Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics

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Lesbians’ Voices: What Do Lesbians Think about Bisexuality and Its Role in Sexual Politics?

A few of the women who participated in this study might have, on occasion, written a letter to Out/Look or an article for a regional lesbian newsletter, but most have not. The women who participated in this study are the women who read these letters and articles and respond to them privately. If they care about the issues raised, they might discuss them with personal friends; if they do not care, they might never finish reading the article. Whatever their thoughts and opinions, they do not appear in print and do not become a matter of public record. Yet, these are the thoughts and opinions of the lesbian community. Does this silent majority share the opinions expressed by the women whose voices appear in print? Do they consider the issues debated in the lesbian press to be important enough to have an opinion about? How do lesbians really feel about bisexuality, bisexual women, and social and political relations between lesbians and bisexual women? How do their feelings about bisexuality reflect their thoughts and feelings about who they are and what they stand for as lesbians?

Participants in this study answered several questions about their attitudes toward sexuality, bisexuality, and bisexual women. The most
important question was a very simple open-ended one, “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” Although this question would seem to be a straightforward request for an opinion, the answers women gave revealed much more than that. The value of this question lies in the fact that it allowed women to define the issue of bisexuality themselves, in their own words, and then to respond to the issue as they saw it. Every lesbian respondent read the same question, but each transformed this question into her own before giving an answer. These answers therefore reveal what the issues are as well as how lesbians feel about them.

One of the most controversial issues is the question of whether bisexuality exists at all. This question was raised either explicitly or implicitly by more than half of the lesbians in the study, and the answers given covered the entire gamut from “it does not exist” to “everyone is inherently bisexual.” Nearly as important is the issue of defining bisexuality; if bisexuality exists, what is it? Those lesbians who agree with each other that bisexuality exists disagree over what it is that they are talking about. Not only do lesbians have a variety of definitions of bisexuality, but these definitions of bisexuality reveal fundamental differences in the way lesbians think about sexuality in general and about the philosophical and political relationships between lesbianism and bisexuality.

Once the questions of existence and definition are answered, the question “What are bisexuals like?” arises. Lesbians hold a variety of beliefs about bisexual women, particularly about bisexuals’ personal characteristics, sexual proclivities, and political allegiances. A few respondents not only described bisexual women, but compared lesbian and bisexual lifestyles in terms of their social and political implications or consequences. Finally, most respondents did answer the question that was asked, “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” by describing their own personal feelings about bisexuality and bisexual women.

In this chapter, I describe the variety in lesbians’ images of and feelings about bisexual women; then, in chapters 5 and 6 I will analyze the individual and historical bases of these attitudes.

**Does Bisexuality Exist?**

This question is central to the debate about bisexuality. It is a fundamental issue over which there is considerable disagreement among lesbians,
setting the stage for further disputes over the finer points of bisexuality. While some women answered this question with an unqualified “no” or “yes,” others expressed more complex beliefs about the circumstances under which bisexuality might exist, the likelihood that people who appear to be bisexual are really true bisexuals, and the legitimacy of bisexuality as a sexual orientation. Figure 4.1 illustrates the proportion of lesbians in this study who hold certain opinions on the question of bisexual existence, but the great variety in their beliefs can only be appreciated by examining the actual comments of women who hold each opinion.

Lesbians Who Are Skeptical

There is widespread skepticism among lesbians about the existence of bisexuality. Very few lesbian respondents stated explicitly and unequivocally that there is no such thing as bisexuality, but many expressed serious doubts about whether it exists. In all, nearly one out of four lesbian respondents tends to believe that it does not exist (figure 4.1). Many of these women explained their opinions by providing descriptions of that which they do not believe exists. These definitions reveal that they base their opinions on a variety of different images of this nonexistent form of sexuality. For example,

- It does not exist. To be bisexual would mean that a person were simultaneously involved in an intimate sexual relationship with a man and a woman. It is possible but would be better described as schizophrenic. (Marlene)

- Bisexuality is a transition and exploration phase. Women may have sex with men and women but I think it's only possible to fall in love consistently with one sex or the other. (Stephanie)

- I don't believe it exists . . . I believe it's impossible to love men and women 50–50. One has to have stronger feelings one way or the other. (Naomi)

These three women have three very different definitions of what bisexuality would be if it existed. Marlene defines bisexuality as simultaneous sexual involvement with both a man and a woman. Stephanie clearly rejects this definition, saying that it doesn’t matter whom one has sex with; she defines sexuality in terms of “consistent” feelings of love.
Naomi is the most restrictive, defining a bisexual as someone who has exactly equal feelings of love for women and men. Arguing that such phenomena would be rare or impossible, these women conclude that bisexuality is nonexistent or, as in the case of Marlene, a form of mental illness.

Other women have broader definitions of bisexuality but still believe it does not exist. For example, Julia defines bisexuality as a simultaneous attraction to women and men, but because she believes that attraction to women and attraction to men are antithetical, she does not believe that simultaneous attraction would be possible:

...it is very hard for me to conceive of a woman who is emotionally and physically attracted to women being also similarly attracted to men. I do not feel the two can co-exist. (Julia)

Many lesbians pointed out that some people claim to be bisexual, believe themselves to be bisexual, or behave bisexually, but argued that this bisexuality is illusory. Some fell short of actually saying explicitly that bisexuality does not exist, but the implication was unmistakable. For example, Karen believes that women who claim to be bisexual are really lesbians who either haven’t realized it yet, or who are trying to preserve their heterosexual privilege or avoid stigma:

My experience of women who define themselves as bisexual suggests that bisexual women are either really “lesbian” but using the bisexual label to preserve their heterosexual privilege in society or on their way to becoming a lesbian and using the bisexual label as a “safe” transition stage or experimenting with lesbianism but not in a serious way (“sexual tourists”). (Karen)

Other skeptics argued that claims of bisexuality are the result of confusion, youthful immaturity, lack of self-knowledge, indecisiveness, conformism, mental illness, or attempts to gain the acceptance of both the lesbian and heterosexual communities, to get the best of both worlds, to avoid stigma, or to avoid taking a political stand. Each of these beliefs about women who claim to be bisexual will be examined later in this chapter.

A number of lesbians were more circumspect about expressing their skepticism. They really don’t believe that bisexuality exists, but they are willing to reserve their final judgment. For example, Jerri wrote, “I find it hard to believe that people can be bisexual since it is so removed from
my experience.” She left open the possibility that bisexuality really does exist and that her disbelief is a result of her inability to relate to it. Some lesbians’ comments even contained a note of sympathy, as did Barbara’s: “I am not convinced that it is a true entity but instead may represent a label attached to the group of people who are still struggling with their sexual identity and sexual preference.”

Other women harbor clear-cut doubts about whether all bisexuality is illusory, leaving open the possibility that a few women who claim to be bisexual might in fact be true bisexuals or that they themselves might be wrong in assuming that bisexuality does not exist. Some of these women took pains to explain that their opinions about bisexuality are based on limited experience with bisexual women or on their own experience of identifying as bisexual when they were coming out, and apologetically acknowledged that their impressions of bisexuality might be inaccurate. For example, Donna admitted her ignorance,

I don’t think about it much. I don’t think I’m well informed on the subject because I don’t know one person who calls herself bisexual. My uninformed tendency is to believe that bisexuals don’t know yet whether they are gay or straight and one day will decide. (Donna)

Sally apologetically drew conclusions based on her own experience and the experience of her friends,

As I said before, I’d rather not label anyone—however, the bisexual people I know are rather confused—not sure where their “loyalty” lies. This is the way I felt pretty much during the two years I thought I might be bi. (Sally)

and Mona did not entirely rule out the possibility of bisexuality, although she is inclined to disbelieve people who say they are bisexual:

Although I think many bisexual women are really lesbians who haven’t reached the point of being able to say so (just a period of transition), I believe there are people who are truly bisexual. However, I know few bisexuals and am pretty ignorant of the subject. (Mona)

According to Mona, and several other lesbians who share her opinion, bisexuality is indeed a valid, albeit rare, orientation. Although they tend to be skeptical of other women’s claims of bisexuality, they believe that among the many women who appear to be bisexual or who call themselves bisexual there are a few women who really are truly bisexual.
Liberal Opinions and Mixed Feelings

Several lesbian women in this study stated that sexuality is a private matter and that people have the right to do or be what they want (figure 4.1). This liberal opinion leaves the question of bisexual existence open; presumably, these respondents believe that a woman is bisexual if she says she is and that there is no universal definition of bisexuality on which to base an opinion as to whether bisexuality exists. Several of these women said simply, “to each her own,” while others like Sue were only slightly more verbose: “Each of us has a right and a responsibility ‘to thine own self be true.’ Another person’s sexual preference is not my business or concern.”

Surprisingly few women expressed ambivalence or mixed thoughts about bisexuality. One of these women appears to be in a state of acute conflict over the question of bisexual existence,

I believe in it and yet I don’t. Which I guess means that while I know what it is (?) I don’t understand it. But then I do. I wonder how can anyone know what gender they really are attracted to. And yet the men some bi women go with! (Amy)

but others seem to be quite content with their mixed feelings:

My gut reaction is to think it’s a cop-out for people who can’t admit their homosexuality, but my intellectual reaction is much more positive. I have to think a lot to hold these negative feelings in check when dealing with bisexuals. (Sharon)

Bisexuality Exists

The question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” which sparked all of the comments quoted above, is a very simple, direct question. But even simple questions contain assumptions. The assumption behind this question is that there is, in fact, something called bisexuality that one might have an opinion about. In other words, the question itself presupposes the answer to the question “Does bisexuality exist?” to be “yes.” Respondents who believe that bisexuality does not exist could not answer the question as asked. Before they could answer the question, they had to challenge the assumption that bisexuality exists by stating that it does not exist. In contrast, respondents who believe that bisexuality does
exist could passively accept the question’s assumption and write an
answer without giving a thought to the question of bisexual existence.

More than a third of the lesbian women who answered this question
did exactly that (figure 4.1). They accepted the premise of the question
that bisexuality exists and chose to discuss other issues relevant to
bisexuality, referring to bisexuality as a real phenomenon. For example,
Ruth commented that “this lifestyle could present problems,” and Chris
stated “I admire them and welcome them into our community.” It is,
therefore, reasonably safe to assume that these women, who comprised
a plurality of the lesbians in the study, believe that bisexuality exists.

Given the ease with which lesbians who believe in bisexual existence
could overlook the question of bisexual existence, however, it is surpris-
ing that nearly one out of five lesbians nevertheless stated explicitly that
she believes that bisexuality exists (figure 4.1). Why would so many
women have felt it necessary to state that which had already been
assumed? Apparently, the question of bisexual existence is a salient one
in lesbians’ minds and they did not feel that the assumption could be
taken for granted. The women’s answers suggest that they were re-
spending to an unspoken assertion that bisexuality does not exist, as if
they had already read the answers of the women who do not believe that
bisexuality exists and were responding to these answers instead of to the
question that was written in the questionnaire. For example, Anne
wrote, “I think many people are genuinely bisexual. I am often sad that
the lesbian community can be so closed to bisexuality.”

Many women described bisexuality as a valid, legitimate, or natural
sexual orientation, or as one aspect of human sexual diversity. Com-
ments by these women included “It is as valid a choice as any other,”
“A legitimate option,” “It’s one kind of sexual preference,” “it is a state
of being that some people exist in,” “It’s a valid orientation,” “It is as
natural as any other sexual orientation,” and “It is one aspect of the
wide spectrum of human sexual identity.” One terse respondent said
simply, “It exists.”

Not every woman who believes bisexuality exists feels positively
about it. Some women believe it exists, but are either indifferent to
bisexuals or dislike them:

I feel it is a significant reality so I accept it. (Siana)

Some people are this way. They are set on both sexes (not undecided).
I prefer not to socialize with them. When they do I feel intruded upon.
I have no interest in dating or having sex with bisexual women. They have men in their lives and I want nothing to do with them. (Keesha)

But most of the women who took time to defend the existence of bisexuality do feel positively about it and believe that it should be recognized as a sexual orientation on a par with lesbianism and heterosexuality.

Everyone Is Bisexual

Alongside the ever-present charge that bisexuality does not exist, there is also another idea about bisexuality that winds its way through the lesbian debate over bisexuality—the idea that everyone, or almost everyone, is really bisexual. This idea, expressed by one lesbian in six, recalls Freud’s assertion that each individual is born with an unshaped sexual potential that becomes focused on particular objects as the individual matures psychologically and socially. Individuals whose sexual energies become focused on people of the other sex are heterosexuals and individuals whose sexual energies become focused on people of their own sex are homosexuals. It follows, therefore, that the unshaped sexual potential is a bisexual potential; everyone is born with the potential to relate sexually with either people of the other sex or people of their own sex.

