

The positive aspects of a bisexual self-identification

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Bisexual clients (Page, 2007) and lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)-affirmative therapists (Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher, & Lund, 2006) agree that facilitating a positive identity is one of the most important therapeutic tasks. However, the task of achieving a positive identity may be particularly challenging for bisexual-identified individuals (Rust, 2002). To assist in this effort, the authors conducted an online survey that asked bisexual-identified individuals to respond to an open-ended question about the positive aspects of bisexual identity. Findings from an international sample of 157 adult participants (age 18–69; 67% female; 25% Canadian; 19% British; 51% American; 5% other) revealed 11 positive identity aspects: freedom from social labels, honesty and authenticity, having a unique perspective, increased levels of insight and awareness, freedom to love without regard for sex/gender, freedom to explore relationships, freedom of sexual expression, acceptance of diversity, belonging to a community, understanding privilege and oppression and becoming an advocate/activist. Each of these positive aspects is illustrated with quotes from participants. The authors offer suggestions for incorporating these findings in bisexual-affirmative counselling and therapy.

Keywords: bisexual; sexual identity; sexuality; positive psychology; psychotherapy; counselling

The developmental task of achieving a positive sexual identity is challenging for persons with non-heterosexual identities. Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals must negotiate this task within social contexts that pathologise and stigmatise them. This task may be particularly challenging for bisexual-identified individuals because of negative stereotypes that are specific to bisexual identities (Israel & Mohr, 2004; Rust, 2002). Negative attitudes towards bisexual-identified individuals have been documented in both heterosexual- (Herek, 2002; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999) and gay/lesbian-identified individuals (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999). These negative attitudes and stereotypes associated with bisexuality may result in suspicion, invalidation and rejection of those who claim bisexual identities (Rust, 2002). The lack of identity validation and support may at least partially account for the higher rates of psychological distress and substance use that have been documented in samples of bisexual-identified adults (Dodge & Sandfort, 2007).

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Psychological practitioners are not immune to negative stereotypes about bisexual-identified individuals (Page, 2007). Recent empirical work has demonstrated that even therapists who believe they are free from sexual orientation bias are more likely to view bisexual-identified clients, as compared to gay- or heterosexual-identified clients, as confused and conflicted, even in the absence of clinical evidence to support such a view (Mohr, Weiner, Chopp, & Wong, 2009; Ross, 2009). On the contrary, sexual minority clients have reported that having a therapist to help them achieve a positive identity is one of the therapeutic outcomes that they most value (Liddle, 1996; Page, 2007). Gay-affirmative therapists concur that assessing and clarifying the strengths and joys of a sexual minority identity is important to facilitating positive identity achievement (Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher, & Lund, 2006).

Past research has documented self-reported positive aspects of 'gay' and 'lesbian' identity (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008). However, little direct empirical study of the positive aspects of bisexual identity has been conducted. Some very early research studies conducted in the 1970s noted that bisexual-identified individuals were psychologically well adjusted, reporting, for example, high levels of self-esteem, assertiveness and cognitive flexibility (Fox, 2003). Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor's (1994) landmark ethnographic study of bisexual identity development focused on change and continuity in the sexual lives, relationships and community supports of a cohort of bisexual-identified individuals who lived in San Francisco during the height of the AIDS epidemic and its aftermath. Following up on this cohort when they reached midlife, the authors found that the participants were more certain and stable in their bisexual identities and felt positively about their lives (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 2001). Bradford (2004) interviewed a sample of 20 bisexual-identified individuals and created a stage model of bisexual identity achievement that included some positive outcomes such as a sense of community, self-reliance and life satisfaction. The focus of these important studies, however, was more broadly on bisexual experience rather than specifically on the positive aspects of a bisexual identity. This study builds on the findings from these previous studies by directly exploring the positive aspects of bisexual identity in a larger, multinational sample.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the LGB-affirmative practice literature and, more generally, to the areas of positive psychology and strengths-based psychotherapy. These conceptual frameworks assume that building on individuals' strengths and harnessing the resiliency that comes from effective coping with adverse events and/or social contexts can enhance psychological health and well-being (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). Given the exploratory nature of our research question, we used a qualitative methodology that privileges the voices of an under-researched population to enquire about and delineate the positive aspects of bisexual identity. Knowing and understanding the positive aspects of a bisexual identity can help psychological practitioners, educators, families and communities to understand the importance of and competently support the positive identity achievement of individuals who self-identify as bisexual.

