Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics

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In chapters 4, 5, and 6 I explored lesbians' attitudes toward bisexuality and bisexual women and showed how the controversy about bisexuality among lesbians reflects lesbians' historically rooted disagreements about whom they are as lesbians. In this chapter and the next, I turn my attention to bisexual women and the effects of lesbians' attitudes on them. As marginal members of the lesbian community, bisexual women are exposed to lesbians' various attitudes and beliefs about bisexuality. Although these attitudes and beliefs are varied, negative attitudes are more widespread and have greater symbolic presence in the lesbian community than positive ones; therefore, these are the attitudes that bisexuals are most likely to encounter. How do bisexual women respond to these attitudes? Do they agree with lesbians about the nature of their differences? Do they share lesbians' desires to maintain some distance in social and political situations? Or, do they reject these attitudes and spend their energy refuting lesbians' beliefs about bisexuality? Or, perhaps, do they ignore lesbians' attitudes altogether, opting to participate in the lesbian community insofar as they can benefit from it without
either assimilating or rebelling against the attitudes that dominate that community? What do bisexual women think of themselves? To find out, we must listen to bisexual women’s voices.1

Bisexual respondents were asked the same question that was asked of lesbian respondents, “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” Their spontaneous answers to this question reveal their conceptions of the issues surrounding bisexuality, as well as their positions on these issues. To a large extent, the issues raised by bisexual women are similar to those raised by lesbians. Their opinions on these issues are sometimes dramatically different from lesbians’ opinions, but sometimes they are surprisingly similar.

DOES BISEXUALITY EXIST?

It would be tautological to say that women who identify themselves as bisexual believe that bisexuality exists—or would it? Most bisexual respondents do believe that bisexuality exists, but a few have reservations. Emily, for example, has some doubt about whether true bisexuality exists. She wrote, “Sometimes I wonder if this is a cop-out for someone who can’t admit/accept being gay—but I also wonder if it isn’t possible to be truly attracted to both men and women.” Five other bisexual women also expressed some skepticism or argued that some people who claim to be bisexual are not really bisexual. The remaining thirty-six indicated either implicitly or explicitly that they do indeed believe that bisexuality exists.

The bisexual women who stated clearly that they do believe that bisexuality exists did so in very different terms than their lesbian counterparts. Whereas lesbians typically referred to bisexuality as a legitimate or valid form of sexuality, or stated simply “it exists,” not a single bisexual respondent used the words “legitimate” or “valid,” and only one used the word “exist”—and this bisexual respondent used the word in the context of describing lesbians’ attitudes toward bisexuals. Instead, bisexual women described bisexuality as “natural,” a word choice used to indicate bisexual existence by only 2% of lesbians as compared to 11% of bisexual respondents. For example, one stated simply, “I think it’s healthy and natural.” Several other bisexual respondents did not use
the word "natural" itself, but argued that most or all people would be bisexual if not for socialization, or that bisexuality is a healthy form of sexuality, thereby implying that it is natural.

These different word choices reveal that lesbians and bisexual women appeal to different sources of authority when making claims for bisexual existence. Lesbians who described bisexuality as "legitimate" asserted the existence of bisexuality on the basis of its symbolic acceptability, whereas bisexuals who described bisexuality as "natural" based their claims on an appeal to an essence that is intrinsically valuable by virtue of its truth. Both lesbian and bisexual respondents were defending bisexuality from unstated attacks on its existence—if these women did not perceive attacks on the existence of bisexuality, there would have been no reason for them to assert its existence—but the nature of the attack is perceived differently by lesbian and bisexual women, thus requiring different defenses.

Lesbian women are involved in the discourse of the lesbian community in which attacks on bisexuality tend to revolve around the accusation that bisexuality is a political cop-out. In such an atmosphere, assertions of the naturalness of bisexuality would fail to hit their mark, since nature is not the issue. Even if bisexuality were judged to be natural, it would still be vulnerable to the charge that it is bad politics and the argument that individuals should subvert their "natural" bisexual impulses to the demands of politics in a patriarchal and heterosexist society. This is, in fact, what many lesbians themselves have done, as shown in chapter 4. Thus, to defend bisexuality, lesbian women must assert its symbolic legitimacy, i.e., not the fact of its existence but its right to exist.

Bisexual women, on the other hand, apparently feel little need to defend bisexuality against the lesbian community's attacks on its right to exist. Instead, bisexual women look to their own experience as evidence of the existence of bisexuality. They experience their own bisexuality as essence and build their bisexual identity on this experience. Hence, it stands to reason that they would call on this essence when supporting their assertion of bisexual existence, and that they would not feel the need to seek political sanction to demonstrate the legitimate existence of something that they already know exists.

Thirty-two percent of bisexual respondents made extreme claims for bisexual existence, asserting that most or all people are really bisexual or that bisexuality is much more common than it appears to be. Faced
with the reality that few people actually identify themselves as bisexual or appear to be bisexual, these bisexual women typically posited the existence of a common bisexual potential that is often not actualized, or asserted that most people are in fact bisexual but refuse to acknowledge this fact to themselves and others.

