex/gender are entertained by some bisexuals who prefer traditionally feminine female partners and masculine men, and may result from (or lead to) bisexual’s sexual experience of women and men as qualitatively different. Attraction to feminine women and masculine men can have implications for the performances of sexuality associated with these performances of gender. Not only do bisexuals choose relationship partners on the basis of gender
performances and gendered physical appearances, but also with consideration of perceived sexual differences between women and men.

**Attraction to Gender-Benders**

In contrast to the above discussion of bisexuals who are attracted to women and men who perform traditional gender, other bisexuals markedly prefer women and men who do not conform to traditional gender norms. First I will review the various ways that traditional gender performances by potential partners, most particularly men, can effectively deter relationship involvement. Then I will review bisexual’s attraction to both male and female gender-benders, or individuals who do not perform traditional gender in accord with their identity as female or male.

As discussed above, traditional gender performances are most problematic for men who seek other masculine men as it is difficult if not impossible to signal his interest in other men as well as to identify similar others via traditional performances of masculinity. I also observed that traditional performances of masculinity by potential male partners can deter relationship involvement with some bisexual women and men, largely because some bisexual females and males find stereotypical presentations of masculinity unattractive.

“Generally I find um, a lot of the, um, the really stereotypical male behavior is sort of off-putting. You know like, um, for example like, um, gigantic interest in sports, you know um, and the sort of um, rude behavior at times, um, […] …like, you know, fart jokes, you know um, for example, you know, um, sort of the situations where, men are sort of you know, putting on kind of an act, you know. Like uh, asserting their masculinity in you know, stereotypical ways. You know if it turns out that they actually are interested in sports, not just doing it because that's what they're supposed to do, then that's fine. I think it's pretty prevalent that they just sort of put on an act, um, and that's definitely off-putting to me. (M) –Patrick
Several of my female respondents were particularly critical of traditional performances of masculinity and the implications such performances have for sexuality and issues of the stereotypical “male ego.” They perceived men to be more sexually aggressive and indiscriminate than women, and relationships with men to be much more fraught with power issues:

“...Guys usually like more of the chase you know... They want to be the ones that are like, a lot of the time like, calling the shots. And, this is also the reason that I you know, up until the present time I wasn't involved with anywhere near the number of men as I was with women because those games are not so appealing.” (F) –Helga

Respondent: ... I think I would see guys as willing to almost go for anyone. Because I see them like, they'll hit on anyone almost. Girls I don't see doing that so much. So if I'm with a girl, it would almost, make, not necessarily make me feel better about myself but I guess you could put it in those words, just because I know girls tend to be more picky, so if they pick me they must really like something because they wouldn't just go for anyone whereas guys might would have. If it wasn't going to be me it would have been somebody else, so.

[...] Interviewer: So how do you feel about men being willing to pursue as you say ‘anyone,’ and women being more picky?

Respondent: Um, it's almost annoying with guys and it makes me like almost not want to be with any of them, sometimes [giggles]. (F) –Cat

Such attitudes toward men are not limited to perceptions of gender performance, but are also reflections of respondents’ gender ideologies and more generally, how they perceive women and men and interaction between them. An individuals’ gender ideology constantly informs performances of gender and also assessment and reactions to the performances of others. Particularly for those bisexuals who question or resist traditional gender ideologies, traditional gender performances by potential partners may deter relationship involvement. Individuals who generally do not perform gender in accord with traditional prescriptions may be perceived as much more attractive:
“...I like someone who I stop and say, damn! You're different! You're not a herd animal! You know. I like that. I like people that buck the system; men who can cry, women that can fight, you know. Things that we're not normally taught to do.”
(F) –Helga

Attraction to gender-nonconformists was often described in terms of the gendered behaviors of others, such as attraction to “sensitive” men who will display emotions or women who are assertive. My respondents also expressed attraction to gender-nonconforming appearances, which entailed a strong preference for women and men who did not follow traditional gender norms for feminine and masculine physical appearances.

For example, Helga was one bisexual respondent with great attraction to gender-benders:

Interviewer: Well about your attraction, are there any perhaps totally superficial things that you are attracted to with either men or women...[?]

Respondent: Men with long hair. Oh god. And I don't know if it's just because of the total, I don't know why. I don't know. I love it. Women with any kind of hair. I don't know. Women with hair, yes! Women who don't shave every square inch of their bodies—oh! A plus to that, definitely. (F) –Helga

Christine also prefers that her partners “challenge the [sex/gender] stereotypes.”

In what follows below, I will discuss Christine’s attractions in-depth as she aptly represents bisexuels who prefer gender nonconforming partners, both female and male.

In our interview, Christine described the gender-bending characteristics of her most recent female and male partners. Christine described her last girlfriend as “fairly androgynous.” She described her current boyfriend as “really girly” and explains that he is a sensitive individual who is not concerned with putting on a masculine appearance.