For example,

I think all of us are basically bisexual. We each have the potential to have sexual,affectional, emotional feelings for persons of either gender. (Ellen)

It’s fine. I believe all people are capable of the gamut of sexual experience. (Kim)

Bisexuality is the ability of an individual to be sexually and emotionally attracted to either sex. I believe the majority of people have this capability if they were truly in tune with their feelings. (Renee)

These three comments reveal slight differences in the way these three respondents conceptualize bisexual potential. Ellen conceptualizes it as the capacity to have sexual and emotional feelings for both genders, whereas Kim conceptualizes it as the potential to have actual sexual experiences with both genders. Ellen and Kim made blanket statements that all people have bisexual potential, whereas Renée’s comment is a bit less sweeping; she believes that a majority of people have this potential. All three believe that bisexuality is no more than a potential and
that many people might never realize this potential by having actual feelings or sexual experiences with both genders.

The idea that people are initially or potentially bisexual but then "sort themselves out" into lesbianism and heterosexuality is a recurrent theme in lesbians' comments. This argument allows lesbians to reconcile a belief in the prevalence of bisexuality with the scarcity of people who actually appear to be bisexual. Some respondents expressed this distinction between potential and actual sexuality as a distinction between being and doing,

\[ \text{In truth what we all are . . . what few can possibly practice. (Nancy)} \]

or as a distinction between potential feelings and actual behavior:

\[ \text{I believe that people have the possibility of falling in love with either gender but love and sexuality are not always equated. (Carol)} \]

Others argued that social and political factors cause the transformation of bisexual potential into monosexual reality. These factors include homophobia that prevents women from recognizing their attraction for other women,

\[ \text{It seems to be a natural development of most people, in terms of desire. Because of this country's homophobia, the practice of bisexuality seems less common. (Judith)} \]

rejection of bisexpals by both the lesbian and heterosexual communities,

\[ \text{Actually I think most people are bisexual. They just tend to identify with one sexuality because it's practically impossible to switch back and forth without being ostracized from your peers. (Maureen)} \]

the lack of a supportive bisexual community,

\[ \text{I think that it is very common, if not ubiquitous for women to be sexually attracted to both sexes at some times in their lives . . . I think it must be difficult to maintain a bisexual lifestyle because of the lack of a support community. I think people tend to sort themselves at one node or another. (Pamela)} \]

socialization,

\[ \text{I think it would be many people's choice if we were not taught to identify as either straight or gay. (Jane)} \]

or personal experiences:
... by nature we are all bisexual. Our choices are based mostly on social sex roles, somewhat on who's there for us when we're ready to be sexual. (Alice)

Many lesbians described an ideal society in which these social and political factors would not operate, and in which everyone would be able to express the full range of their sexual capacities without constraint. Some stated simply that in such a society, bisexuality would be more common. For example, Cindy thinks that "it is a state of being that some people exist in and that in a different society and time maybe we would all have the capacity for.” Others argued that bisexuality itself would be a different phenomenon in an ideal society than it is in contemporary society. In the ideal society, bisexuality itself would be ideal, i.e., desirable and even beneficial. But under current political circumstances, bisexuality takes on a very different meaning:

In a perfect world perhaps it would be the norm... however, this is not a perfect world... so... I think bisexuality is often a way of keeping at bay the bad/negative aspects of homophobia while enjoying a lot of the good parts of the lesbian community. (Rebecca)

... really I believe humans are "naturally" bisexual or multisexual. But in contemporary culture, I think sexuality is so tied to emotional and political issues that to be bisexual is to refuse to make a stand. (Margaret)

Among lesbians who believe that bisexuality would be the norm in an ideal society but are unable to accept it in this society, some experience their mixed feelings as ambivalence, or are confused by their own contradictory emotions:

Part of me would like to believe that there can exist a perfect society, truly spiritual, whole, undiscriminate (sic), where women, men have become, have progressed to a sexless society—which then allows one to call themselves bisexual (for want of a better term.) (Joan)

I think that ideally all people are born with the physical potential to relate to both sexes... Today I feel as if society is so repressive that our sexuality is less fluid. I have nothing against women or men who are bisexual. I guess emotionally I feel some kind of resentment for some unknown reason! (Laura)

Not all lesbians who believe that most or all people are bisexual used concepts like "potential" or "ideal" to explain this belief. Many
asserted that bisexuality is universal or widespread here and now. Among these lesbians, references to a continuum of sexuality or to “degrees” of sexuality/bisexuality were frequent. For example, June feels that “most people, women and men, are to a certain extent bisexual—but this constitutes a continuous scale, not clear distinctions between straight, bisexual, or gay.” Although there are differences of opinion over whether and where to draw the lines that distinguish bisexuality from lesbianism and heterosexuality on this continuum, many of these women see bisexuality as overlapping lesbianism and heterosexuality. These respondents typically argued that although most or all people are “bisexual to a degree,” most lean toward one direction or the other and are therefore “really” lesbian or heterosexual and should identify themselves as such. Apparently, on the sexual scale conceived by these lesbians, bisexuality encompasses the entire continuum with the presumed exception of the extreme endpoints, whereas lesbianism and heterosexuality encompass the entire continuum with the exception of the area immediately surrounding the midpoint. This conception of sexuality allowed these women to state that most or all people are bisexual while also asserting that women who call themselves bisexual are sometimes or frequently denying their own lesbianism. For example,

I think everyone is bisexual to some degree. It is difficult for me to believe someone could be equally satisfied in a relationship with a man or woman. Some people hide behind this label because it’s more acceptable than being gay. (Nel)

Thus, the concept of a sexual continuum, like the concepts of an ideal society or an unrealized sexual “potential,” enables lesbians to reconcile beliefs about the universality of bisexuality with beliefs about the political undesirability of bisexuality or the suspicious quality of those who call themselves bisexual in this society.

Summary

The issue of whether or not bisexuality exists is a salient one among lesbians. Although the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” made no explicit reference to the issue of bisexual existence, more than half of lesbian respondents chose to address this issue more or less directly in their answers. This finding is all the more remarkable because
many of those who addressed the issue believe that bisexuality exists. Within the context of a question that presumed bisexual existence, statements affirming bisexual existence were unnecessary. Apparently, the minority that does not believe in bisexuality is vocal enough to create a climate in which other lesbians feel compelled to assert their belief that bisexuality does exist.

In fact, the lesbians who participated in this study are as likely to believe that everyone or almost everyone is potentially bisexual as they are to believe that bisexuality does not exist. But the fact that no one except the proponents of the idea of a universal bisexual potential mentioned it indicates that this idea is less salient in discourse about bisexuality among lesbians. Apparently the idea of universal bisexuality, despite its popularity, has less impact on lesbian symbolic culture than the idea that bisexuality does not exist; the idea of universal bisexuality does not “hang in the air” as an idea to be reckoned with.

The finding that the question of bisexual existence is so important to lesbians is a bit surprising, given that the existence of bisexuality was not constructed as an issue in any of the lesbian and/or gay publications I examined in chapter 1. In The Lesbian and Gay Press, the issue is not whether bisexuality does exist, but whether bisexuality should exist, what its political implications are, and whether it belongs in The Lesbian and Gay Movement. The “issue of bisexuality” as it is presented in The Lesbian and Gay Press does not accurately reflect the issue as it is seen by the “lesbian-on-the-street.” However, by overlooking the issue of bisexual existence and focusing on the implications of bisexuality, The Press accurately, albeit implicitly, reflects the fact that most lesbians believe that there is something called bisexuality.

**WHAT IS BISEXUALITY? OR, WILL THE REAL LESBIAN PLEASE STAND UP?**

If bisexuality does exist, then what is it? Is it a feeling or is it a lifestyle? Is it a preference or a choice? Is it sexual nondiscrimination or sexual indiscriminacy? Although most lesbian respondents believe bisexuality exists, for many this is the only point on which they agree; there are
almost as many conceptions of bisexuality among lesbians as there are lesbians who believe it exists.

The question of what constitutes bisexuality is inextricably entwined with the question of what is lesbianism. By defining the boundaries of bisexuality, we define the boundaries of lesbianism, and vice versa. Sometimes the distinction between bisexuality and lesbianism is clear; a woman whose lovers have all been women and whose romantic and sexual feelings are exclusively same-sex is a lesbian, and a woman who has had equal numbers of female and male partners and feels equally attracted to women and men is a bisexual. But few of us fit either of these ideal images. Most of us have had some combination of female and male sexual partners, and many of us have some degree of sexual attraction toward men. Where, then, do we draw the line between lesbianism and bisexuality? How do we decide who is the real lesbian—indeed, whether we ourselves are real lesbians—and who is bisexual?

Nearly half of the lesbians who participated in this study provided definitions of bisexuality when they answered the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” Analysis of these definitions showed that there are a small number of criteria, which, like building blocks, are applied and combined in unique ways by each individual. The most commonly used criteria are behavior, used by nearly two-fifths of lesbian respondents, and feelings, used by one-quarter. Other criteria include identity, preferences, choices, and the importance of gender.

Bisexuality as a Matter of Behavior

Many lesbians define bisexuality in terms of behavior. In the opinions of these women, one is bisexual if one behaves bisexualy. But what is bisexual behavior? Lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of behavior concur that the bisexual lifestyle involves some form of sexual contact with both women and men, but beyond this basic point, agreement breaks down. What kind of sexual contact is necessary to qualify one as bisexual? Is casual sexual contact sufficient, or must sexual contact occur within the framework of a serious romantic relationship? How much sexual contact with each sex is necessary—is a single experience with one or the other sex sufficient, or must a person have considerable sexual experience with both sexes in order to be considered bisexual? Must one enjoy these sexual contacts? Must one have exactly equal
amounts of homosexual and heterosexual experience? Can homosexual and heterosexual experiences occur serially, or does bisexuality imply that homosexual and heterosexual relationships occur simultaneously? Differences of opinion exist on all these questions.

Compare, for example, the following two definitions of bisexuality:

A person who has sex with both women and men. (Jill)

To be bisexual would mean that a person were simultaneously involved in an intimate sexual relationship with a man and a woman. (Marlene)

Both of these women define a bisexual person as one who has sexual relations with both women and men, but they have very different ideas about the kinds of sexual relations that constitute bisexuality. In Jill’s opinion, merely having both homosexual and heterosexual physical relations is sufficient to qualify one as bisexual. The context, quantity, and quality of these sexual relations are irrelevant. Marlene has a much narrower definition of bisexuality. According to her, to be bisexual one must not only engage in both homosexual and heterosexual physical relations; one must also be involved in intimate ongoing relationships with both sexes, and these relationships must be simultaneous. In other words, merely engaging in both homosexual and heterosexual physical activity does not constitute bisexuality; this activity must take place in sufficient quantity and within the right context in order to be defined as bisexuality.

Other lesbians are more concerned about the quality of homosexual and heterosexual relations than about their quantity, context, or simultaneity. Jamila and Greta define bisexuality as the ability to enjoy homosexual and heterosexual contact:

I think that there are times when anyone can enjoy sex be it with a man or woman. Bisexuality means you can enjoy it either way. The way I see it is if you enjoy it do it. (Jamila)

Many bisexuals have not realized or accepted that they are gay. Others may really be bisexual getting as much fulfillment from men as women. (Greta)

But despite their agreement on this point, these two women still have different conceptions of bisexuality. Jamila considers anyone who enjoys both types of sex to be bisexual, whereas Greta reserves the term for those people who enjoy the two sexes equally. Therefore, in the opinion
of the first woman almost everyone is bisexual, whereas in the opinion of the second woman bisexuality is less common than it appears to be. Consequently, these two women have different attitudes toward bisexuality. Jamila takes a liberal “to each her own” stance, whereas Greta looks upon women who claim to be bisexual with suspicion.