Method

Participant recruitment and sample description

Announcements about an online study were sent to email support groups and Listservs that provide news, information and support to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. These lists included social, workplace and professional groups. In the announcement, volunteers who were at least 18 years of age and who identified as bisexual were invited to complete a survey that focused on the positive aspects of having a bisexual

identity. An electronic link to additional information about the survey was provided for those who were interested in participating. Announcement recipients were also invited to forward the announcement to appropriate individuals and groups. Thus, the announcement reached participants in several countries (listed below).

The survey questions and open-ended response were completed by 157 participants. The total sample of participants represented seven countries: United States ($n = 81$), Canada ($n = 40$), United Kingdom ($n = 30$) and four other countries [New Zealand, Finland, Norway and Tunisia ($n = 6$)]. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 69 ($M = 33.42$; $SD = 11.49$). Of the sample 67% was female, 24% was male, 4% identified as transgender and 6% reported their sex as 'other' or did not indicate their sex. The majority of participants indicated that they were white/Caucasian (77.7%). The remainder of the sample was bi-racial/multiracial (6.5%), African American (2.5%), Hispanic/Latino (2.5%), Asian American (1.3%), Native American (1.3%) and other (5.7%). Four participants (2.5%) did not indicate their race/ethnicity. Sixty-eight percent of the sample reported earning at least a bachelor's degree, and an additional 23% reported some college attendance.

In reporting their relationship status, 30% of the sample indicated 'single'; 8.3% in a dating relationship; 12.1% in a same-sex committed relationship; 4.4% in a same-sex marriage, civil union or domestic partnership; 19.7% in a partnership with an other-sex partner; 14% married to an other-sex partner; and 7% divorced or widowed. Those participants currently in a partnered relationship were asked to indicate how many years they had been in the relationship. The range of responses was 1–40 years ($M = 7.37$; $SD = 7.48$).

Data collection instrument and procedures

The online survey began with an informed consent page that identified the researchers and the purpose of the study. An acknowledgement button at the end of the informed consent page indicated that the participant was at least 18 years old and had read the consent form. In addition to standard demographic items, an expandable text box was provided for responding to the following prompt: 'Please tell us below what you think the positive things are about being bisexual. Please describe as many positive aspects as you think are important to your life and in as much detail and with examples if you wish'. A final page thanked the participant and provided the researchers' contact information.

Data analysis

The qualitative data analyses were conducted using a modified version of the Consensual Qualitative Coding method devised by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997), which was in turn an adaptation of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A team of coders read the first 50 responses and developed an initial 'start list' of categories that captured the content of the open-ended responses. Participants' responses ranged from 1 phrase to 30 complete sentences. The typical response was between 4 and 6 sentences in length. The participants' responses were segmented into 'meaning units' (Giorgi, 1970). A total of 393 meaning units were coded for the full sample of 157 participants. Beginning with the initial start list, three team members independently assigned each meaning unit to a category, making notes about any new categories that emerged as the coding progressed. Following this inductive process of constant comparison, the coding team met to discuss the categories and the codings, noting and resolving any discrepancies through discussion. Categories and codings were revised until the coders reached a consensus on the placement of each meaning unit

into its appropriate category. Similar categories were combined into a larger thematic structure that best captured the participants' descriptions of the positive aspects of a bisexual identity. The use of three independent coders and a systematic consensus-building process of analysis served as a credibility check (Hill et al., 2005) for the findings. As an additional credibility check, a fourth research team member who was not involved in the primary coding meetings performed an independent audit of the coding decisions, categories and final thematic structure. The themes and categories thus developed are described and illustrated below.