But much of Christine’s gender-bending preferences were expressed in terms of physical appearance. Though her boyfriend is not a cross-dresser, she said, he will wear pastel pink polo shirts and sometimes don his stepsister’s jeans. Christine explains that, due to
his appearance, she mistook her boyfriend as homosexual when she first met him. Her girlfriend would also wear traditional men’s clothes:

“Like my girlfriend, she, I mean she never wore, I don't know if she's ever worn a skirt or a dress or anything close to it ever. She buys all of her clothes in the men's department. … like dark colors and black and masculine clothes. … I guess she challenged people's notions of gender. And my boyfriend, like whenever, whenever people meet him they think he's gay so I guess that works too. He's just like, he'll wear pink shirts and like, he dresses in kind of preppier nice I guess. I guess how other people think gay guys dress, [giggling] he might be gay I don't know!” (F) –Christine

In her relationships with both women and men, Christine prefers to perform traditional femininity. Christine explains that her interest in gender-bending or androgynous women results from her interest in assuming the traditional feminine role in relationships:

“…[L]ike I'm not attracted to really feminine girls because I think I want to be the feminine, girly one. But um, like my ex-girlfriend. She was like, fairly androgynous looking or whatever the term would be. I think just, girls that look more masculine I'm attracted to. And I think, I think I'm attracted to girls that look more masculine and like guys who look more feminine.” (F) –Christine

When with a male, Christine also prefers to assume a feminine role. Such role-taking might be more apparent or easily assumed with an opposite-sex partner as each could refer to the traditional gender schema. With women, since such a sexed division of gender performance is not defined for female-female relationships, Christine’s gender ideology motivates her preference for less feminine female partners. She is attracted to women who thereby would take on more of the masculine role in a relationship and permit Christine to be more feminine.

Christine’s traditional gender ideology interestingly motivates her attraction to gender-benders, and she herself maintains a traditional performance of gender. However,
the predominant attraction of some other bisexuals to gender-nonconformists may reflect their attempts to resist traditional sexual/gender ideologies via such attraction.

**Attraction is Not Gendered**

Though performances of gender and sexuality can attract or deter relationships, some bisexuals explain that gender is not a salient factor in their selection of any particular individual as a relationship partner. Attraction manifests itself on the basis of other personal characteristics rather than sex or gender:

“"I can deal with the person rather than the sexual orientation or a gender or an expression of identity as intangible. I date people not, people first not genders and stereotypes." (M) –George

“I really, I don't think that I do [behave differently in a relationship with a man or a woman] just because I don't, I don't really think about it as like, oh, I'm dating a man or I'm dating a woman. I just think of it as like I'm in relationship…” (F) –Christine

For such bisexuals, the gender performances of potential partners are not the definitive criteria through which relationship partners are selected. Ross and Paul (2000) similarly found that other factors, such as personality characteristics or overall compatibility with an individual, are credited greater consideration in bisexuals’ partner selection than sex/gender. Some bisexuals do not as a rule prefer female or male, or feminine or masculine partners of either sex category. This mode of attraction was often explained through comments and dry humor referencing the respondent’s lack of preference for the sexual characteristics of women and men:

“"… [I]t's the person that I'm attracted to, you know not like, it's not like some sort of weird genitalia fetish or like, I like this genitalia or that genitalia, it's got to be like a mind, and a brilliance you know." (F) –Helga
“… I really don't care how personality matches the genitals.” (M) –George

“…I don't understand people, people think that bisexuals can't make up their mind or, they want to date women and men at the same time and, it's not about like, oh, I want to date someone with a penis right now. At least not for me or for any of my friends that I know [who are bisexual], it's just whoever you are attracted to.” (F) –Christine

Bisexuals who do not specifically factor in sex/gender as a significant variable of attraction consider their interest in people to be broader than attraction exclusively limited to a specific sex category or type of sexual anatomy. Kathy states that even in light of societal discrimination that she might encounter while in a relationship with another woman, she perceives that engaging in a relationship with a man on the basis of his sex category status as male would be a narrow avenue limiting her pursuit of a meaningful relationship:

“Like I wish I could tell you which sex I would be more, you know, see myself with, but um, I really don't know. … And I think in a way, um, I know it would be easier but I don't want to, um, be with a man just based on the fact that he has a dick, you know and, be like, that's the extent to which I love you [giggles]. You compared to this other person, because you have different parts, you know. And I don't think anyone would want to hear that. So, I just want to be with somebody that, um, supports me and lets me have the independence I need and, ….Just being able to talk to them, and be comfortable around them, I guess.” (F) –Kathy

Kathy recognizes that heteronormative social pressures would make having a relationship with a man easier for her, but she asserts that such justification (having a relationship with a person on the basis of sex) is not meaningful enough for her. She utilizes other requirements to select her relationship partners, and obviously having one type of sexual anatomy or some other is not her full motivation.
Though bisexuals like Kathy appear to potentially nullify any importance of sex/gender with partner choice, bisexuals motivated by this form of attraction do not fail to distinguish women and men as different in accord with traditional gender schemas. Though they may not be motivated to select partners on the basis of gender or sexual differences, they still regularly differentiated characteristics between women and men such as women’s greater propensity for intimacy and emotion and men’s sexual aggressiveness.

Dominant definitions of gender/sex predominate even for those whose attraction to potential partners is not guided by traditional gender ideology. It seems plausible that all bisexuals (if not everyone, regardless of their sexuality) incorporate the traditional gender schema into gendered/sexed/sexual interactions with others in some way since the traditional ideology is the dominant—and perhaps the only—culturally coherent sex/gender ideology. Many theorists of gender suggest that all behavior is gendered behavior and cannot transcend the prevailing norms for sex/gender (Butler 1990, 1993; Harding 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987). Even “…bending gender rules and passing between genders does not erode but rather preserves gender boundaries” (Lorber 1994:21).