Some women extrapolate the ability to enjoy both sexes into a need for both sexes, conceptualizing bisexuals as individuals who not only enjoy both heterosex and homosex but who need both heterosex and homosex. In this view, a bisexual person can never be completely satisfied with either a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship, since her need for the other type of relationship would be unfulfilled. Thus, bisexuals are doomed to a life of either alternating between homosexual and heterosexual relationships,

Now, though, I am trying very hard to understand bisexuality. I feel that it must be a very difficult lifestyle . . . an emotional and sexual seesaw. (Kelly)

or juggling simultaneous homosexual and heterosexual relationships,

I think that it would be a very hard way of life for me. I could not juggle the two. (Gina)

or indiscriminate sexual activity with anything that moves:

[Bisexuality is a way] for highly sexed people who go either way to double their chances for sex. (Arlene)

Any of these three lifestyles would make a committed monogamous relationship difficult to maintain, if not impossible. Conceptualized in terms of coexistent homosexual and heterosexual needs or as the result of an overly active sex drive, bisexuality becomes incompatible with committed monogamy,

If a person is settled with this identity I think it's great. I also believe that this lifestyle could present problems in needing both preferences met at same time—makes for a difficult monogamous relationship. (Ruth)

especially when homosexual and heterosexual needs are perceived as antithetical to each other:

One who is attracted and enjoys a sexual relationship with both men and women. Sad that the inner conflict prevents the person to experi-
ence a complete commitment to one person in order to build a lasting relationship. (Cori)

The implication that bisexuels are incapable of committed relationships bothers many lesbians, who conclude that bisexuality is a symptom of an inability to commit oneself to a single partner. These lesbians often have moral objections to bisexuality as nonmonogamous by definition. Although they sometimes extend partial tolerance to bisexuality, they do so only under certain conditions and predict that problems will arise even under these conditions. For example, Bobbi feels that nonmonogamy would be OK if the participants were mature and honest: “I can accept bisexuality if . . . (1) the person is happy and can emotionally handle and accept their own sexual identity and lifestyle; and (2) they are honest and open with someone they are about to or are committed to in a relationship.” Similarly, Jennifer’s approval is contingent on the mutual consent of those involved, “Bisexuality is fine with me—as long as everyone is consenting.” In contrast, Alison does not approve of nonmonogamy under any conditions; she would tolerate bisexuality only “If the person has a relationship with either sex and breaks it off totally, to start a relationship with the other sex.”

Some lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of behavior disapprove of bisexuality for political as well as moral reasons. Many feel that bisexual women’s associations with men disqualify them completely from political alliance or comradeship with lesbians. Others feel that bisexual women can and should align themselves with lesbians, but again, only if they follow certain rules. They have different opinions about what these rules are. Some don’t care if bisexual women continue to sleep with men as long as they identify themselves as lesbians for political purposes. Other lesbians are angered by bisexual women who try to present themselves as lesbians because they feel that this is deceptive and disrespectful to lesbians. Still others feel that bisexual women should, for the time being, abstain from relationships with men and unite with lesbians until equality between the sexes has been achieved. Lesbians’ political opinions about bisexuality will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

In summary, the most common criterion lesbians use to define bisexuality is behavior. That is, when most lesbian respondents were asked to discuss their opinions about “bisexual women,” they pictured women
who behave bisexually. But they have different opinions about what constitutes bisexual behavior. For some, it means simultaneous sexual relationships with both women and men, or an exactly equal amount of homosexual and heterosexual experience. Others have broader definitions, which include any woman who has had sexual relations with both women and men, or who could enjoy both homosexual and heterosexual relations. According to any of these definitions, bisexual women are nonmonogamous or at best serially monogamous by definition, and many lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of behavior are concerned about bisexual women's inability to commit themselves to a single partner. Others are concerned about the political implications of bisexuels' relations with men. For these reasons, bisexual women—defined as women who have sex with both women and men—meet with a great deal of disapproval and distrust from lesbians.

Bisexuality as a Matter of Feelings

Although the lesbians who participated in this study most commonly define bisexuality as a form of behavior, many are less concerned with actual behavior than with the feelings one has toward women and men. These lesbians define bisexuality as a matter of how one feels rather than how one behaves, and not surprisingly, they are more likely than lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of behavior to believe that bisexuality exists. Although there are some differences of opinion among them over exactly which feelings should be defined as bisexual, these differences are fewer and more trivial than those that exist among lesbians who define bisexuality behaviorally. Like the latter, they are concerned about bisexuality, but their concerns have a markedly different character.

Most lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of feelings simply referred to bisexual women as having "attractions" to women and men. Some respondents specified that they were referring to both emotional and physical attraction, or to emotional, social, and sexual attraction. Dorothea described attraction as "the range of feelings allowing us to be sexually and romantically involved with women and men." Other respondents referred to "love," "affectional preference," or simply "feelings."

For the most part, these differences appear to be merely differences
in wording rather than differences of opinion. The only issue over which these lesbians are substantially divided is the question of whether bisexuals are those rare individuals whose feelings for women and men are exactly equal in strength and quality, or whether everyone who has feelings for both women and men should be considered bisexual:

*I feel we all have varying degrees of attraction to both sexes, and maybe bisexual people really are equally attracted to both sexes . . . (Juanita)*

*I feel it is one aspect of the wide spectrum of human sexual identity. Just as there are women who are attracted to women, men to men, and women and men to each other to varying degrees, so there are also women and men who are attracted to both sexes to differing degrees. (Martha)*

Lesbians like Juanita who define bisexuality in terms of equal attractions for women and men generally hold more negative attitudes toward bisexuals than lesbians like Martha who define bisexuality as a broader range of feelings toward both women and men. The former typically believe that while most people experience attractions toward both women and men, everyone or almost everyone has a preference one way or the other. They feel that people should identify themselves as lesbian or heterosexual according to their preferences, and many expressed antagonism or impatience with people who do not. In contrast, the latter are generally very tolerant or accepting of bisexuality. Those who define bisexuality as encompassing a broad range of varying feelings of attraction toward women and men disagree, however, on the issue of whether people with bisexual feelings should act on these feelings. Some believe that they should,

*I don’t have any problems with it. If someone is attracted to both men and women, I think they should act upon it—it’s not healthy to hide feelings like that. (Frances)*

whereas others believe that they should not.

Lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of a broad range of feelings toward women and men expressed concerns about bisexuality, but their concerns are very different from those expressed by lesbians who define bisexuality behaviorally. Instead of being concerned about bisexual women’s heterosexuality and integrity, they are concerned about the difficulties that bisexual women must face. These difficulties include personal problems, such as combining two very different types of love,
and social hardships, such as a lack of acceptance by both the lesbian and heterosexual societies:

_It must be very difficult to be a bisexual because of the tremendous difference between loving women and loving men. I have trouble understanding relating to “bi’s.”_ (Georgia)

_For persons attracted to both genders, I feel both envy and pity. They, in theory, could have the best of two worlds, but in reality, I fear usually neither gays or non-gays trust and accept them._ (Abigail)

Many, like Georgia, confessed that they have difficulty understanding bisexuality, usually explaining that it is so removed from their own experience that they cannot relate to it. Some have trouble understanding attractions to men because they have never felt attracted to men themselves, whereas others have trouble understanding how people could be attracted to both sexes. Nevertheless, their comments convey a note of tolerance and even warmth that is generally lacking from the comments of those who define bisexuality in terms of behavior or in terms of equal attractions to women and men. For example, Thelma accepts what she cannot understand:

_I feel accepting of my friends who identify themselves as bisexual. I don’t understand their ability to feel sexually attracted to and satisfied by both men and women._ (Thelma)

In summary, lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of feelings of attraction toward women and men are divided over the question of whether bisexuality should be defined as an equal attraction toward women and men, or as a combination of attractions toward women and men of varying degrees. Lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of equal attractions generally take a dim view of people who call themselves bisexual because they believe that most people have a preference for either women or men and that most bisexual-identified people use the bisexual label to avoid admitting their true preference. Lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of a broader range of feelings are generally tolerant and accepting of bisexuality, however. They are concerned about the difficulties bisexuals face in a society that validates heterosexual and lesbian identities and lifestyles but condemns bisexuality, even though many admit that they cannot relate personally because they are not bisexual themselves.
Bisexuality as a Matter of Identity—
Or a Denial of Identity

In an early phase of this research, 26 pre-test subjects were asked to rate the importance of various criteria in defining sexual orientation. Forty-six percent rated bisexual identity as "very important" or "essential" in defining bisexuality. Apparently, the women who participated in the pre-test felt that they accorded a great deal of respect to others' bisexual identities. When lesbian respondents in the main phase of the research were asked "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" many of them spontaneously mentioned bisexual identity. In this open-ended format, however, they usually mentioned it not to tout it as an important criterion of bisexuality, but to raise questions about its validity as a criterion. Of the 82 lesbians who mentioned bisexual identity, 57 did so to cast doubt on it. It would appear that when asked directly, lesbians generally say that they give serious consideration to other women's bisexual identities, but when they are allowed to express their thoughts in a less structured context their comments reveal that many do not in fact accord bisexual identity much credibility.

Most lesbians who are suspicious of bisexual identity believe that women who call themselves bisexual are really lesbians. They explained that bisexual identity is used by people who can't or won't acknowledge their true sexuality, i.e., lesbianism, usually because of homophobia. Other lesbian respondents do not necessary think that bisexuals are lesbians, but they do expect that bisexuals are women on their way to becoming lesbians. Both of these beliefs cast doubt on the authenticity of bisexual identity, and by implication, on bisexuality itself. I call these beliefs "existentially invalidating" beliefs, and I will discuss them in detail along with lesbians' other images of bisexual women later in this chapter.

A few respondents took pains to point out that their doubts about the authenticity of bisexual identity arose from their personal experiences with bisexual women, thus softening their criticism of bisexual identity. Marla, for example, sounded apologetic for her skepticism about other women's bisexual identities. She wrote, "I feel that sometimes women who claim to be bisexual are simply denying their homosexuality. This is based on only the people I know that say they are bisexual." Others commented that their impressions of bisexuality came
primarily from their own experiences. They recalled that they identified themselves as bisexual before they came out as lesbians, and tentatively drew on this experience to wonder if other bisexual-identified women were also in the process of coming out as lesbians. For example, Doris explained, “I think many women think in terms of bisexuality when they are initially coming out—a transitional period—when I first fell in love with a womyn my internalized homophobia was so great I couldn’t comprehend me being a lesbian.”

Like Doris, Rhonda identified herself as bisexual before she came out as lesbian, but in hindsight she interprets her experience in a very different way:

> When I first entered the lesbian community I thought of myself as bisexual—and referred to myself as such. A very large group of women (friends) that identified themselves as “lesbian” said I was confused. Within six months of coming out, I started referring to myself as “lesbian.” Found a much stronger sense of acceptance in the gay community . . . bisexual people are not accepted and have a harder time than gay men and women. (Rhonda)

Rhonda believes that lesbians’ suspicions about bisexual identity pressure bisexual women into identifying as lesbian. If she were to meet Doris, she might disagree with her that her period of bisexual identification was a transitional phase. Rhonda might argue that Doris is not a lesbian at all, but a bisexual woman who was pressured into identifying as a lesbian and who, in order to authenticate her current lesbian identity, now perceives her bisexual identity as inauthentic in hindsight.

Such a process would tend to be self-reproducing; each generation of women who are convinced to identify themselves as lesbians learns to inauthenticate their own previous bisexual identities by explaining them as transitional phases. These women, like Doris, then assume that other women who identify themselves as bisexual are likewise “going through a phase”; they expect these women to eventually come out as lesbians just as they themselves did. Bisexual-identified women become aware of lesbians’ expectations, and this awareness creates the pressure to identify as lesbian that Rhonda described. Those who are convinced by this pressure to identify as lesbians become invested in authenticating their own lesbian identities by inauthenticating their own and others’ bisexual identities, and the cycle continues.
But not all lesbian respondents who mentioned bisexual identity did so to cast doubt on its authenticity. Of the 82 lesbian respondents who referred to identity in their answers to the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” 25 referred to it for other reasons. Nine lesbians stated or implied that they accept other women’s bisexual identities at face value, i.e., that they assume other women’s identities are authentic reflections of their sexual essences. For example, Thelma expressed no suspicion whatsoever that bisexual-identified women might not be bisexual, which, according to her own definition, means that they are attracted to both women and men,

*I feel accepting of my friends who identify themselves as bisexual. I don't understand their ability to feel sexually attracted to and satisfied by both men and women.* (Thelma)

and Samantha believes that a woman’s sexual identity should be respected and taken as the primary indicator of her sexuality:

*It seems to be a viable lifestyle for some individuals. I support individual choice in defining ourselves. I, therefore, support individuals who choose bisexuality.* (Samantha)

Five other lesbians went one step farther in authenticating bisexuality; so far, in fact, that they questioned the authenticity of lesbian identity. In contrast to the 57 lesbians who cast doubt on bisexual identity by stating or inferring that women who call themselves bisexual are sometimes or always really lesbians, Mae cast doubt on non-bisexual identity by implying not only that women who call themselves bisexual are authentically bisexual, but that many women who don’t call themselves bisexual are also bisexual. She thinks that bisexuality is “the most common sexual orientation, if only people would admit it.”