Results

The participants in this study described 11 specific positive aspects of bisexual identity that were located at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and community/societal levels of the human ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although each of the positive aspects was categorised into one level of the ecological system, these categories are not orthogonal. Rather, they are inter-related and mutually influencing. Table 1 displays the percentage of participants that mentioned each positive aspect in their written response. The following sections describe each positive aspect and then illustrate that aspect with quotes from participants' written responses.

Intrapersonal positive aspects

Four positive aspects of bisexual identity were located at the intrapersonal level of the self-system. Participants described their freedom from socially constructed labels and roles and the feeling of authenticity and honesty that they experienced. Their bisexual identities also provided them with a unique perspective. Finally, participants perceived that their efforts to forge a bisexual identity had resulted in a level of insight and self-awareness that they would not otherwise have attained.

Table 1. The positive aspects of bisexual identity.

Positive aspects	Percentage of participants describing each positive aspect
Intrapersonal or self-view	
• Freedom from labels, roles and social 'rules'	28
• Honest and/or authentic self	24
• Unique perspective	21
• Insightful and self-aware	10
Interpersonal relationships	
• Freedom to love without regard for sex/gender	34
• Freedom to explore diverse relationships and experiences	29
• Freedom of sexual expression	18
• Acceptance/appreciation/understanding of others	18
Relationship to community/society	
• Belonging to a community	17.5
• Understanding privilege and oppression	15
• Educating and advocating	15

Note: Percentages are based on the full sample of 157 participants. Participants may describe more than one positive aspect of a bisexual identity.

Freedom from social identity labels and gender roles

Many participants described their resistance to binary social locations such as gay/straight or male/female. They expressed pride in their ability to see beyond the limits of discrete identity 'boxes'. For these participants, the process of claiming a bisexual identity provided the opportunity to break free of these dichotomies and achieve a more complex, continuous view of their own and others' identities. A 27-year-old female participant from the United States expressed this positive aspect in this comment:

You're not boxed in by one set of expectations or confined to a specific label/role . . . Not everything is cut and dry or black and white, and I believe that one's sexuality is not something that can be explained, experienced, and fulfilled in such plain, restrictive terms. Humans, and human sexuality, is very complex and is determined by various factors. Furthermore, because human sexuality is complex, the modes of identification and expression are also just as complex and diverse.

Even though they responded to the survey announcement for individuals who identified as bisexual, several participants nonetheless expressed discomfort with the label 'bisexual' and disclaimed any sexual identity label. For some participants, adopting any sexual identity label, including the label 'bisexual', implied a binary (monosexual vs. bisexual) and thus was too simplistic, inaccurate or limiting. As stated by a 23-year-old female participant from the United States,

I don't [label myself], but if I had to I'd use bisexual, pansexual, maybe queer . . . Imagining myself identifying as heterosexual doesn't feel right but neither does identifying as a lesbian and even the term 'bisexual' feels a little off because of its limited nature in dichotomizing gender identity.

Participants also described the freedom they felt from pressures to perform gender in prescribed ways. For instance, a 30-year-old British female participant noted,

I can choose to dress how I like and create my own 'style' – I think if I had chosen to identify as a lesbian I would probably feel more pressure to look a certain way and to 'code' a particular way.

In addition to a wider range of gender expression, participants saw themselves as enjoying more freedom from prescribed gender roles and traditional relationship structures. Whether in same-sex, other-sex or polyamorous relationships, participants valued the ways that they were redefining gender role and relationship expectations in their intimate relationships. A 49-year-old Canadian female participant wrote, 'We (bisexuals) have the potential to think outside the box, to live in non-traditional relationships structures, to throw off traditional gender roles . . . '.