The small number of bisexuals for whom the sex/gender and gender performances of their partners is not particularly significant is far outnumbered by those to whom gender does matter, whether or not they prefer traditional or gender-bending performances. Future research could investigate whether or not bisexuals are unique in the importance placed on gender performances in comparison to homosexuals and
heterosexuals. This research concludes that in addition to the performances of gender and sexuality by bisexuals, the gender performances of bisexuals’ potential partners do play an important role as to whether a relationship with any particular individual will occur.
Part V: Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This research demonstrates the comprehensive influence of prevailing constructions of sex/gender. Though bisexuals’ sexual attraction does not comply with heteronormative sexuality in that their desire is not directed toward only one sex/gender, bisexuals’ performances of gender directly reflect normative gender ideologies. Even bisexuals’ attempts to diverge from traditional gender prescriptions are often constructed as the ‘opposite’ gender performance. Switching between traditional performances of femininity and masculinity is only a movement between the two gender possibilities; existing conceptualizations of gender are not subverted by interplay between the two traditional performances, as they remain performances operating within the defined boundaries for gender.

Yet as a sexual identity for which no particular gender performances have been ascribed, unlike those for homo- and hetero-sexual women and men, bisexuals’ negotiations of gender in romantic relationships can be problematic. Bisexuals, as women and men, have scripts for gender performances. But the dual functions of gender performances as claims to sex category membership and as declarations of sexual identity promote the invisibility of bisexual desire: to perform one’s gender in accordance with traditional norms (or one’s sex status as female or male) connotes a heterosexual appearance, whereas the ‘opposite’ performance implies homosexuality. This research has revealed that there is no other existing schema available to bisexuals to guide performances of gender and sexuality. Operating within the confines of existing
ideologies, bisexuals selectively choose which traditional script to perform in situated contexts as per their objectives for social interaction.

This study has focused on bisexuals’ romantic relationships, and observed that bisexuals are quite purposive in their negotiation of gender performances. The bisexuals included in this sample were often quite highly aware of gender dynamics in their relationships, as well as gender performances that may be involved in the process of acquiring a partner. Though this sample did not include any heterosexuals and only one homosexual-identified respondent, it seems plausible that bisexuals may be more cognizant of gender and sexuality performances than those who identify as heterosexual or homosexual since bisexuals must negotiate many unscripted social circumstances.

The lack of a cultural image of bisexuality results in both positives and negatives for bisexual women and men: on the one hand bisexuals easily appear heterosexual through their traditional performances of gender, but therefore bisexuals do not easily advertise their (bi)sexuality and experience a general scarcity of same-sex relationship partners. Unlike homosexuals, bisexuals have greater freedom of choice to publicly demonstrate their nonheterosexuality. “[Bisexuals] carry the weight of constantly having to make the decision of how and when to come out and at what cost” (Ochs 1996:220). Bisexuals may have access to “heterosexual privilege,” as homosexuals assert, but bisexuals are also discriminated against by heterosexuals and yet remain largely invisible within lesbian and gay activism. Bisexuals thereby experience “biphobia” in the form of stigmatization from both heterosexual and homosexual communities (Ochs 1996). Also, bisexuality’s ambiguous social location, theorized as both the in-between of homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as the combination of the two, situates
bisexuality uneasily with regard to existing conceptualizations of gender and sexuality—not to mention sexual politics—and reflects the unique and challenging circumstances that bisexuals encounter in their negotiations of gender and sexuality.

**Future Elaboration**

This research has necessarily been limited in its scope of the many complexities of bisexual relationships, identity formation, (bi)sexual politics, desire, and bisexuals’ performances of gender and sexuality. Several additional areas of interest have emerged from this study on bisexuals’ gender performances in romantic relationships that I have not been able to include lengthy discussions of herein. I will briefly outline some preliminary ideas regarding these topics in the sections that follow below, and intend to further develop these discussions in future work.

**Female vs. Male Bisexuality: Performances of Gender and Sexuality**

One topic briefly discussed herein that is particularly amenable to further exploration is the differences between female and male bisexuals’ performances of gender and sexuality. I have previously discussed in Part III how women’s gender performances switch more often than men’s in their romantic relationships; I also reviewed in Part IV the significant difficulties that masculine men encounter in their attempts to locate other masculine male partners. Certainly bisexual women and men experience both their gender and social recognition of their sexuality differently. Though both women and men may develop bisexual identities, “…they are men and women first,
subject to the effects of socialization and of the opportunities that befall any man or woman in our society” (Weinberg et al. 1994:47).

The findings of this study suggest that female bisexuals’ gender performances are more flexible than men’s. Perhaps because of the different ways that women and men do gender and the differing amounts of social status and power that are at stake in these performances, it may be more acceptable for female bisexuals than male to engage in a variable degree of femininity or masculinity in their gender performances. Whether or not sexuality is a determining variable in the flexibility of gender performances, or if such differences persist between all women and men, is an issue that should be pursued by future research.

Both female and male bisexuals strongly correlate femininity with external appearance. For instance, when I asked Jane if she could describe femininity, she struggled and eventually said, “the only things I can think of are in terms of outward appearance.” Not only was femininity itself often described in terms of gendered appearance, but also feminine women (and men) were perceived as caring more about their physical appearances. My female respondents varied in the amount of effort they expended towards the construction of their gendered personal appearance and the corresponding degree of ‘femininity’ that they attributed to themselves. “Girly girls” were described as spending a lot of time on their appearance:

Interviewer: Where would you place yourself on a scale of femininity and masculinity and androgyyny?