If there is a common bisexual potential, how do bisexuals conceptualize this potential and how do they believe it is transformed into heterosexual or lesbian identities and behaviors? Patty described the bisexual potential as a “capacity to be sexual with both sexes,” and Colleen “agree[s] with Freud—people are born ‘polymorphous perverse.’” In other words, “people are born without a sexual orientation and are subsequently socialized mainly into heterosexuality.”

Whereas Colleen argued that the transformation from polymorphous perversity to heterosexual predominance is accomplished by means of socialization, other bisexual respondents believe that heterosexuality and lesbianism result from individuals’ lack of awareness of the full range of their sexual feelings, or from denial of these feelings. For example, Rosa argued that bisexuality would be more common if people would only allow themselves to experience all their feelings. She wrote, “It should be the preferred lifestyle of the majority of people who, eventually, come to understand both their masculine and feminine needs and natures.” In this view, lesbianism and heterosexuality are lifestyles adopted by default or through ignorance.

In contrast, 5 bisexual respondents believe that individuals “choose” to “go one way or the other,” to “lead a (lesbian) lifestyle,” or to “commit” themselves to one lifestyle based on the sex of their current romantic partner. In other words, individuals might be bisexual or potentially bisexual, but they choose to live as either homosexuals or heterosexuals. Karolynn explained that this choice is based not on personal preferences, but on the politics of sexuality that make maintaining a bisexual identity in this society difficult,

That is probably what the majority of people potentially are but that, it’s easier to deal with the politics, rules and roles of either choosing to live a straight life or a gay life, at least for longer blocks of time. (Karolynn)

Tracy disagrees that the forces that pressure individuals to choose to live either a homosexual or heterosexual life are social. She believes that the
necessity for a "choice" stems from the inherent conflicts present in bisexuality itself:

As a bisexual woman, I feel it is more difficult to live with than being straight or gay—leads to more confusion early in life when a person is personally establishing what their sexual identity is. Also, creates conflicts in relationships and is a distraction to be attracted to both sexes. I chose to lead a lesbian lifestyle... (Tracy)

No matter what the explanation for the transformation of bisexual potential into lesbian or heterosexual identity and behavior, the result is a collective illusion that bisexuality is much less common than it really is. As Camille put it, bisexuality is "the norm" even though "the rest of the world both gay and straight doesn’t admit it," but that’s "their problem."

How do bisexual respondents who made extreme assertions of bisexual existence compare to lesbian respondents who made similar assertions about the universality or ubiquity of bisexuality? First of all, they are more numerous; whereas one out of three bisexual women believes that most or all people are bisexual, only one out of seven lesbians expressed the same idea.² The content of the opinions of bisexual and lesbian women who made this claim, however, are remarkably similar. Both bisexuals and lesbians explained the apparent scarcity of bisexuality by distinguishing between bisexual potential and heterosexual or lesbian identities and behaviors, providing many of the same explanations for the transformation from the one to the other. Members of both groups argued variously that individuals are socialized into heterosexuality, unaware of their own bisexuality, or pressured to commit themselves to either homosexuality or heterosexuality for social or political reasons. The only notable difference in the explanations offered by bisexual and lesbian respondents is that a number of lesbian respondents referred to an "ideal society" in which bisexuality would be more common or more politically acceptable. One bisexual woman suggested that someday in the future bisexuality might be more common, but not a single bisexual woman mentioned the concept of an ideal society. Instead, bisexual women focused on pointing out the aspects of our contemporary society that discourage bisexuality.

It is not surprising that bisexual women are more likely than lesbians to assert that most or all people are bisexual. On a practical level,
bisexual women like any minority have an interest in maximizing their numbers, whereas lesbians have a converse interest in maximizing their own numbers—two processes that necessarily occur at each other’s expense, given current concepts of sexuality. Ideologically, it is also advantageous to bisexuals to maximize the importance of bisexuality as an issue by emphasizing its prevalence. But the actual process by which individual bisexual women and lesbians arrive at their respective opinions probably has little to do with political self-preservation or promotion. It is probably a result of much subtler perceptual processes. As demonstrated in a separate study of lesbian and bisexual women’s perceptions of the sexual orientations of hypothetical targets (Rust-Rodríguez 1989), bisexual women are more likely to perceive others as bisexual whereas lesbians are more likely to perceive others as lesbian. In other words, both lesbians and bisexual women tend to perceive other women as having the same sexual orientation as they themselves do. There are several possible reasons for this phenomenon, including a tendency to perceive sameness between the self and others, a tendency to fill information gaps with desirable rather than undesirable information, and the possibility that lesbian-identified and bisexual-identified women have different definitions of bisexuality. Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that bisexual women do in fact tend to perceive bisexuality where lesbians perceive lesbianism. The bisexual population thus appears to be larger to bisexual women than to lesbian women. In other words, bisexual women are more likely than lesbians to believe that most or all people are bisexual because that is in fact what they find to be the case on the basis of their own observations.