Perhaps paradoxically, the fluidity and flexibility described by participants was experienced as a solid foundation for establishing a sense of self. Participants noted that, in contrast to individuals with attractions to a single sex, they, as bisexual individuals, were free from fear that a sexual attraction to 'the wrong gender' would precipitate an identity crisis. These participants appreciated the self-confidence and security that a bisexual identity gave them.

Freedom to live authentically and honestly

Claiming a bisexual identity led participants to experience a sense of wholeness and authenticity. Several participants described their experience as being 'more at home with

myself'. A 34-year-old US participant eloquently described her identity development as follows:

Rather than being 'this not that', I am this AND that . . . I've felt like a blossoming flower. As I become more fully me and as I'm more comfortable with each petal of my identity, I open myself up and look into the sun . . . as someone who identifies as bisexual and does see the world on a multitude of plains, my intellect and creativity, my head and my heart, are just further parallels of how I am able to find myself attracted to and love both men and women.

For these participants, identifying as bisexual allowed them to validate their experience and achieve a more complete sense of self. Several participants said that they felt positive about identifying as bisexual because 'It is just who I am'. Many participants noted that this honesty about their bisexual identity was accompanied by a deeper level of self-acceptance, even if others were less accepting. As a 37-year-old female participant from the United States wrote,

It's (bisexual identity) an honest description of who I am, despite pressure on me from gays and straights to 'pick' one of their sexual orientations instead. To proudly identify as bisexual for seventeen years is to affirm every romantic and sexual relationship I've had as valid, and not apologize for past relationships or a key part of my life to appease my peers.

For these participants, despite experiences of rejection, claiming a bisexual identity felt real, right and true.

A unique perspective

The third intrapersonal positive aspect of bisexual identity was the unique perspective that participants perceived they had achieved. Some participants simply described themselves as unique. The following quote is illustrative:

Another positive aspect of being bisexual as I see it, is that being bisexual sets me apart from the majority of my friends, family and colleagues. I am a fiercely independent person and revel in my individuality. From very early childhood, I saw the value in being 'different' from others . . . I learned that being 'different' makes me interesting, makes me unique. (Female participant, age 29, Canada)

Other participants noted that their 'in-between' social identity gave them a broader perspective on gender and sexuality than they observed in most single-sex attracted individuals. This broader perspective, in turn, allowed them to appreciate and value rather than feel threatened by individual differences. This unique perspective was compounded for participants who identified with more than one 'in-between' identity:

I admit, I enjoy being the minority within a minority – many of my identities are 'minority identities' – bisexual, biracial, Jewish, woman, etc and I have learned to enjoy not being the norm. I believe I have a unique perspective because of the intersection of all of these identities – and I think that's a good thing . . . I can pull on my varied experiences . . . and . . . find avenues to relate to different people. (Female participant, age 41, United States)

Self-awareness and insight

Participants perceived that achieving a positive bisexual identity required considerably more self-exploration and self-reflection than required of their gay-, lesbian- and heterosexual-identified peers. They appreciated the level of insight and self-awareness that came as a result. A 44-year-old female participant from the United States noted, 'I feel that

the process of accepting my same/other sex attractions made me think more complexly about myself and others'. Another participant wrote the following:

The journey of sexual growth and discovery I've gone through has been wonderful, and being bisexual is a big part of that. If I had been straight, I probably would have been less motivated to become sexually self-aware because I could have just done what everybody else was doing, without really thinking about it, without questioning. I also find that most bisexuals I meet have gone through similar journeys, and are more articulate about their sexuality, and often more self-aware in general than my community of straight friends. (Male participant, age 36, Canada)

Together, these four themes suggest that achieving a positive self-view is important to achieving a positive bisexual identity. Participants expressed gratitude for the experiences that a bisexual identity had afforded them and the positive feelings of self-acceptance that they had achieved. In turn, these positive aspects of the self-view enhanced their interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal positive aspects