Respondent: I would, I think I'm pretty much like pretty far over on the femininity scale. I mean I don't, I have friend and she's like, the pinnacle of girliness. You know like she gets manicures and pedicures and her hair always looks perfect and it's permed and highlighted and she goes out to [nearby large city] and gets like ensembles and stuff so, I'm not that extreme just because I don't really care
that much about my appearance. I guess that's associated more with femininity but, I mean, pretty far over I would say. (F) –Christine

My female respondents reported varying amounts of concern with their physical appearances. They often rated their overall femininity in accord with the amounts of such efforts that they engaged in. Thereby, femininity was often measured on a scale of degree in terms of the amount of effort devoted to the “gender project” of femininity, or their feminine toilette (Connell 1999). As Cat explains, her degree of femininity is relative to the amount of effort she expends on her appearance:

Respondent: I'd like to think of myself more on the feminine end even though I do have characteristics of both but, I can't really judge myself cause I don't know how other people see me, but personally I consider myself more on the feminine end on certain days; it just depends [giggles].

Interviewer: What does it depend on…?

Respondent: My level of trying to, yeah, trying, pretty much. Because I know guys don't tend to try as hard.

Interviewer: Try at what?

Respondent: Try to, make themselves look like the best that they possibly can that day. Like I think girls tend to do that on a daily basis, the more feminine ones anyway, they like to do it every day whereas guys like sometimes they just don't care and they'll just put on anything and they'll go out, where certain people just wouldn't do that. So on some days I feel more like a guy and I'll just put clothes on and go on with the day, but certain days I try and I know I put some work into looking that way, I feel more feminine that day.

Interviewer: Does it make you feel good to do it one way or the other?

Respondent: Yes, it's very good when I can actually do the whole feminine process. I feel better those days than other days. (F) –Cat

However, some clarification is required: Though women may experience some flexibility in the degree of femininity performed via physical appearance any given day, I do not intend to suggest that performances of femininity are not also possibly enacted through other means such as personal demeanor and manner of interaction with others, regardless
of one’s external appearance. Yet my respondents’ strong emphasis on femininity as a concern for appearance suggests that an important aspect of the performance of femininity would involve the careful construction of one’s gendered appearance.

It appears that women may purposively choose whether or not to engage in a hyper-feminine construction of physical appearance. Such a performance of femininity by women likely not only bolsters claims to sex category membership as female, since a woman without makeup or high heels is still likely perceived as female, but may also proclaim strong signals about her sexuality. Employing gender performance as a performance of sexuality, my female respondents often described using cosmetics and jewelry to get “all dolled up” to signal availability to potential partners. Also, when women were not interested in signaling sexual interest, they would also consciously conceal their femininity through such means as wearing loose clothing to deemphasize a curvy figure and choosing not to wear cosmetics, décolletage, high heels, or short skirts.

Do bisexual men experience a similar flexibility of appearance? There were no reports of purposive manipulation of physical appearance by the men in this study. For instance, as Cat says, men “don’t care and they’ll just put on anything and they’ll go out.” Or rather, men who are perceived as masculine are not supposed to be very concerned with their appearance. Men who do care about their appearance are perceived as feminine, and such a performance of gender is associated with homosexuality. Emily explains that neither of her two male bisexual friends are very concerned with their physical appearances, but her two gay friends “…take a long time getting ready and make themselves look pretty.”
Undoubtedly both women’s and men’s appearances are perceived to reflect their homo- or hetero-sexuality as per the degree of traditional or nontraditional gender they perform. But the female bisexuals in this sample reported greater amounts of flexibility overall in this manner than did the male bisexuals. Some of the men mused about whether or not a more feminine gender performance could possibly signal same-sex interest to other men, yet whether or not any of the men actually engaged in such performance is unclear.

Bisexual women reported greater amounts of purposive manipulation of their appearance in a variety of different contexts. Not only did women utilize traditional norms for feminine appearance in order to advertise to potential partners, but their physical appearance was manipulated in accord with various aims. A more or less feminine appearance may be constructed in accord with the norms of a particular context. Also, a bisexual woman’s identity as feminine or masculine may be bolstered by purposive gender performances in the form of more conforming or selectively resistant gender performances; when a woman is feeling more feminine or less so she may construct her appearance accordingly. None of my male respondents mentioned different ways they constructed their appearance on days when they feel variably more or less masculine.

Bisexual women may also employ a purposive manipulation of gender to obtain whatever they want in general. Much more so than males, female bisexuals have a greater tendency to utilize expectations for a traditional female appearance in this way. The women in this sample described much more intentional manipulation of their gendered appearance (and thereby connotations to sexuality) than men. Perhaps women are not
held as “accountable” for their gender performances, specifically in terms of gendered appearance, as are men (West and Zimmerman 1987). Women’s claims to femininity and femaleness do not seem to be challenged by situational and momentary disruptions from their usual traditionally feminine appearance.

An interesting case of women’s contextually excused appearance is provided by the ‘tomboy.’ The female tomboy is an interesting cultural character in light of connotations of sex category membership and sexuality that are embedded in individuals’ gender performances. Though a young woman may perform masculinity, she does so with immunity to her sex category membership. “Sex categorization and the accomplishment of gender are not the same… Women can be seen as unfeminine, but that does not make them ‘unfemale’” (West and Zimmerman 1987:134). Despite her performance of masculinity including an unfeminine physical appearance, the tomboy’s sex as female and heterosexuality are not questioned.

Without prompting during the interviews, five of the women in this study described themselves as childhood tomboys. None of the men in this study described themselves as particularly feminine, neither presently nor during childhood. For a man to don a feminine appearance or any article of traditionally female garb would possibly connote something about his sexuality more so than for a (young) woman to dress in masculine attire. Also, there also is no cultural equivalent of ‘tomboy’ for young men who act more femininely. The stigma of appearing homosexual for men seems much greater than for women. As a result, the traditionally masculine gender performances of my male respondents were often purposively constructed to prevent this misconception.
A question remains to be fully explored: If women’s performances of gender are potentially less reflective of their sexuality than men’s, could it also be that women’s performances of sexuality are also a bit less reflective of their sexual identity than men’s? The initial findings of this study suggest that there may be circumstances both in which this does and does not occur.