Despite their disagreements over the authenticity of various sexual identities, all 71 of the women discussed above—those who doubt the authenticity of bisexual identity, those who doubt the authenticity of non-bisexual identity, and those who believe in the authenticity of all identities—do agree on one point. They share the underlying opinion that sexual identity should reflect sexual essence. There are also lesbians who believe that sexual identity should not necessarily reflect sexual essence, especially when that essence is bisexual. In fact, some believe that essence should not be the determining factor in identity at all.
Loretta, for example, believes that although women might be essentially bisexual, they make choices regarding which sex or sexes they will become sexually involved with, and their identities reflect, or should reflect, these behavioral choices:

*I think that almost everyone is bisexual but some choose to place their emphasis on one end of the scale. I think that many lesbians could be involved with a man and straight women with other women if they allowed themselves to. I see people who call themselves bisexuals as those who do not wish to choose.* (Loretta)

Other lesbians believe that identity reflects, or should reflect, a woman’s political commitments. Gilda, for example, believes that it is woman-identification, not sexual behavior, that distinguishes lesbians from bisexual women. In other words, lesbians and bisexual women might have identical sexual behaviors and feelings; the difference lies in their political orientation, not their sexuality:

*I know many lesbians (including myself) who relate romantically/sexually with men and women yet identify strongly as lesbians. To me a bisexual is someone who goes either way sexually but is not particularly woman identified.* (Gilda)

Rebecca would approve of Gilda’s decision to identify herself as a lesbian:

*I think bisexual women while they may practice bisexuality ought to identify as lesbians to strengthen the lesbian movement. I believe the old line about identify with the oppressed group and not the more privileged one.* (Rebecca)

In summary, the majority of lesbians who mentioned bisexual identity did so to discredit it. In general, lesbians tend not to accept other women’s bisexual identities at face value; usually, they suspect that women who call themselves bisexual are really lesbians. Very few lesbians spoke up to defend the authenticity of bisexual identity and express their respect for women who choose to identify as bisexual, but a few of those who did went so far as to cast doubt on lesbian identity instead. Finally, some lesbians do not believe that identity should reflect essence at all; they feel that identity should reflect a woman’s political convictions, not her sexual behaviors or feelings. To them, the issue is not authenticity, but politics.
Bisexuality as a Matter of Preferences or Choices

Some lesbians simply referred to bisexuality, or sexuality in general, as a matter of "preference" or "choice" without specifying what is preferred or chosen. Among those who referred to unspecified preferences, eleven consider bisexuality a sexual preference, whereas four conceptualize it as a lack of preference. For example, SueAnne called bisexuality "one kind of sexual preference," and Helen thinks it "must be difficult not to have a definite preference one way or the other." The ten lesbians who referred to sexuality as a matter of choice were evenly divided between those who consider bisexuality a choice and those who consider bisexuality to be the absence of choice, or a failure to choose.

Lesbians who consider bisexuality to be a positive sexual preference or choice generally expressed empathic and tolerant attitudes toward bisexuality. Many took the liberal stance, "if that's what a person is happy being, go for it," or explicitly stated that the bisexual preference is as valid or legitimate as the homosexual and heterosexual preferences are. In contrast, lesbians who define bisexuality as a lack of preference or choice are inclined to accuse women who call themselves bisexual of cowardice. At the very least, they are uneasy around women whose loyalties are not clear. Madeline, for example, is "more comfortable with people who have made definite choices for one sex over the other."

Bisexuality as a Matter of Gender Blindness

The foregoing discussion demonstrates one point very clearly. Lesbians define bisexuality in a variety of different ways. Despite this great variety, however, all of the definitions examined so far have one thing in common. They all describe bisexuality in terms of the gender(s) of one's sexual partner(s) or potential partner(s). Defined by behavior, bisexuals are people who engage in sex with both women and men. Defined by feelings, bisexuals are people who are attracted to or capable of loving both women and men. Defined by preferences, bisexuals are either people who have preferences for both women and men or people who lack a preference for one over the other. These definitions of bisexuality retain the emphasis on the gender(s) of one's partner(s), an emphasis
derived from the gender-specific definitions of homosexuality and heterosexuality.

A very small number of lesbian respondents—fewer than one in twenty—have a very different type of definition of bisexuality. Rather than conceptualizing bisexuality as a combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality, thus emphasizing gender, these women choose to deemphasize gender by conceptualizing bisexuality as the ability to love people regardless of their gender. Bisexuals are, by this definition, people who love people rather than people who love women and men. For example, Prudence defines bisexuals as “people who love people regardless of sex.”

These women harbor some of the same reservations about bisexuality that other lesbians do:

*I don’t understand it because I can’t relate to men the way I do to women (any more than I can understand heterosexuality). It’s possible that it is the ideal—relating to people regardless of gender, but I tend to think (perhaps wrongly) of the bisexual as sexually oriented instead of emotionally oriented.* (Willa)

Most, however, believe that bisexuality is the most natural or ideal form of sexuality, arguing that it reflects an openness toward people and experiences or a more humanist way of relating to people. This ideal is achieved by a few healthy and untraumatized people in this world and could be achieved by all people in a less sexist, more humane world. In effect, bisexuality is the sexual equivalent of equal opportunity; as Esther put it, “One way to look at it is they give all people equal footing.” Once gender discrimination is eradicated, perhaps we will all be able to look past each others’ genitals and genders to the human beings inside.

Summary

Lesbians define bisexuality in different ways. Many define it in terms of behavior, whereas others define it in terms of feelings of emotional or sexual attraction that might or might not be expressed through behavior. A few lesbians think of bisexuality as a positive sexual preference or choice and, conversely, a few think of it as a lack of preference or a failure to choose. Even among lesbians who use the same criterion to define bisexuality, there is considerable variation in the way they apply
this criterion to distinguish bisexuality from homosexuality and heterosexuality. But whether defined in terms of behavior, feelings, preferences, or choices, bisexuality is usually defined in terms of gender; for example, as sexual behavior with both women and men, or as a choice between women and men. A very small handful of lesbians define bisexuality as the ability to love or be attracted to people regardless of their gender.

Lesbians who use different definitions of bisexuality tend to have different attitudes toward it. For example, lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of behavior tend to be skeptical about its existence and reluctant to become too closely involved with bisexual women, whereas lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of feelings are more tolerant and concerned about the difficulties they think bisexuals must face. It is not surprising that lesbians who define bisexuality differently have different opinions; after all, they are talking about entirely different things.

**WHAT ARE BISEXUALS LIKE?**

The question “How do lesbians picture bisexual women?” bears a disquieting resemblance to questions like “How do whites picture blacks?” and “What is the male ideal of womanhood?” In the past few decades, we as a society have become increasingly sensitive to the dynamics of stereotypy and oppression. One after the other, oppressed groups among us have begun to resist the economic, social, and political structures that cause their disadvantage, fighting to change not only these structures but also the prejudicial attitudes of the powerful members of society who benefit from the same structures. As a result, those of us who are oppressed ourselves or who are sincere in our hatred of oppression have become sensitized not only to sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, and age-ism in particular, but also to the form of prejudicial thinking in general. We are suspicious of any statement that sounds like a generalization or that refers to people as members of groups instead of individuals.

Making generalizations about the objects in our environments, including other people, is a natural and necessary human skill. Generalization involves overlooking individual differences in the effort to find similarities. Without this skill, we would be unable to learn from our
experiences, unable to plan future activity, largely unable to communicate with each other, and unable to empathize with the experiences of other people. So when does this natural and necessary capacity for generalization become objectionable? It becomes problematic when the objects we generalize are other human beings, and when our capacity to perceive similarities impedes our ability to perceive individual differences as well. At that point, we begin to see other people as no more than group representatives and we begin to treat them as members of categories instead of individuals. We then look at Black people and see nothing but black; we look at White people and see nothing but white. Instead of facilitating social interaction, our ability to generalize becomes an obstacle to social interaction that robs others of their individuality by replacing it with stereotypes.

Failure to perceive the individual differences among members of other social groups is only one side of the coin of stereotypy. The other side is failure to recognize the similarities between members of other groups and members of one’s own group, including oneself. It is difficult to identify or empathize with someone who bears no similarity to oneself; those who appear entirely foreign to us often appear subhuman because we are unable to recognize their human qualities. In short, we objectify them; by denying their similarity to ourselves, we deny their humanity. Such is the psychology that makes killing an enemy during wartime a moral act.

How does all of this relate to the discussion of lesbians’ views of bisexual women? Is it a simple exploration of the necessary human capacity for generalization, or is it an indictment of lesbians for stereotyping bisexual women even as they condemn the ignorance of homophobic heterosexuals? This depends more on the answer to the question “How do lesbians picture bisexual women?” than it does on the question itself. It depends on whether lesbians’ images of bisexual women leave room for individual differences among bisexual women. It also depends on whether these images leave room for the perception of similarities as well as differences between lesbians and bisexual women. To find out, we cannot examine lesbians’ attitudes toward bisexuals in a vacuum; we must compare them to lesbians’ images of themselves. The question is no longer “How do lesbians picture bisexual women?” as it was originally phrased, but rather “To what degree do lesbians picture bisexual women as different from lesbians and as more homogeneous than lesbians?” It is not very useful to know that some lesbians believe
that bisexual women are confused, for example, unless we also know whether or not they believe that lesbians are more or less confused than bisexual women and unless we know whether they believe confusion is universal or merely common among bisexual women.

The lesbians who participated in this study answered several specific questions about their images of both bisexual women and other lesbians. These questions are described below under the subheading “A Note about Method,” which may be skipped by the uninterested reader. Respondents' answers to the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” which have formed the basis of the foregoing segments of this chapter, were also used as sources of information about lesbians' images of bisexual women.

For the purpose of discussion, lesbians' images of bisexual women fall roughly into four categories. Unflattering images are those that might not be clearly negative, but that are not images most people would desire to project themselves. Positive images, in contrast, ascribe an exalted moral, social, or existential status to bisexuality. Existentially invalidating images challenge the authenticity of bisexual identity by calling into question the existence of bisexuality, and political images concern the social and political advantages or disadvantages that bisexuals face vis-à-vis lesbians.

A Note about Method

In addition to the open-ended question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” respondents were asked several closed-ended questions about specific beliefs that they might have about bisexuality. Whereas women's responses to the open-ended question provide rich information about the subtleties and varieties of their beliefs, this information is neither systematic nor comprehensive because each woman answered the question in her own way. Closed-ended questions, on the other hand, do not reflect subtle differences in the thinking of women with similar beliefs, but they do provide systematic information about the strength and popularity of certain key beliefs. Taken together, the two sources of information provide a more complete picture of lesbians' images of bisexual women and of how bisexual women differ from lesbians than either would provide alone.

The closed-ended questions included questions about the beliefs that bisexuals are really lesbians, that bisexuals are in transition to lesbi-
anism, that bisexuals are less committed to their female friends than lesbians are, that bisexuals are less politically trustworthy than lesbians, and that bisexuals are more likely to pass as heterosexual. Each of these beliefs was mentioned in some form by pre-test respondents in the current study, and all have been reported in previous research by other social scientists. However, the evidence from previous research is entirely qualitative and anecdotal. Quantitative data, which would provide an indication of the popularity and strength of these beliefs among lesbians, as well as a means of assessing the demographic and social correlates of these beliefs, did not exist until the current study. Other closed-ended questions asked about lesbians’ beliefs about bisexual women’s political interests and experiences of prejudice and discrimination, an area that has received very little attention in previous research.

The closed-ended questions used a variety of different formats to measure lesbians’ beliefs and the wording of all these questions can be found in the tables at the end of this book and in the appendix of Rust (1993b). Some beliefs were measured with a single question that asked respondents to make a direct comparison between lesbian and bisexual women. For example, beliefs about personal commitment were measured by asking respondents to indicate on a seven-point scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

Bisexuals are not as committed to other women as lesbians are; they are more likely to desert their female friends.

The single-question/direct-comparison format was also used to measure beliefs about bisexuals’ trustworthiness and differences between lesbians’ and bisexual women’s political interests.