At the level of interpersonal relationships, participants described four inter-related positive aspects of a bisexual identity. These aspects included the freedom to choose partners without regard for biological sex or gender and to welcome and embrace diverse sexual and relational opportunities. A number of participants specifically noted that they, in comparison to their single-sex-attracted friends, enjoyed more freedom to explore and express their sexuality. Because of their diverse experiences, the participants perceived that they had cultivated a more keen appreciation, acceptance and understanding of others.

Freedom to love without regard for biological sex or gender

Many participants appreciated that their bisexual identity allowed them to choose a partner based on characteristics other than biological sex. These human (rather than male/female) attributes, such as personality traits, moral character, interests, emotional intimacy and sexual compatibility, were prized and prioritised over biological sex or gender expression. Many participants expressed ideas similar to this 26-year-old female participant from the United States: 'To me, identifying as bisexual is positive because I do not feel restrained to only one certain gender. I can fall in love with the person and the qualities that the person possesses . . . no matter what their anatomy is'. Whereas a few participants simply noted that being bisexual gave them more 'options' in their dating life, many more participants articulated a depth of appreciation for the ability to choose an intimate relationship based on the person's 'heart and mind' or 'gender rather than genitals'.

Freedom to explore diverse relationships and experiences

The freedom to choose a partner without confinement to a particular biological sex or gender expression led to a freedom to explore and enjoy diverse or 'unconventional' relationships with others. For example, a 45-year-old female participant from the United States noted,

Being bisexual also helped me explore my attitudes about what 'being in a relationship' means. What committed means. What marriage means when only some can legally take part. What 'open' means . . . I have been in a committed open relationship for five years with a man. It was a surprise to me . . .

Another female Canadian participant, age 29, described a freedom within friendships, ‘I feel that being bisexual allows me to love my friends deeply without being fearful of loving them “too much”, of moving beyond the boundaries of friendship and into romantic or passionate love’. Still other participants revealed that their bisexual identities allowed them to question traditional gender roles within the context of their intimate relationships and actively negotiate with their partners the extent to which they were willing to conform or reject these roles. Many participants expressed the idea that the diverse relationship forms and relational experiences that they had enjoyed had deeply enriched their lives and contributed to a positive sense of self.

Freedom of sexual expression

In addition to the freedom to choose partners and relational forms, participants valued the freedom of sexual expression they enjoyed as a direct result of their bisexual identity. For example, some participants noted that their bisexual identities had helped them to stay open to a variety of sexual experiences including certain sexual fantasies, role-playing or polyamory. More generally, participants thought that they had a more extensive sexual repertoire that enhanced their intimate relationships. Participants also perceived that they and other bisexual individuals had a more sex-positive attitude in general. One bisexual male participant explained that

Bisexual men may perhaps have a more ‘objective’ view of sexual activity and the forms and function of the male and female body that a number of gay men and straight men do not. This understanding and appreciation, I find, would definitely help in providing a more positive outlook on body difference and sexual experimentation.

Other participants concluded that honouring their bisexual identities meant acknowledging and communicating their sexual desires in ways that ultimately made them better lovers or better partners.

Acceptance and appreciation of others’ differences

Participants noted that their bisexual identities gave them a special appreciation for diversity. Because of their acceptance of their own unique identities, they perceived themselves as generally less judgmental and more open and empathic towards others. A 29-year-old male participant from the United Kingdom wrote,

The last thing we need is to become sexuality-centric in how we approach others. Avoiding such attitudes takes effort, but the trials of bisexuality have equipped me well in this respect. So to conclude with the most positive aspects of bisexuality, I would say that what I value most highly is holding on to my compassion, tolerance, and broadmindedness towards others.

