“Bisexuality: Not Gay. Not Straight. A New Sexual Identity Emerges” proclaims Newsweek on its cover. Shunned by heterosexuals and many gays and lesbians alike, bisexuals recently have been “discovered” by the popular media as well as conventional researchers. Nonetheless, the category of bisexuality remains elusive for most adults. Only about 1 percent of the adult population identifies as bisexual. Yet nearly 4 percent acknowledge that they are attracted to people of both sexes.¹

Bisexual invisibility pigeonholes individuals into gay and straight boxes. A bisexual perspective allows us to ask ourselves who we find attractive and why, rather than to presume that sexual partners are chosen on the basis of gender. This perspective broadens to a “bi” perspective² as we reject conventional bipolar categories in the areas of gender, race, and disability in understanding our own lives, as well as in responding to others.³

I. Harms that Flow from Categorization

A. Invisibility to Ourselves and Others

Martin S. Weinberg and his colleagues report that one-fourth of self-identified bisexuals are currently “confused” about their
bisexuality, with more than half of the women and three-quarters of the men reporting previous confusion. People who do not self-identify as bisexuals, yet have sexual relations with people of both genders, report even more identity confusion: “Some people who behave bisexualy are confused and think that they may be in the process of becoming homosexual. Others simply deny their same-sex feelings and behaviors in order to preserve their self-image as heterosexuals.”

The pressure to identify with a monosexual label of “gay” or “straight” leads to some odd results. Some women continue to identify with the label “heterosexual” despite the fact that they are intimately involved with a woman. Other women who have had prior intimate relationships with a woman continue to identify with the label “lesbian” even when intimately involved with a man. One of the best-known examples of this phenomenon was Holly Near, a very popular songwriter and singer among lesbians, who persisted in labeling herself as a lesbian despite her intimate relationship with a man. Alternatively, some women simply have felt immobilized by this need to fit into a category and have therefore chosen the “choose not to label” category.

A bisexual perspective facilitates picking the “choose not to label” category rather than the static and bipolar categories of homosexual and heterosexual. Ruth Gibian describes the problematic, bipolar structure of the dominant sexuality categories: “The definition of a static sexuality is based on binary opposition. . . . Indeed, our entire Western system of thought is based on binary opposition; we define by comparison, by what things are not.” Bipolar injustice is of epidemic proportions; it is not limited to the area of sexual orientation. Although it is unrealistic to think that we can dismantle an entire system that is built on binary opposition, we can take small steps in
the area of life that touches us most personally—our self-identity.

We should not allow our bisexuality to be invisible even to ourselves. When I ended an intimate relationship with a woman and began dating a man about fifteen years ago, I remember telling him, “It’s important that you recognize that I am a lesbian.” I insisted on the lesbian label because I did not want to acknowledge to myself the dynamic nature of my sexual orientation. I thought I had to choose between being gay and straight and was having trouble reconciling the gender of my current partner with those choices. Five years later, when I became involved with another man, again ending an intimate relationship with a woman, I told a friend that I was sure that I was now a “heterosexual.” My obsession with categorization precluded me from seeing the complexity of my feelings and the multiplicity of my prior relationships, harming the fullness of my self-identity.

The invisibility of bisexuals has had some profound social consequences. For example, it has rendered invisible the bisexual practices of many African-American men, thereby stalling our attempts to deal with the AIDS crisis. Although the Kinsey study⁹ is often cited for statistics about sexual behavior, it is rarely noted that the study included only white American men who had engaged in a homosexual act at least once.¹⁰ The statistics that do exist on the sexual behavior of African-American men are inconclusive but preliminary statistics suggest that African-American men may be somewhat more likely than white men to engage in both opposite-sex and same-sex sexual behavior.¹¹ These men, however, rarely identify as bisexual, in part because of disapproval of that status in their own community and in mainstream society.¹² A polarized straight/gay dichotomy and disapproval of bisexuals have caused us to ig-
nore the sexual practices of this group of men. This lack of recognition has had profound consequences: it has deterred attempts to provide AIDS counseling to many African-American men who engage in same-sex sexual behavior, as well as to their female sexual partners. By rigidly assuming that people who primarily identify as heterosexual are not engaging in same-sex sexual behavior, health care professionals until recently have not targeted heterosexual African-American men and their female partners for safe-sex education. A bisexual perspective would make more apparent the sexual behavior of many African-American men and thereby would be more racially inclusive irrespective of what label these men apply to themselves.\(^{13}\)