Other beliefs were measured by asking respondents separately about their images of lesbian and bisexual women, and then comparing these two images to determine the degree of difference respondents perceived between lesbian and bisexual women. For example, the following pair of questions asked respondents to assess the degree of prejudice experienced by lesbians and by bisexual women:

How much prejudice do you feel there is in the general U.S. population against lesbians/gay women?

How much prejudice do you feel there is in the general U.S. population against bisexual women?
Each question was followed by a seven-point response scale that ranged from “No prejudice at all” (1) to “More than against any other single group” (7). Because these two questions used identical wording, they are comparable to each other and subtracting one answer from the other produces a measure of the degree to which a respondent believes that either group experiences more prejudice than the other. The paired-question/identical-wording format was also used to measure lesbians’ perceptions of the degree of discrimination faced by lesbian and bisexual women, and the ability and desire of lesbian and bisexual women to pass as heterosexual.

Neither the single-question/direct-comparison nor the paired-question/identical-wording format could be used to measure the beliefs that bisexualls are really lesbians and that bisexualls are in transition to lesbianism because the questions would have sounded awkward or nonsensical. For example, imagine a question that asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement, “Bisexual women are more likely to really be lesbians than lesbians are to really be bisexual”—the statement is too confusing to produce meaningful responses. Or, imagine a pair of questions that asked respondents to estimate “How many bisexual women will eventually come out as lesbians?” and “How many lesbians will eventually come out as bisexual?” The first question of the pair makes sense because the idea that bisexual women are in transition to lesbianism is a familiar one and respondents would be able to respond to it without further thought. But the second question would probably leave many respondents scratching their heads because the idea of lesbians coming out as bisexual is unfamiliar; there is no cultural image for this question to evoke that would make it meaningful to lesbian respondents. Questions that ask about phenomena that are not meaningful to respondents are not fruitful questions; they create phenomena instead of measuring them.

Therefore, the beliefs that bisexual women are really lesbians and that bisexual women are in transition to lesbianism were measured using a third question format, paired-question/equivalent-wording, which allowed each question in the pair to be worded meaningfully. This format consisted of paired statements, each of which was worded to sound as realistic and natural as possible while retaining as much objective equivalence in the meanings of the paired statements as possible. For example, the pair of questions used to measure the belief that bisexuality
is a transitional phase that women go through before coming out as lesbians was:

"Women who say they are bisexual will eventually realize that they are lesbians." What proportion of women who say they are bisexual do you think will eventually realize that they are lesbian?

"Some women who claim to be lesbians will eventually find out that they actually are bisexual, or straight." What proportion of women who say they are lesbians do you believe will eventually realize that they are actually bisexual or straight?

Each of these two statements was followed by a seven-point response scale ranging from “None” (1) to “All” (7). Although the statements are worded slightly differently, their meanings are similar. The first statement asserts that bisexuality is a transitional phase that women go through before they come out as lesbian, whereas the second statement asserts that lesbianism is a transitional phase. The arithmetic difference between a respondent’s responses to these two statements gives a measure of the degree to which she is more or less likely to think that bisexuality is a transitional phase, as compared to lesbianism.

The variety of formats used to assess lesbians’ beliefs about bisexual women has both advantages and disadvantages. The primary advantage is that each measure could be designed to optimally measure a particular belief. Since this study was the first to systematically explore many of lesbians’ beliefs about bisexual women, a certain flexibility of measurement was necessary and appropriate; rigid measurement methodologies would be premature. The primary disadvantage is that results obtained from measures with different formats cannot be compared to each other. Each measure provides a rough indication of the prevalence or strength of a particular belief among lesbians, subject to the caveats outlined in chapter 3, but these measures cannot be compared to each other to determine which beliefs are most prevalent or most strongly held among lesbians.

In the discussion below, respondents’ answers to closed-ended questions about their beliefs about bisexual women will be used to buttress information gathered from the spontaneous comments they made in answer to the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” Readers who are interested in a more detailed and scientific discussion of lesbian respondents’ answers to the closed-ended questions are referred to Rust (1993b).
Unflattering Images

In their responses to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" many lesbians were less than flattering in their comments about bisexual women. Most of these comments simultaneously invalidated bisexuality as a form of sexuality or as a political stance. Few lesbians described bisexual women in terms that were simply and purely unflattering without impugning the existence or politics of bisexuality (figure 4.2). In fact, only four such images were spontaneously mentioned by more than two lesbian respondents: sexual indiscriminacy, promiscuity or nonmonogamy, inability to commit, and carriers of sexually transmitted diseases.

Some of these beliefs tend to be more generalized than others. Of the 7 lesbians who described bisexuals as sexually indiscriminate or "switch hitters," only 2 implied that the charge applies to all bisexual women. The other 5 accused only a portion of the bisexual population of sexual indiscriminacy, although most charged the remainder of the bisexual population with having other unflattering characteristics. For example, Trudy wrote that bisexuals "are one of two things: . . . into . . . sex with anybody just for a thrill, [or] confused about sexuality." In contrast, most of the 10 lesbians who described bisexual women as promiscuous or nonmonogamous implied that this is a characteristic of all bisexual women. This is largely a matter of definition, however, since these are also the lesbians who define bisexuality in terms of simultaneous homosexual and heterosexual involvements or needs. Similarly, 8 lesbians described bisexual women as unable or unwilling to commit themselves to a relationship. Most of these women apply this image generally to all bisexual women, or believe that it is an inherent characteristic of bisexual women.

The 8 women who described bisexuals as unable to commit represent only 2.5% of the entire lesbian sample; is it possible that only one in forty lesbian respondents believes that bisexual women are less able or willing to commit themselves to a relationship? Or, are there other lesbians in the sample who would agree that bisexual women tend to be less committed, but who did not happen to mention it in answer to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" What proportion of the sample does this 2.5% speak for? When asked directly to agree or disagree with the statement "Bisexuals are not as committed to other women as lesbians are; they are more likely to desert their female
friends," 61% of lesbian respondents agreed (figure 4.3). When asked to agree or disagree with the statement "It can be dangerous for lesbians to trust bisexuals too much, because when the going really gets rough, they are not as likely to stick around and fight it out," 53% agreed. Apparently, concerns about bisexual women's loyalty to their female friends and the lesbian community are much more widespread than the spontaneous comments made in answer to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" would lead one to believe. The majority of lesbian respondents share these concerns, although only a handful thought of mentioning it until they were asked about this issue specifically.

Finally, 7 lesbians spontaneously mentioned a concern that bisexual women would bring diseases into the lesbian population in answer to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" Given the publicity surrounding AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, it is surprising that so few women would mention this concern. Are lesbian respondents unconcerned about sexually transmitted diseases? Or, are they concerned about disease but not given to blaming bisexual women for transmitting disease? In a separate question, respondents were asked specifically whether they felt that the existence of AIDS had affected lesbians in any way. Eighty-three percent said "yes," but most explained that AIDS affected lesbians by increasing homophobia or by infecting their gay men friends, not by infecting lesbians. Of those who expressed concern about the risk of HIV infection among lesbians, 14 specifically mentioned bisexual women as a risk. Some said that they were now more careful about relating to bisexual women than they had been, and others said that lesbians in general should be more careful about relating to bisexual women or that bisexual women could spread AIDS from gay men to lesbians. Three said that they themselves are less willing to relate sexually to men than they have been; that is, they are less willing to be behaviorally bisexual. In short, concern about HIV infection is low among lesbian respondents but among those who are concerned, a number single out bisexual women as AIDS risks.

Other unflattering images of bisexuals that were mentioned by one or two lesbian respondents in answer to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" include mental illness, insecurity, self-abusive-ness, willingness to settle for mediocrity (i.e., heterosexuality), lack of political consciousness, male identification, lack of self-knowledge or self-awareness, a tendency to be more "sexually" than "emotionally"
oriented, faddishness, a potential or tendency to exploit or hurt others, and a lack of fulfillment. A total of 44 lesbian respondents, or 14.2% of lesbians, spontaneously mentioned one or more unflattering images of bisexual women.

Positive Images

Among the positive images associated with bisexuality in the minds of some lesbian respondents are naturalness, health, and idealism. Positive images of bisexuality were mentioned much less often by lesbian respondents than unflattering images were (figure 4.2). Only 4.4% of lesbian respondents—one-third of the number that described bisexuality in unflattering terms—spontaneously described bisexuality as natural, healthy, or ideal.

Mentioned by only 8 lesbian respondents, naturalness was nevertheless the most commonly mentioned positive image. Whereas some lesbians simply said that bisexuality is “as natural as any other sexual orientation,” or “a natural state for some people,” some went farther, arguing that bisexuality is “probably the most ‘natural’ state of sexuality.”

As discussed earlier in this chapter, many respondents believe that bisexuality would be more common in an ideal society, the implication being that bisexuality is itself an ideal form of sexuality in which one is “more conscious about people than sex.” Many of these women made it very clear, however, that they do not consider bisexuality to be an ideal in contemporary society.

Existentially Invalidating Images

Although the majority of lesbians believe that bisexuality exists, a substantial number believe that there is no such thing as bisexuality or that bisexuality is very rare. What do lesbians who don’t believe in bisexuality think about women who engage in sexual activity with both women and men, who claim to be attracted to members of both sexes, or who call themselves bisexual? They cannot all be bisexual; all or most of them must be either lesbian or heterosexual. But then why are they behaving bisexualy or claiming to be bisexual? Perhaps they are innocently unaware of their true sexuality and behave bisexualy or call themselves bisexuals because they are confused. Perhaps they are merely
experimenting with same-sex sexuality, or have not yet decided what their sexual orientations are. Perhaps they are in the process of coming out as lesbians and are using bisexual behavior or identity as a comfortable stepping stone during this transitional period. Or, perhaps they know full well that they are really lesbians (or possibly heterosexuals), but they call themselves bisexuals to escape the painful effects of homophobia, their own as well as other people’s. All of these images of bisexual women—confused, undecided, transitional, and closeted lesbians—exist among the lesbians who participated in this study, and all of them effectively discredit bisexuality as an authentic form of sexuality. These different images have different implications, however, and some are typically accompanied by greater tolerance of bisexuals than others.

Confusion, for example, is understandable. Many lesbians experienced some confusion over their own sexuality at some point in their lives; after all, growing up lesbian in a heterosexual society is a confusing experience. It is not surprising that some women would mistakenly call themselves bisexual during this period of confusion. Sally noted that, “the bisexual people I know are rather confused . . . This is the way I felt pretty much during the two years I thought I might be bi.” For this reason, lesbians who perceive bisexual women as confused rarely condemn them for their confusion. Although such condemnation was expressed by a few respondents,

I don’t like it. The women I’ve known who are bi are not only very confused about their sexuality but their personal life as well. (Joyce)

it was more common for these lesbians to take a disinterested stance in which mild disapproval was mixed with a verbal shrug of the shoulders as if they were simply writing bisexual women off, as Rhoda did: “Some people are just plain confused.”

The images of bisexual women as experimenting with lesbian sex or as indecisive generate slightly harsher reactions among lesbians. A couple of lesbian respondents criticized bisexual women for being sexual “tourists” or “adventurers,” and many lesbians fault them for their inability to decide whether they are lesbian or heterosexual, impugning their strength of character. For example, Celia “avoid[s] bisexuals of both sexes. I don’t respect or like them. I think they haven’t the courage to make a choice, or will grab anything that comes along.” Other lesbians, like Holly, nonchalantly dismiss bisexuals as people who have
not yet decided whether they are lesbian or heterosexual: “Doesn’t interest me. I feel a bisexual is a lesbian/gay who hasn’t made up her/his mind.”

Many lesbians believe that bisexuality is a transitional phase that some women go through before coming out as lesbian. This transitional period is characterized by some as a period during which a woman is actually changing from being heterosexual to being a lesbian. Others characterize it as a period during which a woman is realizing that she is and has been a lesbian all along, during which she is becoming comfortable enough with her lesbianism to identify herself as a lesbian, or during which she behaves bisexual because she has not yet committed herself to a lesbian lifestyle. For example, Lee wrote, “For some I think it is a ‘phase’ before one becomes comfortable with one’s lesbianism/gayness.”

Like confusion, transitional bisexuality is understandable and acceptable; many lesbians called themselves bisexual before identifying themselves as lesbians, and therefore they see bisexuality as a legitimate stepping stone toward lesbian identity:

When I used this label it was during a transition period of courage. Once I decided life was not going to just happen to me I acknowledged my true identity as a lesbian. (Sheila)

Instead of dismissing bisexual women, as lesbians who perceive them as confused do, or berating them, as lesbians who perceive them as undecided do, lesbians who perceive bisexual women as transitional lesbians generally adopt a friendly but reserved “wait and see” stance. If bisexual women are simply going through a predictable stage in the process of coming out as a lesbian, then one merely needs to wait a reasonable period of time for them to finish coming out.