Paradoxically, this acceptance of others also led to seeing the ‘universals’ of human existence, as articulated by the following participant:

I think the most positive thing about being bisexual, for me, is the ability to accept people for who they are. It doesn’t matter what you look like, if you’re a man or woman, where you come from, or what you do, we’re all the same deep down. Despite language barriers and oceans, we all have the same basic needs: To be loved, cared for, helped, comforted, and understood. (Female participant, age 21, United States)

For these participants, a positive aspect of bisexual identity was that they were less likely to make assumptions about others’ identities or ‘put others in boxes’. Instead,

they perceived that their minds were expanded in appreciation for all kinds of human differences. This openness to others, in turn, had positive effects on their interpersonal relationships.

Relation to community/society

Participants also shared the profound impact of their bisexual identities on their sense of community and their relationship to larger social institutions. Many participants expressed appreciation for the positive sense of connection they had to the bisexual community. Many more participants, however, noted that experiences of feeling like ‘outsiders’ to the heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities provided them with a deeper understanding of both privilege and oppression. Finally, participants valued the unique role that they filled in their communities as educators, role models and activists.

Belonging to a community

Participants perceived that one positive aspect of having a bisexual identity was access to a warm and accepting community. The bisexual community, sometimes in contrast to the gay/lesbian and heterosexual communities, was perceived as welcoming to people of all sexual orientations. Connecting with others who identify as bisexual felt empowering. As stated by a 46-year-old British male participant,

I’ve discovered an amazing subculture of people who also identify as bi and [I] now feel part of a community for the first time in my life. I get a buzz out of supporting other people who are just making the first tentative steps towards a bi-identity. I’ve become very involved in organizing bi-related events.

While identifying with a bisexual community, many participants also celebrated the positive aspects of claiming their ‘outsider’ status relative to the gay/lesbian and heterosexual communities.

Understanding privilege and oppression

Participants noted that their bisexual identities allowed them to recognise oppressive attitudes that existed in both gay/lesbian and heterosexual politics and communities. As a 21-year-old female participant from the United States wrote, ‘I’m in a position to be able to better see the biases, assumptions, expectations and prejudices that unfortunately exist in the lesbian/gay community in addition to, of course, the straight world’. Another 29-year-old British male participant described his outsider status and its influence on the development of his inclusive attitudes as a ‘saving grace’ in his life. As a result of their experiences of being misunderstood and/or marginalised by both heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities, many participants forged a commitment to making a difference in the lives of those who experience oppression based on gender, race, sexuality or other socially constructed categories.

Engaging in education and political activism

Many participants relished the opportunities they had to personally educate others and advocate for social justice. Some participants, for example, talked about the ways their bisexual identities directly challenged others’ assumptions. A participant expressed this positive aspect of her identity thus:

I also like that I've led some friends to question their own stereotypes or prejudices . . . I think speaking about my sexuality with some people has forced them to change their perceptions of bisexuals (or sexual minorities in general). I've also had some people apologize to me for just assuming I was straight until I told them otherwise, and I think they might remember that and carry that with them when they start to make assumptions about others' sexual orientations. It sounds pretty lofty, but I think speaking candidly about my bisexuality is a way of challenging heteronormativity, even if it's only within my group of friends. (Female participant, age 22, United States)

A few participants saw a similar educational advantage to their perceived 'invisibility' as bisexual. This perception was articulated by the following 38-year-old female participant from the United States:

Given that people assume I am straight unless I say otherwise, it allows for some invisibility. While the invisibility itself is not always positive, it does allow me to build relationships with people who may not initially realize that I am queer-identified, and as a result, our positive relationship helps to change their mind about LGBT issues.

Participants valued the sense of belonging to a community that accepted and supported them. Their experiences as 'outsiders' to other communities provided an opportunity to understand and challenge systematic oppression and privilege. Their experiences of being outsiders increased their motivation to speak out and become activists and role models in their communities and in the world at large.