Similarly, feminist theorist Brenda Marie Blasingame suggests that some minority communities recognize that many people engage in both same-sex and opposite-sex behavior while not expressly labeling it as bisexual:

In talking with older people of color who are queer, I’ve found that they often say that in their community people had relationships with people. Some people chose to be involved with both sexes, whereas others chose to be exclusively involved with same-sex partners. They spoke of how some people were bisexual. That was not what it was called, but that was what was taking place. It was not a subject of conversation: people knew who was in a relationship with whom, that was how it was and life went on.\(^{15}\)

Blasingame provides excellent insight into the bridges that must be crossed if people of color are to feel more welcome in the “gay” movement. When we can start talking about people who have sex with people of the same sex without making any assumptions about whether they also have sex with people of the opposite sex, then we may have a more racially inclusive politics. Our bipolar orientation about sexuality therefore con-
tributes to a misunderstanding of how people experience sexuality and also makes people in various ethnic communities feel alienated from the gay rights movement.

How can we make more visible individuals who lie between sexual categories? One way is to embrace individualized storytelling rather than categories such as “bisexual”:

To compensate for the lack of an adequate label, which I know would have its limitations anyway, I find myself telling my story, or as much of it as the situation warrants. It gives people the chance to hear, not defector or fence-sitter, but process, struggle toward self-understanding, self-claiming. It gives them room to hear about feelings and to tell their own. It gives me—and all of us—room to be larger than a name.\(^16\)

Categories suggest stasis whereas storytelling reflects our changing life experiences. The way for individuals’ sexual identity to become fully visible is not to embrace the new category of “bisexuality” but to explain fully the content of their sexuality. Sandra Bern embraces this perspective when she says that she has been involved intimately with a particular man for three decades but would not describe herself as having chosen him as a partner because of his biological gender. Her life description does a more complete job of explaining her sexuality than the label “heterosexual” or “bisexual.” This perspective does not force us to agonize over whether Bern properly could be considered a “bisexual” given the monogamous nature of her sexual relationship of the last three decades. Applying or not applying the label “bisexual” to Bem’s situation would not add to our understanding of her sexuality. Individualized storytelling, however, makes it clear how her sexuality differs from another woman who has also been married to the same man for three decades but who openly acknowledges that she organizes her sexuality around the biological sex of her partner.
There are times when we need categories for constructive purposes. The fact that categories may have pragmatic advantages in certain situations, however, should not make us forget that categorical thinking can also seriously misstate human feelings and experience. Where individualized storytelling is possible in addition to or instead of categorization, we should seek to promote storytelling.

Individuals who lie between racial categories often face similar dilemmas. As I will discuss further in chapters 5 and 8, some individuals feel that they have to make a false choice on job application forms, census forms, or even birth certificates about their racial identity. Parents complain that such false choices undermine the self-esteem of their children. Although we do not usually think of race as a thought process based on our feelings in the same way that we think of sexual orientation, these stories reveal the element of conscious choice of racial category for certain individuals. Our dominant view of race as a biological category (which, itself, is inaccurate according to scientists and anthropologists) is undermined when we see the ways in which some individuals can move between racial categories or make choices about the racial categories to which they belong.

Nonetheless, sexual orientation and race have basic dissimilarities. Most of us are told as young children, either implicitly or explicitly, that we are heterosexual. It is only through a conscious thought process that we can move beyond that bipolar category. Similarly, most of us are told our race at a young age and few of us ever question our racial identity. However, some individuals discover new information about their racial heritage later in life through comments from their parents or official public records such as birth certificates. Irrespective of whether an individual has been informed of her multiracial
background from a young age or whether she discovers it somewhat later in life, she may make a choice as to whether to identify with a multiracial category or, instead, to maintain a monoracial identity. (Most individuals, however, who have multiracial backgrounds do not make a conscious choice about racial identification, because the “one drop of blood rule” has defined them as fitting a monoracial category.) Racial identity, like sexual orientation, can therefore have a cognitive component for some individuals. That component becomes particularly apparent when we focus on certain individuals with multiracial backgrounds.