It is also not surprising that bisexual respondents, unlike lesbians, did not describe hypothetical ideal societies in which bisexuality would be more common. As I showed in chapter 6, lesbians belong to a historical tradition in which heterosexuality—especially heterosexual behavior—is anti-feminist. In order to reconcile the early gay liberationist goal of the elimination of gender with the lesbian feminism moral imperative to be a lesbian, lesbians constructed the concept of a post-revolutionary utopia in which people would be able to relate to each other without regard to gender, but which had not yet arrived. The concept of the ideal society is, therefore, an important element in lesbian feminist ideology. Bisexuals, on the other hand, believe that bisexuality exists in the current society and they find it acceptable here and now;
they have no need to hypothesize an ideal society in which such would be the case. In other words, they have no motivation to adopt the concept of an ideal society as part of their political ideologies and, according to the findings of this study, they have not done so.

**WHAT IS BISEXUALITY? OR, WHY IS EVERYONE STANDING UP?**

There are probably as many definitions of bisexuality among bisexual women as there are bisexual women; there is clearly no consensus either on what bisexuality is, or on who is bisexual. Some bisexuals define bisexuality in terms of actual sexual behavior or as a potential for actual sexual behavior, whereas others define it in terms of emotional or sexual feelings of attraction. Many define it as a gender blind form of sexuality. But no matter which criterion is used, bisexual women are faced with the same question that confronts lesbians—in a world in which people do not conform to ideal types, where do we draw the line between bisexuality and lesbianism? Bisexual respondents’ comments in response to the question, “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” suggest that bisexuals favor different definitions and generally define bisexuality more broadly than lesbians do. Nevertheless, many of the comments made by bisexuals bear a striking resemblance to the comments made by lesbians.

Many bisexual respondents described bisexuality as a potential or as an essential quality that many people possess, but that only some people express through actual feelings of attraction or sexual behavior. According to this definition, people can be—and are—bisexual without ever experiencing an attraction to one sex or the other and without ever having sexual relations with one sex or the other. In contrast to lesbian respondents, most of whom define a bisexual as a person who feels attracted to or has sexual relations with both sexes, very few bisexual women define bisexuals as people who necessarily have these actual emotional and physical experiences. The definition of bisexuality as a potential or essential quality is a broader definition that defines a much larger proportion of the population as bisexual than do definitions that depend upon actual experiences. It is this definition of bisexuality that
underlies the belief in universal or almost universal bisexuality discussed above, and that accounts for the differences in lesbians' and bisexuals' estimates of the prevalence of bisexuality.

But some bisexual women do define bisexuality in terms of actual sexual behavior or sexual attraction. Comments made by these bisexual women are very similar to the comments made by lesbians. Compare, for example, the following quotes from a bisexual woman and a lesbian who both define bisexuality in terms of a desire for both homosex and heterosex,

Someone who is comfortable in relating to either sex in a sexual manner. (Corinne, Bisexual)

Man or woman who likes both sexes and likes to engage in sexual intimacy with them. (Liz, lesbian)

and this pair of quotes from respondents who define as bisexual only those people who have actually acted on their desires for both homosex and heterosex:

Someone who is attracted to both (sexes) and pursues it farther at some point. (Adrienne, Bisexual)

Attraction to and physically and emotionally “acting” out the sexual preference simultaneously or at separate times. (Vashti, lesbian)

Or, consider this pair of quotes from a bisexual woman, who calls herself bisexual because she is attracted to both women and men even though she lives a lesbian lifestyle, and a lesbian, who would agree that she is bisexual:

I feel that most people are bisexual to some degree whether they admit it to themselves or others or not . . . . I chose to lead a lesbian lifestyle . . . as my emotional attachments are closer to women. (Tracy, Bisexual)

I define sexuality as on a continuum from attraction to same sex to opposite sex. However, society defines two cultures/gay and straight. Bisexuals (those who feel both attractions) usually choose one group for validation and support. (Riannon, lesbian)

Both Tracy and Riannon conceptualize sexuality as a continuum of attractions in which people are more or less attracted to the same or the other sex, or, as Tracy put it, more or less bisexual. Both also refer to people who are attracted to both women and men as bisexual, even if
they are more attracted to one sex or the other and even if they are sexually active with only one sex. In other words, their definitions of bisexuality are nearly identical.

Some bisexual respondents bypass the issue of "degrees" of attraction to women and men by defining bisexuality as a humanistic, gender-blind way of relating to others. They see bisexuality as a way of loving the person, not their sex, or of being nondiscriminatory in their attractions to others. For example, Ludwiça wrote, "I feel as if I'm open to respond to the person, not just the gender." This way of conceptualizing bisexuality places bisexuality at the forefront of liberal thinking; it is an equal opportunity way of loving others. Evelyn draws a clear distinction between homosexuals and heterosexuals, who discriminate against people of one sex or the other, and bisexuals, who do not discriminate. To her, being bisexual means "I do not exclude who I choose to love, emotionally and/or sexually, by virtue of the person's sex."