Discussion

In contrast to the negative stereotypes and negative assumptions that abound (Rust, 2002), the findings from this study revealed 11 positive aspects of a bisexual identity. These positive aspects occurred at the levels of the self (intrapersonal), interpersonal relationships and society/community. A number of positive aspects of bisexual identity were consistent with the positive aspects of gay male and lesbian identities (Riggle et al., 2008). Common to both study samples were the positive aspects of living authentically and honestly, exploring sexuality and relationships, developing empathy for others, forging strong connections to others and to the larger community and engaging in social justice activism. Perhaps these similarities reflect the shared experience of forging a positive identity in the context of social stigma and minority stress (cf., Meyer, 2003). For LGB individuals, positive coping with stigma may involve actively making meaning of experiences and creating positive relationships and a positive self-view. These processes may be similar for gay/lesbian- and bisexual-identified individuals vis-à-vis the larger heteronormative community.

On the contrary, the number of commonalities between the two samples may be somewhat surprising given that the bisexual-identified participants in this study frequently contrasted their own experiences with their perceptions of their gay/lesbian peers. Some participants perceived, for example, that they differed because of the unique freedom they had to live and love outside of the socially imposed constraints of biological sex and gender expression. This freedom, in turn, afforded them unique insights into the similarly oppressive or exclusive aspects of both gay/lesbian and heterosexual communities. Their unique 'in-between' social identity gave them a critical standpoint and also enabled them to navigate between or 'bridge' the two communities.

Limitations and implications for future research

Collecting qualitative data via the Internet (as compared to face-to-face interviews) enables researchers to access marginalised populations by providing a safe, more anonymous

context without compromising the depth or richness of the responses (Van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx, & Pasley, 2008). In this case, we were able, through the Internet, to obtain open-ended responses from a large number of participants from multiple locations. Future research might use the categories discovered in this study as part of an interview guide for conducting in-depth interviews that would elucidate the lifespan developmental process that leads to a positive bisexual identity. Alternately, the positive identity aspects might be used as the basis for a quantitative measure that could be used in large-scale survey research. Hypothesising group differences among bisexual-identified individuals according to sex, age, relationship status or level of disclosure, for instance, is beyond the scope of the current qualitative study, but would be appropriate with a quantitative design.

Although this study elucidates important positive aspects of a bisexual identity as reported by participants in this sample, caution should be used in generalising these findings to all bisexual-identified individuals. For example, bisexual-identified individuals commonly deal with not only biphobia and heterosexism but also sexism and racism (Greene, 2003). The current sample of participants was somewhat limited in ethnic and racial diversity (including the limitation of the racial and ethnic categories provided to an international sample of participants). Thus, the complexity of integrating multiple identities and negotiating disjunctive communities and the positive psychosocial outcomes that may accompany these challenges is not fully represented here and should be explored in future research.

Likewise, bisexual-identified individuals with higher levels of minority stress may be less likely to complete a survey on the positive aspects of their identity. On the contrary, those individuals with high levels of minority stress might benefit from interventions based on the positive identity aspects discovered in this study (see Firestein, 2007). Future research could test the utility of these positive aspects of bisexual identity in increasing knowledge and reducing the internalised biphobia of both clients and their service providers. While awaiting further research, we offer the following suggestions for using the findings from this exploratory study to help facilitate the positive identity achievement and well-being of bisexual-identified clients and their families.

Implications for psychological practitioners

While many participants in this study noted the challenges of coping with a stigmatised identity, these challenges often became opportunities for their personal growth. A positive self-view is consistently found to be a factor in successful adaptation despite adversity (e.g. Masten, 2001). Psychological practitioners can facilitate and support a positive self-view by deconstructing internalised negative stereotypes and co-constructing personal narratives that focus on strengths and resiliencies. To do this effectively, practitioners must educate themselves about the positive aspects of sexual minority identities. Hopefully, the current findings will serve as an initial resource for practitioners and practitioners in training. Beyond knowledge, however, practitioners need to honestly examine their own internalised negative stereotypes about bisexuality. Additionally, practitioners need to become aware of their own assumptions about the sexual identities of their clients. Many of the participants in this study reported that others routinely made assumptions about their identities based on the perceived sex of their current partner. Providing affirmative therapy for LGB clients includes sensitivity to the impact of such assumptions on the therapeutic alliance and the well-being of the client.