**B. Bipolar Classification Reinforces Pejorative Values**

Both the gay and straight communities often use the bipolar classification scheme to disparage bisexuals: “Switch-hitter. Swings both ways. Fence-sitter. AC/DC.” The term “hasbian,” developed by the gay and lesbian community, reflects this disparagement. Stacey Young offers this critique of the term:

I object to the expression because it defines a person only in terms of what she once was. To refer to a woman as a “hasbian” implies that all one need know about her is her relationship to that exalted state, lesbianism. The term “hasbian” also, of course, evokes the word “hasbeen” which Webster’s defines as “a person or thing which was formerly popular or effective, but is no longer so.” What interests, then, does this term serve? Who has the power to define here, and at whose expense?

These negative connotations detract from the desire of bisexuals to work politically within the gay and lesbian community, thereby depriving us of valuable political energy and leadership. For example, the poet Nina Silver felt torn whether to come “out” to her lesbian editor, Tori, who was to visit soon. When
she wrote to Tori and told her that she was living with a man, whom she had also married, Tori wrote back and said that she could no longer have a working relationship with Nina, nor could Nina read her lesbian love poetry at a woman’s bookstore. (The poems no longer genuinely reflected love for women.)

In a more public example of bisexual exclusion, the gay and lesbian community in one city decided to drop the word “bisexual” from the title of its lesbian and gay pride day march. A bisexual, Micki Siegel, had strongly supported the inclusion of the word “bisexual” in the march’s title. Two lesbians responded to Micki’s arguments in a gay newspaper by calling her “Mrs. Siegel” and criticizing her for trying to attach to the lesbian community rather than create a community of her own.21

An anonymous male political activist, who now identifies as gay rather than bisexual, summarizes the anti-bisexual sentiment that he has observed in the gay male community. Gay men, he reports, often believe that identifying as bisexual is:

a phony period of being pressured into conforming to society’s standards, and it’s a giving in to this pressure, therefore it’s a lie; it’s immaturity. . . . Another belief is that straights run the world and oppress gays. Gays are finally making progress. Progress is fragile, so you bisexuals shut up and let us gays have our time now. . . . Also, there is the belief that homosexuality, not heterosexuality is what people are really discriminating against, so bisexuality is a nonissue.22

My own experiences parallel those described by others. I was hurt and baffled when two lesbian friends explained that they would no longer be able to vacation with me once I became involved with a man. They had never met my male partner so they were speaking entirely from an abstract position; they could not imagine any man with whom they would want to
share social space in a vacation setting. Oddly enough, they had repeatedly vacationed with one of their sisters and her husband. My friendship, however, appeared to be contingent on my being a "pure lesbian." Similarly, I was shocked and dismayed when a feminist activist referred to me as a "hasbian" after I married a man, thereby erasing my feelings toward and experiences with women.

Ironically, the lesbian and gay community often criticizes female bisexuals for sleeping with men and diverting energy away from the lesbian community, but it is sometimes the actions of lesbians and gay men rather than our male partners that keep us from working politically in the lesbian community. For example, when I was asked to serve as an openly gay delegate to the Democratic National Convention, I replied that I did not think that would be appropriate since I was currently involved with a man. The person who had "nominated" me immediately responded by agreeing with my assessment of the situation. I learned that he later described the conversation to someone else and called me a "coward" for being a bisexual rather than a lesbian. It was not until I met a woman who identified herself as a bisexual and who explained to me that there was a bisexual community that I came to feel more comfortable with that label and orientation.

Today, I feel comfortable with the label of bisexual and cannot imagine being involved with a man (or woman) who did not share my feminist vision and commitment to equality for lesbian and gay people. By doing childcare, housework, food shopping, and so forth, my male partner facilitates my feminist and lesbian political work rather than hinders it. The assumption that the reverse would be true is obviously the result of stereotypical thinking about "all men" but, in addition, is deeply insulting about my taste and preferences. Why would
anyone think that I would pursue a relationship with anyone—male or female—that prevented me from doing legal and political work?