Finally, many lesbians perceive bisexual women as lesbians whose internalized homophobia prevents them from adopting a lesbian identity, or as lesbians who want to avoid the stigma associated with lesbianism in this heterosexist culture. Some believe that bisexual-identified women have not even admitted their lesbianism to themselves, usually because of their own internalized homophobia,

Personally, I feel a bisexual is one who, for whatever reasons, does not allow themselves to identify one way or the other. That is, she’s really a lesbian but will not allow herself to realize that fully. (Janene)
whereas others believe that bisexual-identified women know that they are really lesbians, and are using bisexual identity to deny their lesbianism to other people in order to avoid stigma,

*It is sometimes an easy label to hide behind when “gay” is too difficult.* (Eleanore)

or to avoid emotional commitments, or to maintain heterosexual privilege:

*I think many people who call themselves bisexual are lesbian but afraid to make a commitment re: their feelings.* (Dorothea)

*I think most people who claim to be bisexual are afraid to claim one lifestyle and don’t want to give up their heterosexual privilege.* (Hilary)

Some believe that all women who call themselves bisexual are really lesbians, whereas others believe that some, but not all, might be true bisexuals. Generally, the former condemn all bisexual-identified women and the latter approve of bisexual identification only if it reflects true bisexuality:

*I believe true bisexuality is just another hue on the spectrum of human sexual orientation. I think sometimes fearful lesbians will hide behind the bisexual label, and I despise this.* (Sonya)

The condemnatory tone of lesbians who believe that bisexuals are really lesbians who are intentionally avoiding the stigma of lesbianism contrasts sharply with the neutral, nonjudgmental tone of lesbians who believe that bisexuality is a transitional identity. The former resent women who fraudulently use the bisexual label to protect themselves, and they do not sympathize with them. Once a woman has realized her own lesbianism, they expect her to come out as a lesbian and begin shouldering her share of the burden of living as a lesbian in a heterosexist society. But as a transitional phase, bisexual identification is understandable in light of the homophobia that women must overcome in order to come out as lesbians, and it is therefore acceptable. Danielle expressed the moral distinction between transitional bisexual identity and fraudulent bisexual identity clearly:

*People have a right to use available information (or to make a conscious decision) as to what to do with their lives. The time spent making an informed decision could be interpreted as bisexual. I do*
have problems with understanding a long term or convinced bisexual as I wonder if it is a cop out or inability to make a decision. Often I do not trust this group because I doubt their motives. (Danielle)

The beliefs that bisexual-identified women are really lesbians who are avoiding the stigma of lesbianism and that bisexual identity is a transitional stage toward coming out as a lesbian are not mutually exclusive beliefs. Many respondents, like Danielle, referred to both beliefs, explaining that some bisexual-identified women are aware of their lesbianism, whereas others have yet to realize it.

Images of bisexual women as confused, indecisive, transitional, or closeted lesbians effectively invalidate bisexual identity. Even among lesbians who believe that there are some true bisexuals, these beliefs have the effect of casting doubt on the identities of all women who claim to be bisexual. As long as a lesbian believes that bisexual women are likely to have these characteristics—or at least more likely than lesbians—she will tend to react suspiciously whenever another woman claims to be bisexual. Bisexual identity cannot be accepted at face value, because the woman who claims to be bisexual might not be a true bisexual. Therefore, these images, even if they are not generalized to all bisexual women, function to invalidate bisexual identity generally and, therefore, to invalidate bisexuality.

Given the high percentage of lesbian respondents who are skeptical about the existence of bisexuality, it is not surprising that existentially invalidating images of bisexuals as confused, indecisive, transitional, or closeted lesbians are popular among lesbians. Thirty-eight lesbians (11.8%) spontaneously described bisexual women as confused or indecisive; 28 (8.7%) characterized bisexuality as transitional; and 26 (8.1%) described bisexual women as lesbians who are closeted by homophobia (figure 4.2). The results of closed ended questions suggest that these lesbians represent a much larger number of lesbians who agree that bisexual women are confused, indecisive, transitional, or closeted lesbians, but who did not happen to mention these beliefs spontaneously (tables 4.1, 4.2). When asked to estimate the number of “women who say they are bisexual [who] will eventually realize that they are lesbians,” 67% of lesbian respondents replied that they thought at least half of bisexual women will eventually come out as lesbians, and when asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “Society makes it difficult to be a lesbian, so some women claim to be bisexual when they are really
lesbians who are afraid to admit it," 83% agreed. Comparing these responses to lesbians' responses to closed questions about lesbian identity reveals that 79% believe that bisexual identity is more likely than lesbian identity to be transitional, and 50% believe that women who identify as bisexual are more likely than women who identify as lesbian to be denying their true sexuality (Rust 1993b). In other words, most lesbians believe not only that bisexual identity is likely to be transitional or fraudulent, but that it is more likely than lesbian identity to be so. These figures indicate that most lesbian respondents silently share the existentially invalidating images expressed by their more vocal sisters.

Political Images

Are bisexuals political cowards who want the joys of lesbian sex but refuse to shoulder their share of the burden of fighting against the oppression of same-sex love? Or, are they political victims who bear the brunt of oppression because they are not accepted by either heterosexual society or the lesbian community? Lesbians hold very different and conflicting views of the forms of privilege and oppression bisexuals experience, and very different views of the political status of bisexuals vis-à-vis the lesbian community and heterosexual society.

Images of Bisexual Privilege—“The Best of Both Worlds” and Political Distrust

Many lesbian respondents feel a great deal of anger toward women whom they believe call themselves bisexual in order to enjoy the pleasures of lesbian sexuality and the comfort of a nurturing community of women while maintaining heterosexual privilege and avoiding the costs associated with being lesbian in a heterosexist society. These costs include the personal cost of acknowledging one's own lesbianism or living a lesbian lifestyle,

*Most bisexuals are gay/lesbian but think it is too hard a life to choose.*
*(Leah)*

the social costs associated with committing oneself publicly to a lesbian identity,
some claim to be bisexual so they can be somewhat accepted by both “sides.” (Jodie)

and the political costs associated with aligning oneself with a stigmatized minority:

... in contemporary culture, I think sexuality is so tied to ... political issues that to be bisexual is to refuse to make a stand ... to be bisexual seems [to be] a statement of political wishiwashiness. (Margaret)

No matter what the reason, in the eyes of many lesbians, identifying as bisexual amounts to a “cop-out” or to “fence-sitting.” A total of 32 (10%) lesbians spontaneously accused bisexual women of coping out, fence-sitting or trying to maintain heterosexual privilege. The most bitter feelings toward bisexual women were expressed by these lesbians. At best, they see bisexual women as weak-willed and, at worst, as traitors to the lesbian community because they are unwilling to own their lesbianism. Janice spoke for many when she wrote, “I have a lot of anger towards women who identify themselves as bisexuals—I see them as reaping both lesbian and heterosexual privileges.”

Some lesbians concede that not all bisexual women are necessarily lesbians who are avoiding the stigma of lesbianism or hanging onto heterosexual privilege. These lesbians believe that some women who claim to be bisexual are in fact truly bisexual, and they reserve their disinterest, disapproval, or condemnation for those women who are dishonestly clinging to a bisexual identity for selfish personal or political reasons:

I don’t like it when it is chosen because of heterosexual privilege, but if a person truly feels bisexual, I think it is a valid choice. I am willing to defend that choice for any person who is willing to defend my choice to be a lesbian. (Rachel)

Regardless of whether women who call themselves bisexual are truly bisexual or whether they are really dishonest lesbians, claims of bisexuality amount to keeping a foot in the door to the heterosexual world. Because they maintain ties to heterosexuality, bisexuals appear to have the option of passing as heterosexual when it is convenient. When asked to estimate how easy or difficult it is for bisexuals to pass as heterosexual, 71% of lesbian respondents replied that it is somewhat to very easy for bisexuals to pass (table 4.3), and 83% gave higher estimates of the ease of passing for bisexuals than they did for lesbians.
(Rust 1993b). When asked to estimate the proportion of bisexuals who would want to pass, 61% estimated that more than half would (table 4.4), and 65% gave higher estimates of the prevalence of desire to pass among bisexuals than they did for desire to pass among lesbians (Rust 1993b). Very few lesbians made exceptionless generalizations—only 4% stated that all bisexuals want to pass as heterosexual, and only 6% stated that no lesbians want to pass—but the majority of lesbians stated that bisexuals are both more able, and more willing, to pass as heterosexual. By implication, the majority of lesbians believe that bisexuals are more able and more willing than lesbians to avoid the stigma of lesbianism.

By the same token, because bisexuals have one foot in the door of the heterosexual world and are able to live in the heterosexual world, they appear to have the option of abandoning the lesbian lifestyle altogether when the consequences of being lesbian in a heterosexist society are too great. Therefore, lesbians fear that they cannot trust them to stick around at exactly the moment when trust is most important. Trust is necessary in platonic, romantic, and political relationships, and many lesbians have concerns about bisexual women’s loyalties at these various levels. Some, like Deborah, fear that bisexual women would be less committed to them as friends or as lovers: “I’ve yet to see a woman be a practicing ‘bisexual’ who doesn’t end up hurting her lesbian lover and retreating back into the ease of heterosexuality with a male lover.” Others, like Miriam, do not trust bisexual women to remain committed to the lesbian community or the lesbian movement: “As a personal choice it is OK. As a political choice—it’s shortsighted. I do not trust bi women to ‘be there’ for me because of their divided loyalties.”

The apparent fact that bisexual women have the options of passing as heterosexual and of abandoning their lesbian friends, lovers, and community causes no small resentment among lesbians. Even lesbians who harbor no ill will toward bisexual women perceive that their bisexuality does avail them the opportunity to blend into heterosexual society. Although these lesbians do not blame bisexual women for having this opportunity, they do resent it. As Nancy apologetically put it, “I’m afraid [bisexuality] does indeed hurt lesbians, because bisexuals, consciously or unconsciously, ‘run’ to men, male approval, mainstream society for ‘shelter.’ ” The fear that they would be abandoned leads some lesbians to avoid becoming involved in personal or political rela-
tionships with bisexual women, or to enter into these relationships carefully and reservedly, a reaction that will be explored more fully below.

But some lesbians’ concerns about the politics of bisexuality extend beyond the possibility that bisexual women would abandon their lesbian friends, lovers, and communities for a heterosexual lifestyle. These women object to bisexuality for political reasons, arguing that bisexual women are political weak links or political energy sinks simply by virtue of their connections to men and male power. At best, they view bisexuality as an apolitical stance adopted for purely sexual reasons, as opposed to lesbianism, which is a political orientation and lifestyle. At worst, they view bisexuality as not merely apolitical but, in fact, antithetical to lesbians’ and women’s interests. For example, Hilary believes that women should support each other and work toward social and political solutions to sexual inequality rather than wasting their energy trying to forge personal solutions with individual men. She argued that women who invest energy in relationships with men reinforce women’s oppression:

... any long term investment in an intimate relationship with a male reinforces the oppression of women. I know that there are sensitive, loving, etc. males out there but for all their individual qualities, there is no denying they are still viewed as the privileged gender. I believe women need to support, nurture, and unite with one another first and then, when the reality of our world has changed, extend a hand in love and friendship to men. A collective consciousness raising is needed more than a few isolated cases of equality in relationships between women and men. (Hilary)

Similarly, Nadine feels that women who direct their energy toward men hinder their own development as women,

I don’t trust bisexual women because I feel too much of their energy goes to men and I think that it detracts from their own development as well as other women. (Nadine)

and Patricia feels that bisexual women drain energy from the lesbian community, giving it to the male enemy:

Not good for the lesbian community because it gives energy (from women) to the “enemy” (men). (Patricia)

In short, bisexuality is bad politics.
Perhaps, in the ideal world of the future, in which sexual inequality has been eradicated, men will no longer be the enemy and relations between women and men will be egalitarian. In that world, heterosexual relations will not drain women’s energy for the purposes of men, and heterosexual relations will not be detrimental to women’s well being. Under the patriarchy, however, many lesbians believe that bisexuality amounts to sexual heresy and personal treason.