For example, women’s overt performances of same-sex sexuality are not necessarily perceived as reflecting a possible homosexual or bisexual identity. Christine contends that other students in her college dorm never “caught on” that she and her girlfriend were dating, even when they held hands in public spaces and were in each other’s rooms very late at night. Marie describes consuming alcohol and “making out” with other women “on a whim.” No one questioned her sexual identity, and in fact Marie herself did not contemplate changing her heterosexual identity to a bisexual identity until after numerous such experiences with women. Blumstein and Schwartz (1989:122) explain that “women are less likely than men to view their sexual acts as a revelation of their ‘true sexual self,’ and female sexual choice seems to be based as much on situational constraints as on categorical desire.”

Also, my female respondents described situations in which women would engage in sexual behaviors with other women in order to titillate men. My respondents were quite indignant about such behaviors on the part of other women, and perceived such behaviors as affronts to their own bisexual identity. However, same-sex sexual performances are reported as a somewhat common behavior in the repertoire of some heterosexual women. Women being sexual with other women are perceived as “acceptable,” even “hot.” For some women to publicly kiss other women evidently does
not necessarily imply that such women are acting on same-sex sexual desire. As Emily reports, female-female sexual performances have become increasingly popular and “it’s okay for girls to kiss,” as long as they aren’t lesbians:

Interviewer: And that there are possibly a lot more potential bisexuals out there?
Respondent: Yes.
Interviewer: What do you think holds them back?
Respondent: Um, how people view them. Like, it’s worst for guys I think, so it would be harder for gay guys. I mean there’s been a surge in like, almost like a popularity with lesbianism, not actual lesbianism but like it’s okay for girls to kiss, like with the Britney and Madonna [MTV awards] thing. And, I think it’s different with guys. I think it would be harder to come out as bisexual if you were a guy as opposed to being bisexual as a woman. (F) –Emily

Two men engaging in sexual behaviors, particularly in a public setting, will likely encounter a very different social reception than two women together. None of my respondents described men behaving in ways similar to the women above.

Obviously very different social dynamics are involved in the interpretations of women’s and men’s sexual performances. Why is same-sex sexuality between women so much more attractive than that between two men? In their four-part typology of “girl-girl” pornography scenes, Jenefsky and Miller (2004:106) categorize “‘lesbian’ sex as performance” as one type of pictorial scene along what they term the “spectrum of heterosexualization.” They explain that heterosexuality is reinforced by images of women being sexual with each other, thereby resulting in the popularity of such images. The “‘lesbian’ as performance” is one type of pornographic image in which the sexual scene is constructed “…as a performance of ‘lesbian’ sex, not as an expression of lesbian desire” which is staged for the heterosexual male viewer’s pleasure (p. 106).
Conversely, some of my female respondents quite significantly perceived their performances of same-sex sexuality as reflections of sexual identity. In fact, such performances could be *formative* of sexual identity. Two women who presently identify as bisexual previously identified as ‘bi-curious,’ an identity which is assumed to precede the sexual performances required to become bisexual. After having sexual encounters with other women and also having previous sexual experiences with men, they adopted the label ‘bisexual.’ Two other women also felt that same-sex sexual experience was necessary to establish their identity as bisexual, though they did not initially identify as bi-curious. Sexual identity in these cases is dependent upon sexual performances:

**Interviewer:** Have you always identified as bisexual?

**Respondent:** Um, not really. I guess I wouldn’t call it sexual until I actually did it, but I guess it was considered bi-curious up to that point, so

**Interviewer:** Bi-curious?

[...]

**Respondent:** Meaning like you know you like both sexes but you never actually pursued it [sex] with both, so. Until actually I could establish that I had done it with both, I didn’t consider myself bisexual until then. (F) –Cat

So some women’s performances of same-sex sexuality, particularly public performances, may not have any personal or public connotations for their sexual identity. In contrast, some of my female bisexual respondents experienced same-sex sexual encounters as experiences formative of their bisexual identity. The bisexual women in this study were critical of women who engage in sex acts with other women but who do not identify as bisexual or homosexual. My female respondents reported feeling maltreated by women who were willing to engage in sexual behaviors with them to please male onlookers.
Women’s performances of same-sex sexuality are variously interpreted. Depending on both the actresses and their audiences such performances may have connotations for the women’s sexual identities. The possibility for contextual dissociation of one’s sex/gender and performances of gender and sexuality appears to operate very differently for women than for men.

**The ‘Road to Bi-Dom’: The Contested Terrain of Bisexual Identity**

A further related set of questions have arisen with this research in regards to same-sex performances of sexuality: Are women who kiss other women bisexual? Does it matter if they are alone, or if other people are present? Is bisexuality a phase that individuals grow out of into a more permanent sexual identity? What about those who say they are bisexual, but have only had experience with one sex/gender? Or those who are in monogamous long-term relationships? Are bisexuals half straight and half gay? Do bisexuals have to be attracted to women and men equally? Who is really bisexual?