Not all lesbians and gay men have such a spiteful view of bisexuals. I have found, in fact, that some lesbians and gay men have been more supportive of my fluid sexuality than I have been myself. The gay and lesbian community also seems to have progressed in recent years toward greater inclusion of bisexuals; recent anthologies on bisexuality reflect this trend. Bisexuality, however, challenges people’s feelings and actions concerning inclusiveness. When women who have had sexual relations with people of both sexes, and who do not disavow those relationships as authentic expressions of love and commitment, can exist within the community of women in their wholeness rather than as stereotypes, then we will have created a more genuine feminist and lesbian politics.

Individuals who cross racial lines have suffered similar problems. Maria O’Brien Hylton was rejected by some members of the black community during the Northwestern Law School appointment process because she did not have a strong enough black identity. One member of the black community described Hylton as not authentically “black” because unlike most African-Americans, she was not the descendant of “twelve generations of enslaved Africans.” Other members of the black and Latino communities questioned whether Hylton would be a mentor and identify with the needs of minority students. Hylton’s multiracial background, along with her conservative law and economics views, made her an unacceptable candidate for some members of the black community.

Hylton’s story also reflects how these negative attitudes can make an individual feel uncomfortable in continuing to do political work within the black community. Before the controversy
surrounding her candidacy, Hylton described herself as being involved with many black community organizations and identified as “black.” This experience, however, caused her to say: “Woe unto the next black person they try to hire. . . . May he or she have really thick skin.”  

Certainly, Hylton will pause before she checks “black” on an employment application in the future, and possibly she will pause before joining a black organization, wondering if she will be considered “black enough” to be a proper member. If such categorizing causes Hylton to retreat from political work on behalf of the black community then the categorization battle will have had a profound negative effect on her and others.

Gregory Howard Williams similarly has been stymied by racial categorization. Williams is the child of a white mother and light-skinned black father who “passed” as white when Williams was a young child. Williams looks “white” but, subsequent to his parents’ divorce, was placed in an impoverished household with dark-skinned black relatives and friends. He tells a story of applying for a sheriff’s position with the Muncie Police Department. Due to political pressures, they needed to hire a black sheriff. Williams applied for the position so that he could support himself to finish his college degree. A local black minister opposed Williams’s appointment, claiming that the sheriff’s department was trying to hire him in order to preserve a “lily white” appearance. Responding to such political pressures, Williams considered withdrawing his name from consideration. A cousin gave him the following piece of advice which convinced him to remain in consideration: “Let the politicians worry about who’s black and who isn’t. Nobody in Muncie ever gave you any breaks just because you looked white. You’ve had to take just as much crap as anybody I know, black or white. . . . If you’re in a position to arrest some brothers, you
are gonna be fair—not like some of the hillbillies they got on the department.” The cousin’s prediction proved true, as Williams reportedly worked hard within the department to ensure that blacks and whites received fair treatment. Had he listened to the local minister, the community would have been deprived of Greg Williams’s fair policing and he might never have been able to afford to finish college, attend law school, and eventually become the Dean of the Ohio State University School of Law.

Categories also have debilitating effects on people with disabilities. Children’s behavior can be criticized or praised depending on whether they have been categorized as “disabled.” A story told to me by an activist in the community of people with disabilities illustrates this point. Two children are on a hike with their parents and need to urinate. The able-bodied boy goes discreetly behind a tree to urinate, and people say, “Oh, isn’t that cute—that boy needed to pee and went behind that tree.” Another child, with mental retardation, also goes discreetly behind a tree to urinate, and people say, “Oh, isn’t that horrible—that retarded boy has no control and had to pee in public!” The same behavior receives a different response depending upon the perceived category of the child. If we could move beyond labeling, we could respond to the children based on their behavior rather than on our stereotypes about the categories in which they belong.

II. Categories Can Serve Constructive Purposes

A. Categories Can Broaden People’s Understanding of Identity

Nonetheless, categories also have a positive utility. The label “bisexual” can threaten a society that orders itself on neat
bipolar concepts. The common stereotype of a bisexual person is one who always has at least two sexual partners. That stereotype arises out of the assumption that gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people are purely sexual creatures—at all moments being involved with all eligible sexual partners. (Society has trouble imagining a celibate or monogamous gay, lesbian, or bisexual person.)