Not surprisingly, this definition of bisexuality—and its implications regarding the moral superiority of bisexuality as a way of relating to others—is much more popular among bisexual respondents than among lesbian respondents. As noted in chapter 4, only 8% of lesbians described bisexuality as gender blind; in contrast, 28% of bisexual women described bisexuality as gender blind. Although the number of bisexual women involved is too small to draw definitive conclusions, the percentage difference is great enough to suggest that there is a real difference in the way bisexuals and lesbians tend to view bisexuality.

But the relative popularity of the definition of bisexuality as gender blind among bisexuals as compared to lesbians should not be allowed to overshadow the fact that most bisexuals do not define bisexuality as gender blind. Most bisexual women ascribe to a basically dichotomous conceptualization of sexuality, in which bisexuality is a derivative form of sexuality composed of a combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality. This is true of bisexual women who define bisexuality in terms of actual attractions or behaviors as well as those who believe in a universal or nearly universal bisexual potential or essence. The former revealed their hybridized conception of bisexuality by referring to bisexuals as people who are attracted to both women and men, or who have sexual relations with both women and men. Recall, for example, Liz, who defined a bisexual as a person "who likes both sexes," and Rosa, who argued that bisexuality "should be the preferred lifestyle of the
majority of people who, eventually, come to understand both their masculine and feminine needs and natures.” Similarly, Shannon believes that “most, but certainly not all, people are bisexual to some degree, possibly because of genetic makeup, i.e., presence of male and female hormones in people.” Rosa and Shannon not only conceptualize bisexuality as a hybrid sexuality, they also believe that it stems from a masculine/feminine duality inherent in most or all people, either in the form of hybridized gender in the case of Rosa or in the form of hybridized biological sex in the case of Shannon.

The latter typically described bisexuality as a potential to go “either way,” as if the bisexual potential were a combination of homosexual and heterosexual potential, either or both of which might be realized at any given point in a person’s life:

_"I believe that most people are inherently bisexual and that loving relationships with both sexes lead to freer emotional expression. At the same time, I also believe that it is virtually impossible to have deep, loving relationships with more than one person at a time (of any sex) and that at any point in time a bisexual must make a commitment to one or the other sexual orientation depending on the person they are with." (Roberta, Bisexual)_

Roberta’s choice of words—“a commitment to one or the other _sexual orientation_”—is revealing. For Roberta, making a monogamous commitment to a particular person is synonymous to making a commitment to _be_ either heterosexual or lesbian; one’s relationship becomes one’s essence. People might have a bisexual potential, but their sexual orientation depends on the gender of the person to whom they are currently committed. In contrast, Cheryl defines the potential itself as bisexuality; people who are bisexual are bisexual regardless of the gender of the person to whom they currently happen to be committed:

_"I define bisexuality as the ability to be deeply involved emotionally and sexually with both men and women. This doesn’t preclude being in a monogamous relationship. More people are probably bisexual than homosexual." (Cheryl, Bisexual)_

Despite their disagreement over the question of whether bisexuality is a potential or an expression of that potential, Roberta and Cheryl both conceptualize bisexuality as a hybrid form of sexuality. They share this conceptualization with 65% of the bisexual women in this study.
How do bisexuals perceive themselves as a group? How do they feel about themselves? Within the lesbian community, they are portrayed as traitors, cowards, and opportunists. Most lesbians prefer to avoid them as friends and refuse to date them. How do bisexuals respond to these accusations and rejections? At the very least, one might expect that bisexual women would use the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” as an opportunity to defend themselves against some of the charges made against them by lesbians. In fact, bisexuals had surprisingly little to say about their images and feelings about bisexuality—despite the fact that this is exactly what the question asked for. Most lesbians raised these issues; one in two bisexuals did not. Bisexuals’ silence suggests strongly that bisexuals have little to say on these topics, i.e., they have few images of bisexuality and no strong feelings about bisexuals as a group.

Positive Images

Among the 22 bisexuals who did paint images of bisexuality in answer to the question, “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” positive images are more common than negative images. Eight bisexual women described bisexuality simply as “natural” or “healthy.” For example, Lisa thinks “that bisexuality indicates a ‘healthy’ awareness of oneself . . . An integration of personality.” Eight other bisexual women described bisexuality as a more “open” form of sexuality. For example, Marilyn described bisexuality as “an openness to possibilities, to potentials,” and Gloria feels that bisexuality is “an ideal state of being—open to all encounters and developments.” Shirley and Muriel argued that bisexuality “gives the widest possible options,” and Dana described bisexuality as “a greater expansion into loving the being of a person and not only the sex of the person.” Similarly, Jameelah believes that it is a “more universal way of thinking about/being sexual(ly oriented),” Cathy said that being bisexual “makes me feel accepting, freer,” and Michelle finds bisexuality “liberating.” Healthiness/naturalness and openness were the
only two positive images of bisexuality mentioned by more than one bisexual respondent.