Images of Bisexual Oppression—“The Worst of Both Worlds” and Political Sympathy

In contrast to lesbians who resent bisexuals for reaping double benefits, other lesbians sympathize with bisexuals because of the double difficulties they face. Lesbians in the current study mentioned two types of difficulties: difficulties that are inherent in the nature of bisexuality itself, and difficulties that arise from a society that is not equipped to accommodate bisexuality.

Lesbians who are concerned about the former usually perceive bisexuals’ difficulties as resulting from the dual nature of bisexuality, asserting that the combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality poses problems of management or integration:

I think that it would be a very hard way of life for me. I could not juggle the two. (Gina)

It must be very difficult to be a bisexual because of the tremendous difference between loving women and loving men. (Georgia)

Lesbians who are concerned about the latter pointed to heterosexual and lesbian societies, rather than to the inherent nature of bisexuality, as the sources of bisexuals’ problems. These lesbians think that instead of getting the best of both worlds, bisexuals usually end up with rejection from both worlds because neither heterosexuals nor lesbians are willing to accept them. Fanny expressed concern that “bisexuality would be a very difficult way to live” because “bisexuals are never really accepted into either heterosexual worlds or the homosexual support groups.” Some lesbian respondents singled out the lesbian community as the more egregious offender. For example, Lucy commented that “there is a lot of hostility toward it by lesbians that I don’t understand.”

Concerns about bisexuals’ particular disadvantages are as common
among lesbians as concern over their double advantages (figure 4.2). In all, 36 lesbian respondents, or 11.2%, expressed concerns about the difficulties that bisexual women face, whereas 38 (11.8%) made disparaging remarks about bisexuals getting the best of both worlds or being political cop-outs. Lesbians who sympathize with bisexuals’ difficulties, however, are more likely to believe that these difficulties arise from the inherent nature of bisexuality itself than from bisexuals’ social or political circumstances. Only 14 (4.4%) lesbians perceive bisexuals as political victims who get the worst of both worlds because they are rejected by both heterosexuals and by lesbians; the other 22 stated or implied that bisexuals are victims of their own bisexual condition. Thus, when only political images of bisexuality are considered, it appears that lesbians are much more likely to resent bisexuals for being political opportunists than to sympathize with them for being political victims.

**Overall Perceptions of Bisexual and Lesbian Oppression**

How do lesbians perceive the difficulties bisexuals face in comparison with the difficulties they face as lesbians? Respondents were asked to estimate the degrees of prejudice and discrimination faced, respectively, by lesbians and bisexual women, and the overwhelming majority of lesbians said that bisexual women experience less oppression than lesbians (table 4.5, figure 4.4). Seventy-one percent said that lesbians experience a great deal of prejudice, and 11% said that lesbians experience more prejudice than any other single group in society. In comparison, only 20% said that bisexuals experience a great deal of prejudice, and none said that bisexuals experience more prejudice than any other group. When individual lesbians’ estimates of prejudice against bisexual women and lesbians are compared, the results show that 79% believe that lesbians experience more prejudice than bisexual women do. Similarly, 81% believe that lesbians experience more discrimination than bisexual women do. It seems that the 11.8% of lesbians who answered the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” with remarks about bisexuals’ having the best of both worlds were expressing a very popular view; other lesbians may or may not believe that bisexuals actually have an advantage, but they certainly agree that bisexuals are less oppressed than lesbians.
What about the 4.4% of lesbians who expressed concerns about the difficulties bisexuals face because they are rejected by both heterosexuals and lesbians? Were they also speaking on behalf of a larger group? Apparently not—only 1% of lesbians feel that bisexuals experience more prejudice or more discrimination than lesbians, indicating that even those who are concerned about bisexuals' special oppression do not believe that bisexuals are therefore more oppressed than lesbians.

Underlying Conceptualizations: Two Different Kinds of Hybrids and Apoliticality

The “best of both worlds” and the “worst of both worlds” represent two radically different views of the political status of bisexuals vis-à-vis heterosexual society and the lesbian community. From the “best of both worlds” perspective, bisexuals are—whether intentionally or not—apolitical opportunists who enjoy privilege, avoid oppression, and abdicate their political responsibilities in favor of personal comfort. They are fence-sitters who refuse to cast their lot with either interest group, hedging all bets by “playing it both ways.” From the “worst of both worlds” perspective, bisexuals are political victims who suffer from not only heterosexism, but also homosexuality. They are caught in the middle, unable to belong to either world and rejected by both. Both perspectives rest on a conceptualization of sexuality as dichotomous and a conceptualization of bisexuality as a hybrid form of sexuality. In the “best of both worlds,” bisexuals combine the advantages of homosexuality and heterosexuality and, in the “worst of both worlds,” they combine the disadvantages. But closer analysis shows that the concepts of hybrid bisexuality underlying these different political beliefs are different.

The “best of both worlds” view is grounded in a concept of bisexuality as a hybrid combination of heterosexuality and lesbianism. Bisexuals can live a heterosexual lifestyle, feel comfortable in heterosexual society, and appear to be one hundred percent heterosexual. Or, they can live a lesbian lifestyle, feel comfortable in the lesbian community, and appear to be one hundred percent lesbian. Like a chameleon, at any given moment the hybrid bisexual appears to be either heterosexual or lesbian, depending on how she presents herself, whom she is dating, or whether she is among heterosexuals or lesbians. Since she is at all times both heterosexual and lesbian, she can move freely back and forth.
between these two lifestyles and societies. It is this ability to move freely back and forth between heterosexuality and lesbianism, and to appear to belong in all situations, that allows bisexuals to reap the benefits of both heterosexuality and lesbianism while avoiding the costs of both.

The “worst of both worlds” view of the political status of bisexuality is based on a concept of bisexuality as a hybrid *mixture* of heterosexuality and lesbianism. This type of hybrid bisexual is analogous to a biracial person whose features combine the characteristics of her two biological parents. Among people of her mother’s race, she cannot hide the features she inherited from her father, and among people of her father’s race, she cannot hide the features she inherited from her mother. Instead of appearing to belong completely to both communities, she appears out of place in both and might not be fully accepted by either. Likewise, the bisexual woman is *bisexual* at all times; she is bisexual in heterosexual situations and she is bisexual in lesbian situations. She is, therefore, rejected by heterosexuals for her bisexuality or perhaps for her lesbian side, and she is rejected by lesbians for her bisexuality or perhaps for her heterosexual side.

Both forms of the hybrid conceptualization of bisexuality lead to a depoliticized view of bisexuality. As combinations or mixtures of heterosexuality and lesbianism, bisexuals have no political interests of their own as bisexuals. Their interests consist of a combination or mixture of the interests of heterosexuals and lesbians. Seen as combination hybrids, they have the ability to pick and choose their interests and so, of course, they choose the best of both worlds. Seen as mixture hybrids, they are excluded from the advantages of both and cannot escape the disadvantages of both. They are to be resented to the extent that they share all the advantages of both groups, or pitied to the extent that they share all the disadvantages of both groups. Either way, they have political interests only insofar as they share the interests of the two authentic interest groups, heterosexuals and lesbians; they have no unique political interests of their own.

Dissenting Voices

A few lesbians took exception to the charges that bisexual women are sexually indiscriminate, nonmonogamous, confused, indecisive, transitional, fence-sitting, untrustworthy lovers, or political traitors. In com-
parison to the number of lesbians who expressed these beliefs about bisexual women, the number who rejected them is minuscule. But the import of their comments lies not in their number. The fact that some lesbian respondents expressed negative images demonstrates that they exist at least in the minds of some lesbians, but the fact that other women felt the need to refute them demonstrates something even more significant from a sociological point of view. That is, that these images exist as ideas to be reckoned with in lesbian culture. Even if only a few lesbians actually ascribe to a given negative image of bisexual women, the fact that other lesbians found it necessary to refute that image is evidence that the image enjoys a lively existence in the symbolic world of the lesbian community.

Take, for example, the image of bisexual women as confused. In all, only one in ten lesbians spontaneously expressed the belief that bisexual women are confused. But the experiences of women like Rhonda, who recalled that she had begun to call herself a lesbian because her lesbian friends said she was confused and who found greater acceptance as a lesbian than she had as a bisexual, show that these women’s attitudes are influential enough to set the tone of the atmosphere in which bisexuals find themselves. Likewise, regardless of how many lesbians actually believe that bisexuals are sexually indiscriminate and nonmonogamous, Lydia’s impression is that “lesbians in general” do; she wrote, “bisexuality tends to be misunderstood by heterosexuals and homosexuals alike as the indecisive person who will ‘screw around’ with just about anybody.”

Some lesbians implicitly accused those lesbians who do accept negative images of bisexuality of being uninformed or politically outdated by commenting that they, too, used to believe in these images before they were enlightened.

*I used to feel negative toward people who said they were bisexual because I felt it was a cop-out—just a homosexual who couldn’t handle being gay. But now I truly believe that some people, many people, are bi and I feel for them because I think it would be hard to be “middle of the road” sexually. (Liby)*

The charge that lesbians who perceive bisexuals as political fence-sitters or closeted lesbians are politically outdated is an ironic one, because lack of political acumen is exactly what these lesbians find objectionable about bisexual women.
Summary

Lesbians have a variety of images of bisexual women, both positive and negative, but negative images outnumber and are far more widespread than positive images. Lesbians' spontaneous comments about bisexuality reveal that more than one in ten lesbians perceive bisexuals as confused or undecided, and similar proportions perceive them as transitional lesbians and/or closeted lesbians. In addition, one in seven holds other unflattering beliefs about bisexual women, for example that they are sexually promiscuous or unable to commit themselves to a relationship, whereas less than one in twenty holds a positive image of bisexuality as natural or healthy. Finally, those lesbians who sympathize with bisexuals for getting the worst of both worlds are as numerous as lesbians who resent them for getting the best of both worlds, but most of the former pity bisexuals for being victims of their own bisexual condition, rather than victims of political circumstances.

Lesbians' responses to closed questions reveal that these negative attitudes toward bisexuality are even more widespread than spontaneous comments suggest. Whereas only 8.7% of lesbians spontaneously characterized bisexuality as transitional, in response to closed-ended questions 79% of lesbians described bisexual identity as more likely to be transitional than lesbian identity. Whereas only 8.1% of lesbians spontaneously characterized bisexuals as closeted lesbians, in response to closed-ended questions 50% indicated a belief that bisexual identity was more likely than lesbian identity to be fraudulent. Whereas only 2.5% spontaneously described bisexuals as unable to commit to a relationship, in response to closed-ended questions 61% stated that bisexuals are less committed to other women than lesbians and 53% stated that bisexuals are less trustworthy than lesbians. Eighty-three percent believe that it is easier for bisexuals to pass as heterosexual, 65% believe that bisexuals are more likely to want to pass, 79% believe that bisexuals experience less prejudice, and 81% believe they experience less discrimination. Apparently, the minority of lesbians who made these comments about bisexual women spontaneously were speaking for the majority of lesbians, most of whom simply did not express their opinions on these issues until specifically asked to do so.

Lesbians very rarely generalize these negative images to all bisexual women; most lesbians stopped short of saying, for example, that all...
Lesbians’ Voice S

bisexual women are confused or in transition to lesbian identity. Most
lesbians also agreed that some lesbians share the traits that are so
common among bisexuals; for example, some lesbians are also confused
or in transition. In fact, the only beliefs that were generalized to all
bisexual women by the lesbians who held them were those that followed
from particular definitions of bisexuality. For example, lesbians who
characterized bisexuals as nonmonogamous typically defined bisexuality
behaviorally, a definition that virtually guarantees that bisexuals will be
nonmonogamous. In general, therefore, lesbians’ images of bisexuality
have not prevented lesbians from perceiving either differences among
bisexuals or similarities between lesbians and bisexuals.

But the fact that most lesbians do not generalize their images of
bisexuality to all bisexuals does not imply that these images do not
affect bisexuals generally. Even when exceptions are allowed, images of
bisexuality function to implicate all bisexuals. This is particularly true of
existentially invalidating images. Because there are no clear markers to
distinguish the few “true” bisexuals from the greater number whose
claims to bisexual identity are illegitimate, existentially invalidating im-
ages cast suspicion on any woman who claims to be bisexual and thereby
invalidate bisexual identity generally. The lesbian who believes that
bisexual identity is more likely to be fraudulent than lesbian identity, for
example, is likely to be suspicious of all claims to bisexual identity, even
though she believes that some of these claims to bisexual identity will
eventually prove to be authentic. Thus, every bisexual is affected by her
belief that some bisexuals are inauthentic.