Naming bisexuality can broaden people’s understanding of human sexual experiences by acknowledging the existence of a fluid spectrum rather than rigid bipolar categories. “Rather than naming an invisible, undernoticed minority now finding its place in the sun, ‘bisexual’ turns out to be, like bisexuals themselves, everywhere and nowhere. . . . The erotic discovery of bisexuality is the fact that it reveals sexuality to be a process of growth, transformation and surprise, not a stable and knowable state of being.” Bisexuality is not simply another static category.

The terms “gay” and “straight,” by contrast, assume a sexual exclusivity—that a person always only has sexual partners of the same or opposite sex:

These terms [gay and straight] are convenient simplifications for the idea that most people engage in sexual relations with only one sex. To get a clear perspective on the part homosexual behavior plays in the total range of American sexual experience, we should first take a look at bisexuality to evaluate its significance in the gay (and straight world). There are certainly far more individuals with bisexual experience than there are lifelong exclusive homosexuals.

For women, in particular, bisexuality often seems to be an accurate description of their feelings. In a 1976 Ms. Magazine article, a large number of women reported “that when they fell in love it was with a person rather than a gender.”

Gay and lesbian people have been defined by society so that
they have little identity beyond their sexual identity within mainstream culture. As one of my students once said, if you are defined as a lesbian, you have a lesbian breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Or, alternatively, as a gay activist in Louisiana observed, “I often wonder what people think I do in the two minutes of my day when I am supposed to not be engaged in sex!” Bisexual people can also be defined in that way—as irresistibly sexual creatures for whom everyone is a prospective sex partner.

There are many ways to deal with this problem. One common method is to insist that the words lesbian, gay, or bisexual are modifiers rather than nouns. In the disability rights movement, that linguistic move is commonplace. The preferred term is “person with a disability” to emphasize that an individual is a “person” who also has a disability. Unfortunately, that construction is a bit awkward. One would have to say, for example, I am a person who is bisexual, able-bodied, Jewish, white, middle-aged, middle-class, androgynous, and so forth, in order to emphasize that no one aspect of our identity defines us. Such constructions, however, are often preferable to such shorthand phrases as “the disabled” which suggest that one’s entire existence is defined by one’s disability status.

Labels can also help overcome the practical limitations of storytelling. For example, when asked about my sexual orientation, I could say, “I am currently married to a man but find both men and women sexually attractive” rather than say “I am a bisexual.” That kind of storytelling could emphasize the fluid way that I define my sexual orientation. Unfortunately, such storytelling is not always practical. Moreover, in cases such as mine, most people probably just attach the label “married woman” to me with its assumptions about exclusive heterosexuality without even inquiring about my sexual orientation. Use of a simple category such as “bisexual” can force
people to move quickly beyond their assumptions about my sexual orientation even if that label is problematic. One can hope that once a person learns that I attach the label “bisexual” to myself despite my married status that that individual would approach me and ask what the term “bisexual” means to me. At that time, I could try to describe the phrase’s fluid meaning to me.

If it is true that far more people have experienced a bisexual lifestyle than is commonly recognized, why is bisexuality so often ignored? Ignoring bisexuality allows society to perpetuate the stereotype that sexuality is rigidly dichotomous. That stereotype is male and white in that it hides women’s and African-American men’s sexual feelings and experiences. Theologian John J. McNeill describes the impoverishment of the bipolar imagery of homosexuality and heterosexuality which is prevalent in our society:

The tendency to identify oneself as a person with one’s sexual-identity image can, and frequently does, lead to a one-sided stress on certain qualities and the elimination of others. The heterosexual tends to define himself in contrast to the homosexual; the homosexual, in turn, tends to define himself in contrast to the heterosexual. The result is a narrow, impoverished, and dehumanizing self-image for both parties.