Unflattering and Existentially Invalidating Images

Although negative images are less common among bisexual respondents than positive images, they are more varied and detailed. In fact, most of the many unflattering and existentially invalidating images of bisexuality found to be prevalent among lesbians were echoed by at least one bisexual respondent. The most commonly mentioned was “confusion.” The 5 bisexuals who mentioned confusion made comments similar to the comments made by lesbians. For example, lesbian respondent Naomi believes that people who think they are bisexual are really just confused,

I don’t believe it exists. People who believe they are bisexuals are in a state of confusion. (Naomi)

and bisexual respondent Evelyn agrees that this is true of some bisexuals, although she allows that bisexuality does exist and that some people are truly bisexual, not confused:

I think some women consider themselves bisexual who really aren’t, but have confusion and problems . . . I endorse it if it is honest. (Evelyn)

Lesbian respondent Yvette sees a different relationship between bisexuality and confusion. She sees confusion as an inherent aspect of bisexuality; in other words, she believes not that people call themselves bisexual because they are confused, but that bisexual people must be confused because they are bisexual. To her, bisexuality “seems like it would be a confusing life.” This image of bisexuality was echoed by bisexual respondents Cathy, Harriet, and Tracy, who said that they find it confusing themselves, at least sometimes. Many lesbians believe that this confusion stems from the internal struggle that occurs between bisexuals’ homosexual and heterosexual feelings, and bisexual respondent Sylvia agreed. She feels that being bisexual “causes a great struggle of emotions within.”

Bisexual respondent Gloria reflected lesbians’ accusations that bisexuals have difficulty making commitments to other people. She feels that
“unfortunately, [bisexuality] can be used not to make a commitment.” Similarly, Charlotte agrees with the many lesbians who believe that bisexuals are promiscuous or, at least, nonmonogamous; she wrote, “it is impossible to be a practicing bisexual and retain fidelity to your partners.” Although Charlotte seems to avoid the charge that bisexuals per se are infidelitous by using the modifier “practicing,” in truth she is implicating all bisexuals. By “practicing bisexual,” Charlotte means someone who is sexually involved with a man and a woman at the same time. For her, as for most other bisexual women and most lesbians, bisexuality is a combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality. The expression of bisexuality therefore necessarily means that one has more than one lover; whereas heterosexuals and lesbians can express their sexualities in a monogamous context, bisexuals cannot express their sexuality and simultaneously be monogamous.

Finally, two bisexual women echoed lesbians’ charge that bisexual women “cop out” by refusing to acknowledge their lesbianism in order to avoid stigma. Again, their comments sound just like the comments made by lesbians. For example, one of the two bisexual women wrote that bisexuality is “okay as long as that’s where you really are—and you’re not just avoiding homosexuality,” a comment that is very similar to the comments made by lesbians like Nel, “Some people hide behind this label because it’s more acceptable than being gay.”

The fact that only two bisexual respondents referred to bisexuality as a way to avoid the stigma of lesbianism in answer to the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” does not accurately reflect the prevalence of this attitude among bisexual women. Bisexual respondents’ answers to closed-ended questions that asked specifically about this issue indicate that this image is fairly popular among bisexual women. Half (51%) of bisexual women agreed 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” (table 7.1). Although this is a substantial percentage, by itself it does not indicate that bisexuals perceive bisexual identity to be more likely than any other identity to be a façade. When bisexuals were asked to respond to a similar statement about lesbians, “Some lesbians really are somewhat attracted to men, but they are afraid to express these feelings because other lesbians would not approve of them,” three-quarters (73%) agreed; in other words, bisexuals were more likely to state that lesbians
deny their bisexuality than that bisexuals deny their lesbianism. So far, it appears that bisexuals evaluate themselves favorably in comparison to lesbians. But the arithmetic difference between individual bisexual respondents’ answers to these questions reveals that, on an individual basis, one in four bisexual women believes that denial is more common among women who say they are bisexual than among women who say they are lesbian (figure 7.1). In other words, one in four bisexual respondents is more suspicious of other women’s bisexual identities than of other women’s lesbian identities. Although this is a minority, it is a substantial minority, especially when we consider that the attitude being measured calls into question the legitimacy of bisexual identity. The point merits emphasis; one in four women who call themselves bisexual accords less legitimacy to bisexual identity than she does to lesbian identity.

Findings pertaining to the belief that bisexuality is a transitional identity through which some women pass before they come out as lesbians are even more dramatic. Even though no bisexual respondents characterized bisexual identity as transitional in answer to the question “What is your opinion of bisexuality?” their answers to closed-ended questions confirm that many do think of it as such. Three quarters of bisexual women agreed that a “few” or “less than half” of “Women who say they are bisexual will eventually realize that they are lesbians” (table 7.2). On the basis of this figure alone it would seem that bisexuals merely acknowledge the possibility that some bisexual women will come out as lesbians while minimizing the proportion of bisexual women who will do so. But subtracting bisexuals’ responses to that statement from their responses to the statement, “Some women who claim to be lesbians will eventually find out that they actually are bisexual, or straight,” reveals that 44% of bisexual respondents believe that lesbians are even less likely to come out as bisexual or straight than bisexuals are to come out as lesbians (figure 7.2). In other words, two out of five bisexual respondents believe that bisexual identity is more likely to be transitional than lesbian identity or, conversely, that lesbian identity is more likely to be a “mature” identity representing one’s final destination in the process of coming out. Again, 44% is a minority—the other 56% of bisexuals apparently do not believe that bisexual identity is more likely to be transitional—but when we consider that these bisexual-identified women believe that women who call themselves bisexual generally have
less insight and knowledge of their own sexuality than women who call themselves lesbians, this 44% minority seems very large indeed. Apparently, despite the fact that no bisexual respondents spontaneously described bisexuality as a transitional identity, almost half of them see it as such.