The most prevalent issues with regard to bisexual identity politics revolve around debates of who really is and is not bisexual—the central dilemma being that there is no common definition of bisexuality. There are innumerable ideas about what constitutes bisexuality, and there are also various ways in which bisexuality is performed. Also, I have previously discussed the lack of a culturally viable image of what a bisexual acts or looks like, and the general impossibility of identifying a bisexual woman or man via her or his external appearance. The lack of political or media representations of bisexuals as well as a general lack of understanding about what bisexuality is may problematize the development of a bisexual identity (Rust 2003d). Many of my respondents explained that
they did not identify as bisexual until they had learned of it as a potential option; many
had previously assumed that homosexual and heterosexual were the only available sexual
identities.

Various theorists have attempted to define bisexuality or to theorize its origins and
model the process of bisexual identity development (see Rust 2000a). As Christina
(1997) argues, definitions of bisexuality are complex and may potentially have broader
implications for sexual politics:

…[W]hen people debate the definition of the word bisexual, I believe that
they are really debating other questions, questions that are complicated
and messy and difficult to think about directly. Such as: Which is more
important, who you have sex with or who you don’t have sex with? Is sex
more important than romance? Is sexual activity more important than
sexual attraction? (Or the more universal version of that question: Is
identity defined by feeling or behavior?)

(pp.31-32)

Definitions of bisexuality generally pivot between emphasis on an individual’s feelings
or emotional attachments and their sexual behavior. Since the start of bisexual activism in
the late 1970s and early 1980s, definitions of bisexuality have moved towards a greater
focus on desire as opposed to behavior. For example, Fast and Well’s (1975) study
defined bisexuality as repeated and overt sex acts with both women and men, and active
enjoyment of both sexes during sex acts. In contrast, Vernallis (1999:350) bases her
definition of bisexuality on “desires and dispositions” and suggests that “…a person is a
bisexual if he or she has relatively stable sexual desires toward both men and women.”

Focusing on this element of desire, other theorists debate bisexuality’s relationship to
homo- and hetero-sexuality, and prevailing dualistic notions of sex/gender. Is bisexual
desire, unlike homo- and hetero-sexual attraction, gender nonspecific?
Rust (2000b:209) argues that “biological sex and gender are not the only characteristics that might be relevant to sexuality” and critiques the existing sex/gender schema that defines bisexuality “…within a gender-based dichotomous sexual classification system as a combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality.” Rust (2000b:209) argues that “bisexuality is constructed in terms of the one characteristic that does not define it: gender.” Since bisexuals are attracted to both women and men, bisexual desire is not based upon sex/gender. Ross and Paul (2000) also argue that bisexuals’ attractions are based on more than gender, and potential partner’s personalities and other individual variables become significant instead. Weinberg et al. (1994:50) argue that the bisexual’s “…own gender becomes theoretically irrelevant to partner choice.” They hypothesize that bisexuals’ “open” gender schema results in “…a disconnection between gender and sexual preference and makes the direction of a person’s desires (toward the opposite or same sex) independent of whether the person is a man or woman” (p.50). Weinberg et al. (1994) recognize that bisexuals perceive women and men differently, but suggest that it is the bisexual’s own sex/gender that does not influence attraction. However, my research has shown that bisexuals may entertain more or less open or traditional gender schemas; a gender schema that is more characterized by the latter may result in a bisexual’s own gender identity becoming in fact particularly relevant to their partner choice.

My respondent’s definitions of bisexuality vary greatly, thereby reflecting the ambiguity of definitions of bisexuality. Some bisexuals suggest that bisexuality is sexual attraction to both women and men. Actual sexual experience with both women and men may or may not be required for an individual to be “really” bisexual. Others suggest
bisexuality is not just about sexual behaviors, but that it also entails a desire for emotional intimacy and relationships commitment with both women and men. Those who perceive bisexuality as rooted in attraction, as opposed to a set of behaviors, often argue that “everyone is bisexual” but most are inhibited from acting on certain sexual desires. So then, if “everyone is bisexual,” what boundaries or prerequisites decide who is “really” bi?

Similar to Kinsey et al.’s (1948, 1953) continuum of sexuality spanning between homosexuality and heterosexuality, a “spectrum” of bisexual attraction was described. My respondents often used percentages to distinguish their preference for women and men. Along this spectrum, individuals who are “50-50,” or equal in their attraction to women and men, will experience a different set of social circumstances than “the 99 percent person” who is only attracted to “just this one person every now and then.” More specifically, Rivers (1997:337) suggests that the social position of bisexuals is based on a “sliding scale” of attraction such that “those who are more heterosexual than homosexual or those who are in a heterosexual relationship have a greater degree of social and political power than those who are more homosexual than heterosexual or those who are in a homosexual relationship.” In accord with social patterns of privilege and discrimination, bisexuals as a group may occupy varying social positions. Bisexual individuals may also experience a fluidity of social status position in this way depending on the sex/gender of their current partner.

Though most bisexuals tend to have some degree of preference for either women or men (Gagnon, Greenblat, and Kimmel 1999; George 1993; Weinberg et al. 1994), I
observed that some bisexuals in this sample are not certain which direction their desires flow:

“...[I]f I hadn't gotten married and stuff it would be nice to be getting older with some man I think. So probably I'm more gay than I am bi but, um, I took this road to bi-dom but you know, and... [People will ask:] Do you prefer to be with women or do you prefer to be with men? What if you prefer to be with both? But they'll say why no, you've got to prefer one over the other. And then I say well, I guess I prefer with men, because if I've got to prefer, and since it was easier, I guess I prefer that.” (M) –Sean Derrek

Dichotomous understandings of sexuality (homo-/hetero-sexualities) question the authenticity of bisexuality, since bisexuality does not fit easily into this categorization schema. “The preferential bisexual [who does not choose one sex or other] makes everyone nervous because he or she is not in anyone’s camp. Such an independent sexual posture makes people with fixed positions uneasy” (Gagnon, Greenblat, and Kimmel 1999:101). Attempts are often made to convince bisexuals that they are just in “a phase” that they will grow out of, that they will “choose a side one day” as a psychiatrist formerly told one respondent.