The participants in this study valued their ability to see beyond sex and gender binaries and their appreciation of the fluidity and flexibility of their identities and sexual/relational

histories. Practitioners can affirm this world view and the appreciation for diversity and individuality that results. Firestein (2007) suggested that the shifts or changes in sexual identity and sexual expression should be acknowledged in the same way that counsellors acknowledge shifts and changes in careers, relationships and other life arenas. Actively validating the legitimacy of bisexual identities serves as a corrective to the invalidation, stigma and prejudice that bisexual individuals encounter in both gay/lesbian and straight communities (Page, 2007). Likewise, counsellors need to examine and address their internalised heterosexist assumptions about relationships, commitment and monogamy so that they can effectively support the creation of healthy (if not traditional) relationship forms that they may encounter in their work with bisexual-identified clients (Firestein, 2007).

Bisexual-identified clients can be encouraged to draw upon their value and appreciation for human diversity to build strong social support networks that can relieve the sense of isolation and invisibility that many experience (Godfrey et al., 2006; Rust, 2002). Positive social support and a sense of belonging to a community are crucial for those whose identities are stigmatised. Several participants in the current study specifically described the importance of positive interactions with other bisexual-identified individuals. In small or rural communities, virtual rather than physical support groups may provide this important interpersonal contact (Firestein, 2007). Service providers need to educate themselves about bisexual community resources that are available in their geographic regions and on the Internet. Practitioners who develop some expertise in working with bisexual-identified clients can also serve as a resource for the professional development of others.

Finally, psychological practitioners can facilitate the positive identity development of bisexual-identified clients by naming and validating their experiences of stigma and oppression. Validating these experiences and helping clients to forge new meanings and take new actions that support a positive self-view and self-acceptance can enhance the well-being of bisexual-identified clients. Many participants described the importance of their involvement in 'giving back' through community engagement as educators, role models and social activists. From a liberation psychology perspective, empowering clients to provide social support to other bisexual-identified individuals or to engage in community and political activism transforms the individual as that individual joins with the community to transform society (Russell & Bohan, 2007).

Basic research findings have suggested that positive beliefs and positive emotions serve as resources that help people cope with chronic stress (Aspinwall, 2001). More specifically, positive reappraisal and infusing even adverse events with meaning are two important coping strategies that lead to positive emotions (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Consistently, these positive emotions have been demonstrated to provide fuel for flexible and creative thinking, which in turn builds resilience and well-being (Tulgade & Fredrickson, 2007). Recent experimental research on integrating bicultural identities has found that recalling positive experiences related to one's bicultural identity promotes positive identity integration (Cheng & Lee, 2009). All of these findings suggest that facilitating the internalisation of positive and meaningful aspects of a bisexual identity may help bisexual-identified clients and their families to cope with social stigma and minority stress, build resiliency and enhance psychological well-being. Testing these hypotheses in bisexual-identified samples will ensure that our affirmative approaches are empirically supported.

At the societal level, educating others about the positive aspects of a bisexual identity may help to dispel some of the negative stereotypes that undermine positive interpersonal and community relationships and maintain systems of privilege and oppression. As Vera

and Shinn (2006) suggested, cultural competence necessitates understanding these systems of oppression and how they impact psychological health. With this understanding, the role of psychological service providers can help individual bisexual-identified clients effectively cope with a socially toxic environment as well as assist in changing the environment via outreach, education and social advocacy.

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