Amid all of the bisexuals who echoed the negative images of bisexuality expressed by lesbians, only one bisexual specifically disagreed with any of these negative images; Cheryl pointed out that bisexuality does not preclude nonmonogamy. The facts that bisexual women expressed so many of the same unflattering and existentially invalidating attitudes about bisexuality that lesbians did and that only one bisexual raised her voice in protest suggests that many bisexual women have accepted lesbians’ views of bisexuality.

Political Images

Very few bisexual women wrote about bisexuality in political terms, either positively or negatively. Unlike lesbians, no bisexual women ranted about heterosexual privilege, described bisexuals as political fence-sitters or opportunists, or accused bisexuals of lacking political commitment to sexual liberation. One bisexual woman described bisexuality as apolitical, in contrast to lesbianism, which implies a political commitment to women:

*although I consider myself “bisexual,” I feel that (given the power relations between men/women and straights/gays/lesbians) bisexuality is an “easy apolitical out” for many people.* (Colleen)

The fact that most bisexual women did not even discuss bisexuality in political terms suggests that Colleen is not alone in perceiving bisexuality as apolitical. Apparently, the majority of bisexual women do not perceive bisexuality as a political lifestyle, or bisexual identity as a political identity.

Bisexual respondents’ answers to closed-ended questions confirm that most of them perceive bisexuals as less political and less politically worthy than lesbians. When bisexuals were asked to agree or disagree with the statements, “Bisexuals are not as committed to other women as lesbians are; they are more likely to desert their female friends,” and “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,” the majority of bisexual respondents disagreed with each statement (figure 7.3). This is not surprising; both of these statements make explicit comparisons between bisexual and lesbian women that are clearly unflattering to bisexuals. What is surprising is that a sizable minority of bisexuals actually agreed with each statement; one out of nine agreed that bisexuals are less committed than lesbians, and one out of four agreed that lesbians can’t trust bisexuals to stick around when the going gets rough. In both cases, the extent and the strength of bisexuals’ agreement does not match that found among lesbians, but the fact that any agreement was found among bisexuals at all is very telling.

Even more revealing is the fact that a few bisexual women’s attempts to defend themselves against the charge of disloyalty actually demonstrate the depth to which they have internalized doubts about their political worthiness. For example, Adrienne defines a bisexual woman as “[s]omeone who identifies with women spiritually, collectively, emotionally, physically, etc. but still maintains a relationship with a man or pursues them.” This defense of bisexual women’s political loyalty incorporates the premise of the accusation that bisexuals lack loyalty by implying that it is the lesbian component of bisexuality, not bisexuality per se, that is the source of bisexuals’ political worthiness.

If so many bisexual women are willing to agree with statements that clearly denigrate bisexuals’ political loyalties in direct comparison to lesbians, how many bisexuals have more subtle negative political attitudes about bisexuals as a group? In addition to the statements that made direct comparisons between bisexuals and lesbians, bisexuals were asked to respond to paired statements that made indirect comparisons between bisexual and lesbian women. Bisexuals’ responses to these statements show that, when asked to describe bisexual and lesbian women separately, an even larger proportion of bisexual women described bisexuals as less political and less politically worthy than lesbians.

For example, when asked how easy or difficult it is for bisexual women to pass as heterosexual, 64% said it was slightly to very easy, but when they were asked how easy or difficult it is for lesbians to pass, only 32% said it was easy (table 7.3). Taking the difference between respondents’ answers to these questions reveals that three-quarters (73%) of bisexual women believe that it is easier for bisexuals to pass
than for lesbians to pass (figure 7.4). When asked to estimate the percentages of bisexual and of lesbian women who would want to pass (table 7.4), 54% gave higher estimates for bisexuals than for lesbians (figure 7.5). In other words, most bisexual women believe that bisexuals are more able and willing to pass as heterosexual than lesbians are. In both cases, these figures are only 10% less than the comparable figures for lesbians; despite the fact that these beliefs are politically detrimental to bisexual women vis-à-vis lesbians, bisexual women are nearly as likely to hold them as lesbians are.

If bisexuals agree with lesbians that they are more able and willing to pass as heterosexual, do they also agree that they are better able to avoid heterosexist prejudice and discrimination than lesbians are? Yes, many do. When asked to rate the degree of prejudice experienced by bisexuals and by lesbians, half of bisexual respondents rated the two groups equally (table 7.5, figure 7.6). But the other 47% said that lesbians experience more prejudice than bisexuals. Similarly, 57% rated discrimination against bisexuals and discrimination against lesbians as equal in severity, but 40% said that lesbians experience more discrimination than bisexuals. In other words, nearly half of bisexual respondents believe that they are less oppressed than lesbians; a belief they share with 80% of lesbian respondents.