McNeill’s argument helps emphasize the importance of defining bisexuality with regard to feelings as well as conduct. In the Ms. Magazine study, many women described their sexual orientation based on their feelings of attraction toward men and women rather than based on their experiences in sexual relationships. Similarly, Weinberg found a much higher incidence of bisexuality among women if he inquired about their sexual feelings rather than sexual behaviors. A more humanistic understanding of sexuality therefore would go beyond our
conduct and try to understand our feelings. Since only our conduct is readily visible, this observation challenges each of us to verbalize our feelings about our sexuality in order to help society move beyond a narrow, noncontextual, and rigid understanding of sexuality. Saying the word "bisexual" aloud can help us begin to verbalize those feelings.

Finally, embracing the category of bisexuality would help society recognize that one can find an organizing principle other than biological sex to define sexual attractiveness. The labels homosexual and heterosexual are premised on the concept that biological sex is an organizing principle in the selection of a sexual partner. Only bisexuality challenges the significance that biological sex should have in one of the most important activities in our lives—our choice of sexual partner. As Weinberg reports: "instead of organizing their sexuality in terms of the traditional gender schema, bisexuals do so in terms of an 'open gender schema,' a perspective that disconnects gender and sexual preference, making the direction of sexual desire (toward the same or opposite sex) independent of a person's own gender (whether a man or a woman)." This is a powerful message so long as people do not indulge in the stereotype that bisexuals are attracted to everyone. Bisexuals have organizing principles for determining whom they find attractive; that organizing principle simply is not biological sex.

Similarly, multiracial status in the United States is largely rendered invisible through our use of racial bipolar categories. As we will see in chapters 5 and 8, our legal system pervasively has insisted that people classify themselves as white or black with no room to check off a multiracial box. Accordingly, multiracial groups in the United States have begun to organize politically to proclaim their right to be counted as multiracial. In contrast to sexual orientation, however, no clear consensus
exists that multiracial categories are appropriate or desirable. Because nearly all African-Americans are, in fact, of multiracial heritage, some people argue that recognizing the multiracial category will dilute the number of people recognized as African-American. This disagreement reflects the inherently political nature of such categories; the categories do not have any intrinsic meaning. If we recognize that categories are artificial because human behavior and experience exist on a spectrum, then we can be mindful of the implications of categories as we create them. The fact that we use certain categories for census reporting does not mean that we have to use them in the context of affirmative action.

Ongoing controversies over racial identity re-emphasize the point made earlier that racial identity is not entirely a biological or anthropological construct. Although we tend to think of race as a given, some people clearly make choices concerning their racial identity. The very existence of a multiracial identity movement, therefore, represents a positive political development because it emphasizes the socially constructed aspects of racial identity. It draws people's attention to the fact that we make decisions about how to label people racially. There is no "natural" racial categorization system.

Disability categorization also creates controversy although the dimensions of the problems are different. As with racial minorities, there is no monolithic understanding within or outside of the community of people with disabilities as to whom should get covered by various statutes. For example, people often complain that the Americans with Disabilities Act should not cover physical problems such as obesity. These comments are often premised on inaccurate stereotypes of such people, rooted in a belief that they "choose" their disability or are responsible for their problems. Real life stories can help over-
come those stereotypes. In one poignant exchange on the internet, someone with a disability complained about people who are obese being considered disabled because they could control their weight. An obese individual wrote back, explaining that a physiological condition precluded her from losing weight; she also documented the extensive discrimination she suffered because of her body size. The original writer immediately recanted his criticism, ironically noting that his own disabilities precluded him from gaining weight. Yet, it had never occurred to him that people who are obese also can have physiological problems affecting their body weight. By putting a story behind the labels, these individuals were able to overcome their stereotypes. Had there been no way to identify the subcategory of "obesity" within the label "disabled," this helpful exchange might not have occurred.

B. Categories Can Serve Ameliorative Purposes

Not only are categories needed to facilitate ordinary conversation, but they are needed for legislative purposes. We have to define who is "gay, lesbian, or bisexual" if we are to create nondiscrimination statutes, same-sex partner registration, or affirmative action.

Similarly, we need categories in the race context to develop affirmative action. Who should qualify for such programs? The Hylton controversy brings this question explicitly to the forefront. Why do we have affirmative action? Should Hylton have been rendered ineligible because of her economic background, unwillingness to promise to serve as a "black" role model, or because of her racial background, light skin, or conservative politics? We need to articulate more precisely why we have
affirmative action in the education context to know how to resolve Hylton’s candidacy.