But homosexuals and heterosexuals are not alone in their uncertainty about the nature of bisexuality, as bisexuals themselves demonstrate insecurity about their identity as bisexual. They often wondered if they “fit” some definition of bisexuality or another, or were “more gay than bi.” The bisexuals in this sample also frequently contradicted their own professed definitions of bisexuality. These contradictions expressed by my respondents often revolved around whether or not bisexuality is defined by emotional and/or sexual involvement with both women and men. For example, Hillary says that bisexuality is “more of a sex thing for me,” and describes how she has had sex with both women and men without much emotional involvement. But later Hillary distinguishes
herself from women who kiss other women to please men, and expresses feeling used by 
women who want to be sexual with other women without an emotional attachment. So on 
the one hand, Hillary roots her bisexuality in her interest in sex with both women and 
men but she is upset by other women who engage in performances of sexuality that are 
without emotional intimacy.

If given the opportunity at a second interview, it is quite probable that my 
respondents who expressed such seemingly obvious contradictions could likely resolve 
any inconsistencies. However, the amount of inconsistencies expressed overall by the 
bisexuals in this sample is revelatory of the ambiguous social conceptualizations of 
female and male bisexuality and the lack of gender performances associated with this 
sexual identity. The ideas and behaviors that bisexuals expressed that were least coherent 
generally concerned three main topics: respondent’s proclaimed gender ideologies and 
their actual behavioral enactment of gender performances, identity as bisexual as well as 
sex/gender identities, and issues of power in relationships. Within the body of this work I 
have discussed the inconsistencies regarding gender ideology and gender performance, 
and I have briefly discussed in the section above some issues with regard to coherent 
bisexual identity. In the following section I will briefly explore bisexuals’ inconsistent 
descriptions of power dynamics in their romantic relationships.
Interestingly, though gender roles and traditional feminine and masculine performances were clearly dominant in this sample’s relationships, a particular discourse of mutuality in relationships was frequently employed. Power imbalances in these relationships, whether recognized by the respondent (or agreed upon by their partners), were curiously manifest. However, the romantic language used to talk about one’s intimate relationships (especially the initiation of relationships) does not seem to permit the expression great imbalance of power or attraction.

During the interviews I asked all of my respondents questions regarding power in their romantic relationships. I discerned that the initiation of relationships and decision-making within them could be variables revelatory of power arrangements within relationships. When I asked who initiated relationships or who made more or less decisions within relationships, my respondents overwhelmingly described their relationships as having been “mutually” initiated and as characterized by “mutual” decision-making. In addition to the language of “mutuality,” more respondents similarly expressed the same general trend by describing the “equality” and “balance” within their romantic relationships.

Yet what is most striking about this discourse on equality within relationships is that these relationships often did not seem to be characterized by the mutuality my respondents expressed. When discussing power in general within relationships, my respondents were even more likely to express apparently contradictory descriptions of relationship dynamics. Sometimes these inconsistencies were more evident than at other times; occasionally the inconsistencies within their statements were even obvious to my
respondents. In one particularly clear example of this, Kathy describes herself as “being in control” and “being more dominant” in her relationships, particularly in terms of decision-making regarding activities she and her partner engage in and control over money. However, Kathy later goes on to describe the complexities of power within same-sex relationships:

“...I think in all the relationships I've been in though, I've tended to make it more equal not really dominant, except for me always being dominant [giggles]. You know it's just like, we try to work together rather than setting up this hierarchical system I guess.” (F) –Kathy

Even despite her nervous laugh at the recognition of her inconsistency, Kathy was unable to clarify the power dynamics within the relationships she described.

My tentative explanation for the prevalence of inconsistency in the statements of my respondents is that bisexuals may experience tension between their ideal relationships and their lived experiences. Particularly within same-sex relationships, bisexuals seem to anticipate or hope for greater partner equality, and this desire is expressed in the language of “mutuality” surrounding initiation and decision-making in relationships. However, when confronted with direct questioning about the mechanics of gender and divisions of power within relationships, the bisexuals in this sample reveal that there often is one partner who dominates (or who perceives themselves as dominating). However, I do not mean to suggest that bisexuals passively accept and steadfastly enact traditional norms for gender/power. Likely in both same- and opposite-sex pairings, power will shift between partners across contexts and over time. Even if a relationship has a relatively stable pattern for making certain decisions or allotting the accomplishment of certain kinds of work (both emotional and substantive), relationship partners seem likely to
maintain individualized domains of specialty (in accord with personal talents and
terests, context, etc.). Though bisexuals frequently employ traditional scripts for gender
in their relationships, they do so with great individual agency and purposive negotiation
between relationship partners.

**Closing**

This research provides a unique exploration of the sociological concept of gender
performance by focusing on bisexuals’ experiences in the context of romantic
relationships. I have explored various intersections of gender and sexuality by utilizing a
sample of (mostly) bisexual-identified women and men, a sexual identity minority group
with the unique potential to traverse both homosexual and heterosexual desires, identities,
and communities via their romantic relationships. Unlike previous research on bisexuality
and gender, this study has examined the performances of gender by bisexuals themselves
instead of focusing on the gender of bisexuals’ relationship partners. This research has
sought to discover any potential ramifications that such a form of sexuality may have for
individuals’ performances of gender. As such, this research extends previous sociological
efforts of theorizing gender as performance to include aspects of sexuality. I propose that
gender performances are not only claims to sex category membership as female or male,
but that performances of gender can simultaneously be performances of sexuality.