Bisexual respondents were also asked whom they believe is responsible for the oppression of women, lesbians, and bisexuals. Fifty percent replied that the forces that oppress bisexuals are identical to either the forces that oppress lesbians or the forces that oppress women; they saw no difference between their experiences of oppression as bisexuals and the experiences of either women in general or lesbians. Among the other 50%, a few said that bisexuals' oppression is less intense but qualitatively identical to lesbians' oppression, and several said that bisexuals' oppression is identical to lesbians' except that bisexuals are also oppressed by lesbians and heterosexuals who do not understand bisexuality and pressure bisexuals to choose a side. Complaints about the treatment of bisexuals by both gays/lesbians and heterosexuals also arose in 7 bisexuals' answers to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" For example, Cathy said, "at times I feel judged by both sides," and Evelyn said, "I get really tired of people telling me I don't exist." Except for this last point, bisexuals' comments about the forces that oppress them indicate that bisexuals generally do not perceive them-
selves as being oppressed as bisexuals per se. Instead, they perceive themselves as being oppressed for their gender or their “lesbianism.” But the few bisexuals who mentioned lack of understanding or pressure from lesbians/gays and heterosexuals have identified a uniquely bisexual form of oppression and in so doing they have begun to perceive themselves as oppressed for their bisexuality.

The fact that some bisexuals identified a uniquely bisexual form of oppression is an indication that a political view of bisexuality is beginning to develop among some bisexuals. Also, the fact that several bisexuals perceived lesbians as oppressors suggests that they are beginning to see a qualitative difference between their interests as bisexuals and the interests of lesbians. The first step toward politicization of a minority group is the recognition of collective oppression and a collective oppressor. Although none of the seven bisexual women who complained spontaneously about lesbians’ lack of acceptance put their complaints in political terms, they had taken the first step toward the politicization of their bisexual identities by recognizing both a form of collective bisexual oppression and a collective oppressor.

But four other bisexual women did describe bisexuality in rudimentary political terms. For example, Jameelah commented that bisexuality is “a difficult position to take politically,” and Michelle described bisexuality as “politically incorrect.” Neither of these women explained what they meant by “politically,” but their use of the word suggests that they have begun to think of their bisexuality in political terms, if only because straights’ and gays’ motivations for rejecting bisexuals are political and not because bisexuality per se is political. Finally, one bisexual woman wrote about bisexuality in unmistakably political terms by locating the source of bisexual oppression in social structural power dynamics and thereby providing the only truly political characterization of bisexuality found among the nearly four dozen bisexual-identified women in this study:

*It's the norm, but white male culture forces our thinking into either/or patterns. I believe most people are truly bisexual, but it's hard to express it when everyone expects you to choose one sex or the other.*

(Beverly)
Lesbians' negative and apolitical images of bisexual women translate into a preference to avoid bisexual women socially and politically. If bisexual women generally share lesbians' images of bisexuality, do they also share lesbians' preference to associate with lesbians instead of bisexual women? Again, the answer is yes; a surprising number of bisexual-identified women prefer to associate with lesbians instead of other bisexuals.

No bisexual women expressed an aversion to associating with other bisexual women in answer to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" but when they were asked closed-ended questions about their social and political preferences about one-quarter consistently expressed a preference for lesbians over other bisexual women (figures 7.7, 7.8). On average, bisexuals' preferences are neither as strong nor as pervasive as lesbians' preferences, but the fact that such a large percentage of bisexual women prefer lesbians at all is remarkable. Like lesbians, bisexuals' social preferences are strongest in the most intimate social situation of all—dating. Fully one-third of bisexual women said that they would prefer to date a lesbian than to date another bisexual woman. In fact, one in five bisexual women placed themselves at the extreme end of the preference scale, thereby describing their aversion to dating other bisexual women in the strongest terms possible. Another third do not care whether their dates are lesbian or bisexual, and the last third prefer to date bisexual women. Bisexuals are only slightly less likely to care whether their friends are lesbian or bisexual. One out of two bisexuals would be equally likely to make friends with another woman regardless of whether she were lesbian or bisexual, but 29% prefer to have lesbian friends. Previous researchers have found that in the laboratory people can be induced to prefer members of their own groups by simply naming the groups and placing people in them, even if the groups are fictitious and the assignments random or based on trivial characteristics (e.g., Allen and Wilder 1975; Billig and Tajfel 1973). In light of the ease with which researchers can create in-group preferences in the laboratory, the significance of the finding that some bisexual women prefer bisexuals over lesbians pales in comparison to the finding that so many bisexuals prefer to associate with lesbians, not bisexual
women. Unfortunately, it might be difficult for bisexual women to find lesbians to date or befriend, given most lesbians’ strong antipathy toward associating with bisexual women.