Nonetheless, the implications of a bi perspective are not monolithic. A bi perspective on sexual orientation and gender may be very different from a bi perspective on race and disability. An individual who identifies as a bisexual may only be making a statement about her feelings. If she has not formed sexual relations with people of both biological sexes during her lifetime, she is not making a statement about actions. In other cases, it may reflect a statement about her actions. In virtually no case will a bisexual identity reflect a statement about her discernable physical appearance or family history.

Similarly, a bi perspective on gender usually reflects a statement about feelings or attitudes. Embracing a “bi” identity often means that one rejects or questions the traits that are considered “normal” for one’s biological sex. A bi perspective on gender may also reflect a statement about actions. A person may cross-dress, pursue a nontraditional occupation, or even have surgery to align one’s biological self with one’s psychological self. These actions or traits may also make an individual visually discernable as transgendered, although many individuals who are transgendered “pass” as fitting one pole of the bipolar categorization scheme.

By contrast, a bi perspective on race may not correspond to any particular feelings, attitudes, or life experiences. In some cases, such as that of Scales-Trent, one may be light skinned and appear “white” but identify as black because both of one’s parents are black. Society may view Scales-Trent as multiracial or even white because of her appearance, yet she self-identifies as black. Like some multiracial individuals, Scales-Trent may easily “pass” as belonging to one pole of the bipolar categoriza-
tion scheme. Some of these individuals have a strong self-identity of being multiracial, and resent society trying to force them into the categories of black or white. Nonetheless, most individuals who have multiracial family histories prefer to be considered members of a monolithic racial category such as “black.” Being multiracial can therefore be a statement about identity or can simply be a statement about one’s ancestry. Often, it is physically indiscernible and may be unknown to the individual herself.

There is no parallel social movement for individuals who are between categories of disability. There is not even a label for this category. Thus, it is hard to argue that lying between categories can be a source of identity. In some cases, however, individuals who lie between disability categories have received public attention as “unworthy” of being considered disabled. For example, in one Wall Street Journal article, reporter Heather MacDonald questioned why mental impairments, drug addiction and alcoholism, and learning disabilities should be labeled as “disabilities” under the Social Security Act, because individuals with these disabilities purportedly “choose” or fabricate these impairments for financial gain. In a broadscale critique of “learning disorders,” she reports that “stories abound of parents coaching their kids to misbehave in school or fail their tests . . . to ensure that they will fall back several grades and thus fail the ‘age-appropriate’ test” so that their parents can receive a monetary windfall. Her claim that “stories abound” of parents coaching their kids to misbehave is seemingly based on one isolated story from Wynne, Arkansas. Nowhere does she mention that most children only receive money to pay for designated medical and educational needs to specified providers. By disputing that these children have any genuine disabilities and by promoting the stereotype that their parents
coerce their children into appearing disabled for money, MacDonald heightens the mistreatment of individuals who fit between the categories able-bodied and disabled. Her article highlights the need for us to recognize the category of people who are somewhat disabled yet do not fit the stereotype of the “truly disabled” in order to make sure that they are receiving assistance in the face of public criticism like that of MacDonald.

One purpose of MacDonald’s article was to criticize the Supreme Court decision, *Sullivan v. Zebley*, in which the Court concluded that the Social Security Administration had too restrictive a definition of “disability” for the purpose of determining whether a child qualified for Supplemental Social Security. The Social Security Administration’s definition failed to include such obviously disabling impairments as spina bifida, Down’s syndrome, muscular dystrophy, autism, AIDS, infant drug dependency, and fetal alcohol syndrome. Plaintiff Brian Zebley had been denied SSI despite the fact that he had congenital brain damage, mental retardation, development delay, eye problems, and musculoskeletal impairment, because his problems did not meet or equal any single disability category. The Supreme Court required the Social Security Administration to move to a more functional approach so that children who fell between discrete categories, and combined categories of disabilities could be covered by SSI. MacDonald’s broadside would leave such children unprotected by federal law.