Though the concept of gender as performance originates in the symbolic
interactionist literature (see Goffman 1997), I have herein utilized a feminist analysis of
gender to include power as an inherent aspect of sex/gender structural relations and social
interaction. It appears that bisexual women and men may experience their genders and
sexualities very differently from one another. Accordingly, future research on bisexuals and gender performance could best maintain awareness of these differences and analyze female and male bisexuals’ gender performances separately. It is possible that the conflation of female and male bisexuals into the same sexual identity category has restricted not only academic theorizing and research on bisexuality, but also bisexual political movement. As lesbians and gays have realized that women and men inhabit dissimilar social positions and thereby encounter unique struggles, bisexual activism may benefit from the distinct recognition of separate female and male bisexualities.

As mentioned in the preceding section, a second round of follow-up interviews could have been a constructive effort towards the potential clarification of some of the numerous inconsistencies in the interviews. Also, some respondents found it difficult to talk about sex/gender with me. Some were unfamiliar with the language used to talk about gender (i.e., ‘sex’ versus ‘gender’), and many took for granted prevailing conceptualizations of gender (i.e., could not define femininity, masculinity) and explained that they had not previously thought much about gender. Follow-up interviews conducted a brief time after the initial interviews would likely have been very insightful after the respondents had been cued to reflect on gender in their romantic relationships.

At the conclusion of this research, I have been uneasy with the overall finding of the study: in summary, bisexuals generally perform gender and sexuality in accord with traditional conceptualizations of sex/gender. Herein I have outlined the various ways that bisexuals’ performances of gender and sexuality in romantic relationships are restricted and defined by dominant understandings of sex/gender. From my standpoint as a researcher, it became clear early on that I was necessarily reproducing existing
conceptualizations of sex/gender by wondering which partner in bisexuals’ relationships performed which traditional gender role. I have queried whether or not bisexuals negotiate gender in ways different from, or may improve upon, the dictates of traditional gender ideologies. Therefore I have presented my respondents the impossible task of redefining sexuality as well as gender.

“As you can see, being bisexual is the hardest in the gender-bender scheme of things. I mean it's easier to say you're straight or you're gay to be sort of you know, messing around between the two of them. The one side doesn't want to believe you and the other side won't believe you, so you're also caught up, identification one way or the other. And when you're 50-50 like me, you don't know what the hell you are [laughs]." (M) –Sean Derrek

Bisexuality is located at a contested intersection of current conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. At the outset of this study I entertained a slight hope that due to the contested character of this sexuality, bisexuals may in some way reconfigure sexuality and gender in their romantic relationships to improve upon the existing patriarchal patterns. But this study has found that even despite bisexuals’ critique and resistance of dominant conceptualizations of sex/gender, and even in light of the lack of a clearly defined gender of bisexuality or understanding of what bisexuality is, bisexuals refer to existing sex/gender norms to organize their self-presentations as female and male and to structure their romantic relationships. This study demonstrates that despite resistance, questioning, and the general ill-application of some dominant social norms to certain groups or identities, gender as we know it is a central organizing feature in everyone’s lives regardless of their sexuality. The adoption of traditional gender ideologies and performances by bisexuals demonstrates the enduring all-pervasiveness of the existing gender paradigm.
References


Appendix: Interview Outline

Hi. My name is Suzanne Pennington, and I am a graduate student at OU working on my master’s degree in sociology. Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this study. I would like to remind you that your participation in this research is voluntary and that your identity will be kept confidential. In order to insure your confidentiality, please do not provide me with any personally identifying information during the interview. You may stop this interview at any time or stop recording at any time for any portion of the interview. The recording will be destroyed after I transcribe this interview. So that I may be sure to get your words exactly, may I have your permission to record our conversation?

Would you please select a pseudonym that I may use to refer to you during this interview?

How old are you?

Do you identify with a sex/gender? If so, what?

Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship, or more than one?

   Does your partner identify with a sex/gender? If so, what?

   Does your partner identify with a sexual orientation? If so, what?

Have you ever had a relationship with an individual of a different sex/gender than your most recent/current partner? Of a different sexual orientation?

Do you presently identify as bisexual?

   Have you always identified as bisexual?

   If you have not always identified as bisexual, what other sexual orientation(s) did you recently identify with?

Do you behave differently in a relationship with a woman or a man? How?
Did you or your partner initiate your most recent/current relationship? Was it a mutual initiation?

Has initiation occurred this way for you in previous/other relationships?

Regarding your most recent/current relationship, did you or your partner make more decisions that affected both of you (for instance, what to do on a weekend, solving relationship problems, etc.)? How did you feel about this?

Can you compare the decision-making styles of your relationships with women and with men?

If you both made decisions equally, could you please explain how this felt for you?

Is this similar or different to how decisions were made in a previous relationship with another partner?

Do you feel differently with regards to yourself when in a relationship with a woman or a man? How?

Do you think that there is some particular aspect(s) about you, or something(s) that you do, that are particularly feminine or masculine? If so, please explain.

Do you feel that these traits or behaviors reflect your gender? How?

Do you feel that these traits or behaviors reflect your sexuality? How?

Do you feel that your physical appearance reflects your gender? How?

Do you feel that your physical appearance reflects your sexuality? How?

Could you explain how you perceive femininity and masculinity?

Is there anything that you would like to add or clarify?