Although negative images of bisexuality are far more numerous
and common than positive images, lesbians are not unanimous in their
opinions about bisexuality. To characterize lesbians as such would be to
commit the sin of stereotyping ourselves. A few lesbians dissent from
the general attitude toward bisexuality, arguing that bisexuals are also
oppressed in their own right and that lesbians should try to understand
and be sympathetic toward the special difficulties faced by bisexuals.
Some have positive images of bisexuality as natural, healthy, and honest.
Even among lesbians who are critical of bisexual women, many are
quick to assert that there might be bisexual women who do not fit their
stereotypes or that their impressions of bisexual women might be just
that — stereotypes.

Despite the variety in lesbians’ images of bisexuals, most have two
things in common. First, most of lesbians' images of bisexuals, both positive and negative, are based on a conception of sexuality as dichotomous. If sexuality is dichotomous, then bisexuality either does not exist or is a hybrid form of sexuality. If it doesn't exist, then women who call themselves bisexual must be confused, in transition to lesbianism, or closeted lesbians. If bisexuality is a hybrid form of sexuality, then bisexuals are either psychologically healthy individuals who are able to enjoy their natural attractions to both women and men, or they are incomplete lesbians who share a watered-down version of lesbian politics and political interests but who also maintain friendly ties with an oppressive heterosexual society. Bisexuality might be a valid sexual identity or it might not, but either way, it is a derivative identity without a unique essence or politics of its own.

Second, most lesbians' images of bisexuals are laden with emotional implications. These emotions find their outlet in lesbians' feelings toward bisexual women.

How Do Lesbians Feel about Bisexual Women?

Lesbians' feelings toward bisexual women range from mistrust, hatred, and anger to respect and admiration. I discussed many of these feelings earlier in this chapter, because they are typically associated with certain images of bisexual women. For example, lesbians who believe that bisexual women are really lesbians who want to maintain heterosexual privilege or avoid the stigma of lesbianism generally resent bisexual women, and sometimes feel anger and hatred toward them. Lesbians who believe that bisexual women are likely to escape to heterosexuality when life as a lesbian becomes too difficult generally do not trust bisexual women. Very few lesbians have positive feelings, such as respect or admiration, for bisexual women, although a number do empathize with them or deplore other lesbians' harsh judgments of them.

Lesbian respondents frequently expressed their feelings about bisexual women by discussing the limitations of their own willingness or ability to relate to them. Many made general statements to the effect that they prefer not to interact with bisexual women, that they find it
difficult to relate to bisexual women, or that they feel uncomfortable interacting with them. Deirdre, for example, feels that “in theory . . . bisexuality is okay” although “in practice I don’t like dealing with bisexuals,” and Juanita, who defines bisexuality as an equal attraction to both sexes, said “I find it hard to relate with them because I lean heavily towards women.”

Some, like Deirdre, experience a conflict between their heads and their hearts. Their heads tell them to be tolerant of bisexuality but their hearts tell them to avoid bisexual women. Sharon resolves the problem by acknowledging her negative feelings about bisexuality to herself, but concealing them from bisexuals:

My gut reaction is to think it’s a cop-out for people who can’t admit their homosexuality, but my intellectual reaction is much more positive. I have to think a lot to hold these negative feelings in check when dealing with bisexuals. (Sharon)

Chris, on the other hand, has not resolved her conflicting feelings; she welcomes bisexuals into her community, but cannot trust them:

At times—I definitely stereotype and feel anger towards bisexuals . . . But I also admire them and welcome them into our community. I don’t trust them as a group, though, because of their ties to men. (Chris)

Other lesbians’ feelings about interacting with bisexual women are less ambiguous, and these women were often quite specific about the circumstances under which they are willing to interact with bisexual women or the levels of intimacy to which they are willing to admit bisexual women. One of the most intimate relationships two people can have is a romantic relationship, and more lesbians spontaneously commented on their feelings about dating bisexual women than about any other type of relationship. For example, Maxine and Angelina are willing to date bisexual women, but Maxine would do so only under certain conditions and Angelina finds her current relationship with a bisexual woman problematic:

I would have no problem dating or loving a bisexual woman as long as she was monogamous and understood that leading a lesbian life is harder than a hetero. life. (Maxine)

Since my current lover is bisexual it does not make for a very secure relationship. There is always the fear that she will go to the other side. It’s very stressful in a love relationship. (Angelina)
Other lesbians are more reluctant to become romantically involved with bisexual women. Like Maxine and Angelina, their objections to involvement with bisexual women usually center around the belief that bisexual women are less likely to be loyal or monogamous lovers. Molly said that she doesn’t “like to have relationships with [bisexual women], because I think they tend to leave.”

Finally, some lesbians refuse to even entertain the thought of dating or becoming romantically involved with bisexual women. Although generally concerned about bisexual women’s loyalty and monogamy, many of these lesbians are particularly concerned by the prospect that the bisexual woman’s other sexual partner might be male rather than female. Why would a male lover be more objectionable than a female lover? There are several different reasons. First, many lesbians, like Bobbi, explained that they would be unable to “compete with a man to win the love of a woman.” Arguing that bisexual women have both homosexual and heterosexual needs, they feared that as lesbians they could not fulfill all of a bisexual partner’s needs nor could they wage a fair battle against a male lover.

Second, because the larger society condones heterosexuality and condemns lesbianism, lesbians fear that bisexual lovers will eventually retreat back to the comfortable world of heterosexuality when the stress of living in a lesbian relationship becomes too much. Bisexuals are, therefore, less likely to remain committed to their lesbian relationships because they can also enjoy socially approved heterosexual relationships. Although some lesbians find it incredible that a woman who once tasted lesbian sexuality could ever return to heterosexuality,

I don't understand how a woman who has slept with a woman could ever want to sleep with a man again. (Lynda)

the fear that the desire for social approval would lure bisexuals back to heterosexuality remains:

I'm afraid it does indeed hurt lesbians, because bisexuals, consciously or unconsciously, “run” to men, male approval, mainstream society for “shelter.” (Nancy)

Other lesbians object not only to the tendency of bisexual women to become involved with men or to leave women lovers for men lovers, but to the heterosexual aspect of the bisexual woman herself. Some would
not want to have intimate sexual contact with a woman who had also been in close sexual contact with a man because they find heterosexuality or male sexuality disgusting. For example, Alison “wouldn't want to have sex with an active bisexual female if she was presently having sex acts with men. No way.” For a few lesbians, the desire to avoid heterosexually-involved bisexual women is related to a fear of the diseases that a bisexual woman might bring into the lesbian population, whereas for others it is simply a desire to exclude all things male from their own lives.

The heterosexual aspect of a bisexual woman becomes especially difficult to ignore when she actually does become heterosexually involved; as Carrie said, “I have a hard time getting really close with a bisexual woman, even as a friend, for fear she’ll start dating a man and our different lifestyles and interests will come between us.” Beth, who defines bisexuality behaviorally, feels that a bisexual woman’s male lover is antithetical to her lesbianism, compromising the quality of her lesbian relationships. She wrote, “Loving women means more than physical relationships—it’s more like a woman identification in lifestyle and beliefs—this would seem difficult with a man between the sheets.”

The lesbian who becomes involved with a bisexual woman indirectly connects herself to heterosexuality and to men, a connection that is anathema to some lesbians. A comment by Thelma is perhaps the most revealing. She objects to the idea of becoming involved with a bisexual woman because of her own identity as a lesbian. In other words, becoming involved with a bisexual woman would endanger her lesbian identity. Even though the bisexual woman is a woman, and hence Thelma's involvement with this woman would be in itself a lesbian relationship, the fact that the bisexual woman is not a lesbian would compromise Thelma’s lesbianism. For her, being a lesbian does not mean merely sleeping only with women; it means sleeping only with other lesbians and eliminating all connections, even indirect connections, to non-lesbians, including bisexual women and the men to whom they are connected:

I feel accepting of my friends who identify themselves as bisexual . . .
Because of my strong identity as a lesbian I feel I would not want to be sexually involved with a bisexual woman. (Thelma)

Do lesbians who reject bisexual women as lovers also reject them as friends? Some do, and some don't. Women like Thelma refuse only
romantic involvement; Thelma is willing to accept friendship with bisexual women and reported that she did in fact have bisexual friends. Eileen is also open to the idea of friendship with bisexual women, but like Carrie, she does not feel that her friendships with bisexual women are as close as her friendships with lesbians:

I seem not able to connect with them in the same way as I do with my lesbian friends. But, I am open to friendship with bisexual women. (Eileen)

In contrast, Celia and Keesha emphatically reject bisexual women at any and all levels of intimacy:

I avoid bisexuals of both sexes. I don't respect or like them . . . I won't relate socially or sexually to bisexuals. I won't relate socially or sexually to anyone who relates to bisexuals. (Celia)

I prefer not to socialize with them. When they do I feel intruded upon . . . They have men in their lives and I want nothing to do with them. (Keesha)

Apparently, there is considerable antipathy toward bisexual women within the lesbian community. Some lesbian respondents prefer to avoid bisexual women altogether, and those who are willing to accept bisexual women as friends often draw the line at romantic relationships.

This is not, however, the attitude of all lesbian respondents. Several commented disapprovingly on their sisters' rejection of bisexual women, chastising them for their intolerance:

There is a lot of hostility toward it by lesbians that I don't understand . . . I feel sorry for bisexual women because they have no support in the straight or lesbian community. I don't mean that I pity them, it would just be a hard place to be. (Lucy)

Despite the sentiments of lesbians who deplored the lesbian community's intolerance of bisexuality, the antipathy expressed by those lesbians who prefer not to associate with bisexual women permeates the atmosphere in the lesbian community. Evidence of the pervasiveness of this antipathy exists not only in the observations of lesbians themselves, but also in the fact that some lesbians found it necessary to apologize for it. The number of such apologies leads one to wonder, however, whether this antipathy in fact reflects the feelings of the majority of lesbians, or whether the atmospheric tone is being set by a vocal minority of lesbians with extremely negative attitudes about bisexuality. After all, when
asked for their opinions on bisexuality, most lesbian respondents made no spontaneous statements whatsoever about whether they would accept bisexual women as friends or lovers or about whether they condone or condemn the lack of acceptance bisexual women find in the lesbian community. What does this silent majority think?

To find out what the majority thinks, all of the women who participated in the study were presented with a series of seven closed-ended questions that asked specifically about their feelings toward bisexual women in comparison to lesbians. All seven questions used the direct comparison format described earlier in this chapter. One of these questions measured respondents' general comfort level with bisexual women, three measured respondents' feelings about interacting with bisexual women at various levels of social intimacy, and three measured the degree to which respondents trusted bisexual women in various political circumstances.

The results show that overall, lesbians do prefer to associate with other lesbians rather than with bisexual women, and many feel very strongly about the issue (figure 4.5). For example, 96% said that they would prefer to date a lesbian, and 74% said that their preference to avoid dating bisexual women is very strong. Only 13 lesbians said that they don't care whether the women they date are bisexual or lesbian. Many are willing to be friends with bisexual women, however; when asked whether they are more likely to make friends with a woman they had just met if she were lesbian or if she were bisexual, one out of four lesbians said that it doesn't matter—seven times the number who don't care whether their dates are lesbian or bisexual. But the other three out of four (74%) do care, saying that they are more inclined to make friends with a lesbian woman. Most lesbians also prefer lesbian-dominated rather than bisexual-dominated discussion groups (89%) and feel more comfortable when they are among lesbians than when they are among bisexuals (81%).

Lesbians also prefer to share their political lives with other lesbians, not with bisexuals (figure 4.6). Eighty-three percent would rather have lesbian coworkers if they were involved in a gay rights campaign, 80% would rather have a lesbian lobbyist in Washington, DC, and 73% would not trust a bisexual woman to give a speech about alternative lifestyles to a general audience as much as they would trust a lesbian.
Summary

In summary, the majority of lesbian respondents are reluctant to be socially or politically associated with bisexual women. Most even prefer not to become friends with bisexual women, and those who do not mind having bisexual friends usually draw the line at intimate romantic relationships. Those who are willing to date bisexual women would do so only under certain conditions; very, very few said that they do not care whether their romantic partners are bisexual. A fundamental issue underlying lesbians' unwillingness to associate closely with bisexual women is trust. To people who feel threatened, trust is a very important issue; in a heterosexual world, lesbians are threatened, and they do not trust bisexual women because bisexual women appear to be connected to that world.