The *New York Times* also published a critique of special education programs for children diagnosed as learning disabled but, unlike the *Wall Street Journal*, chose to attack a program at one of New York’s elite private schools. In that article, the schools and parents were not criticized for trying to get a free financial windfall from the government; instead, the parents were criticized for going along with researchers who told them
that their children had learning disabilities. The parents of the children in the elite school often supplemented the free special education that was offered to their children with additional special education. In their case, the diagnosis of a learning disability was costly. The combination of the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* stories suggest that parents of all classes want educational and medical assistance for their children with disabilities. The skepticism displayed by the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* suggests that schools and parents are wise to devote whatever resources are available to solving these problems since mainstream society is unlikely to empathize with their children’s problems. These children do not appear to be “truly disabled” yet need our assistance because they fit into an unnamed middle category.

A bi perspective therefore provides us with different insights on race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. The implications of living between categories also varies enormously within categories. A bi perspective requires that we be very attentive to context. Nonetheless, openly transcending categories makes a difference, one worth exploring.

**III. The Critical Aspects of a Bi Perspective**

Critical theorists have offered arguments parallel to, yet different from, my bi perspective. Angela Harris and Kimberlé Crenshaw have questioned how feminists have historically used the word “woman” to mean “white woman” and how civil rights activists have used the word “black” to apply to all persons with any African-American heritage. They have also questioned how judges have tried to force African-American plaintiffs in discrimination lawsuits to fit the category “woman” or “black” without considering the intersections of race and gen-
der. This is sometimes called "intersectionality" theory. Other critical theorists, such as Scales-Trent, have questioned how lawmakers have created the labels "black" or "colored" to force multiracial individuals to conform to a single racial category.

The Harris and Crenshaw critiques of racial categories are somewhat different from the critique offered by Scales-Trent. Harris and Crenshaw consider how an individual crosses several categories—race, religion, and gender. They accept the fact, however, that such markers as "black" have an intrinsic meaning. They are therefore interested in the special ways in which race, religion, and gender intersect to construct identity. Scales-Trent adds to the discussion by considering the ambiguity of the categorical markers themselves; in particular, she focuses on the ambiguity of racial markers. Scales-Trent’s intersections lie within; they are really intrasections.

The Scales-Trent critique, as opposed to the Crenshaw or Harris views, parallels the bi perspective found in this book, insofar as a bi perspective is an intracategorical perspective rather than an intercategorical perspective. A bi perspective can provide us with special insights that we might attain through an intracategorical perspective that are overlooked in the work of Crenshaw or Harris. Questioning the meaningfulness of the labels that they employ can add to intersectionality theory.

In applying a bi perspective to race, I have asked myself why critical race theorists have not tended to ask the intrasection questions that are central to my perspective as a bisexual. The answer, I believe, depends upon the difference between the constructions of our sexual orientation and our race. One of the first components of our identity is race: are we African-American? Caucasian? Asian-American? We consider it to be a given, an immutable fact. The significance of that racial identity
may differ but it is something we "know" like most of us "know" our gender. Our sexual orientation is something that we discover as we grow older. In particular, people who have come to identify with a minority sexual identity have had to grapple with the recognition that they have moved away from the expected category, heterosexuality, to another category such as homosexuality or bisexuality. Intracategorical movement is therefore a typical experience for people who are members of a minority sexual-orientation category but is not a typical experience for people who are members of a minority racial category.

Nonetheless, a bi perspective needs to investigate racial categories because they are, in fact, as socially constructed as sexual orientation categories. Anthropologists, for example, believe that there is insufficient difference between supposed human racial categories to constitute genuine racial categories. In addition, anthropologists agree that the vast majority of people who are labeled as "African-American" have a multiracial background. The fact that most of us do not investigate our race to question whether we belong in a monoracial category reflects the power of socialization rather than any biological reality. Thus, although multiracial existence may be quite different from bisexual or transgender existence, it is worth examining closely, as it reveals the social construction of bipolar racial categories. A bi perspective may therefore enhance our understanding of race by encouraging us to make an intracategorical investigation of racial categories. It is essential that a bi perspective investigate sexual orientation, gender, race, and disability to provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the construction of bipolar injustice in our society.