In large group situations, bisexuals’ preferences shift slightly toward other bisexual women. Two out of five bisexuals said that they are more comfortable among bisexuals than among lesbians and that they would prefer to belong to a bisexual discussion group than to a lesbian discussion group, and the majority of the other three-fifths expressed no preference either way. Conceivably, this is because bisexuals fear lesbians’ disapproval more in larger groups. In intimate situations, social bonds are close and presumably each person in a dyad belongs to the dyad out of choice; any lesbian who would knowingly date or be friends with a bisexual woman has apparently chosen to do so. In larger groups, however, each individual does not necessarily approve of every other group member; hence, in larger groups a bisexual woman is more likely to encounter lesbians who would not choose to associate with bisexuals. Moreover, when a bisexual is in an intimate relationship with one lesbian, each woman has an equal opportunity to contribute to their collective understanding of the relationship. In a larger group dominated by lesbians, the bisexual woman might feel outnumbered and unable to offset the general anti-bisexual atmosphere.

Bisexuals’ preferences in political situations resemble their preferences in social situations. Approximately one in two bisexuals would trust other bisexuals in positions of political leadership at least as much as she would trust lesbians. But one in four would rather work with a lesbian than with a bisexual on a gay rights campaign, and one in four would rather be represented by a lesbian than a bisexual lobbyist. The only political situation in which bisexuals were more likely to express a greater degree of trust toward bisexual women (42%) than toward lesbians (13%) was giving a speech to a local citizen’s group about alternative lifestyles. Perhaps, because the question about the speech asked respondents whom they would prefer to replace them personally—as opposed to representing them as members of a larger interest group—they thought it appropriate to choose someone similar to themselves. Or perhaps, under the assumption that the local citizen’s group would be predominantly heterosexual, bisexual women might feel that a bisexual speaker would be able to relate to the audience better than a lesbian.
THE IMPACT OF BISEXUAL WOMEN'S PERSONAL POLITICS AND EXPERIENCES ON THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD BISEXUALITY

Race, Education, Class, and Other Demographic Differences

There is no evidence that bisexual women of different races, classes, income levels, or education levels have different definitions of bisexuality or different thoughts and feelings about bisexuality. Given the relatively small number of bisexual women in this study, this finding is only tentative; however, there is no indication that a larger sample of bisexual women would have produced different results.

There is some evidence, however, of generational differences in bisexual women’s attitudes. Women who have been out as bisexuals for longer periods of time are more likely to agree with lesbians that lesbians shouldn’t trust bisexual women. No bisexual women who came out as bisexual less than three years prior to the study agreed that bisexuals are untrustworthy, whereas 29% of those who had been out as bisexual for three or more years and 40% of those who had been out as bisexual for eleven or more years agreed with this sentiment (r = .31, p = .05). It is fairly unlikely that bisexual women actually become more receptive to lesbians’ negative opinions about bisexuals the longer they have been out as bisexuals; a more plausible explanation for this finding is that women who came out as bisexual during the heyday of lesbian feminism in the 1970s were more thoroughly exposed to negative opinions about bisexuality than bisexuals who have come out more recently after the advent of queer politics.

Political Differences: Do Political Bisexuals Speak for Anyone?

There are few political sentiments among bisexuals at all, let alone any that are related to their attitudes toward bisexuality. When they were asked to list the social and political issues about which they were concerned, bisexuals demonstrated more interest in general women’s and gay issues than in issues pertaining specifically to their own orientation.
Seventy-seven percent listed women's or feminist issues and 49% listed gay issues, but only five respondents mentioned lesbian issues and none mentioned bisexual issues. Asked how strong a sense of belonging they feel toward women as a group, most (60%) expressed a very strong sense of belonging, whereas only 14% reported a comparable sense of belonging toward bisexuals as a group. Bisexuals' feelings of belonging contrast sharply with lesbians', who reported feeling more strongly attached to lesbians in particular (41%) than to women in general (30%). Bisexuals make less distinction between lesbians' political interests and bisexuals' political interests than lesbians do; 71% of bisexuals feel that lesbians' and bisexuals' interests are the "same" or "slightly different," compared to 43% of lesbians. Again, the findings indicate that bisexual women derive their politics from their status as women or by equating their interests with lesbian interests, not from their status as bisexuals. Given the lack of political concern about bisexuality among bisexuals, it is not surprising that these largely nonexistent political attitudes are unrelated to bisexuals' attitudes about bisexuality.

Personal Experiences

The bisexual women who participated in this study have had a variety of different personal experiences. Every one has had at least one heterosexual relationship, 40% have been married to a man, 40% have been involved in nonmarital heterosexual relationships that they described as "serious," and the other 20% have been involved in more casual relationships with men. At the time of the study, 42% were involved in relationships with men and 53% were involved in relationships with women, ranging from dating to marriages and unions. One-quarter have children. Most (84%) have identified themselves as lesbians at some time in their lives; 64% have switched between lesbian and bisexual identities two or more times. Their feelings of attraction range from 10% to 80% heterosexual—none are exclusively attracted to only one sex. The majority (64%) are predominantly attracted to women, and only 16% described themselves as equally attracted to both sexes.

I showed in chapter 5 that lesbians' attitudes toward bisexual women are related to their experiences of their own sexuality. In particular, lesbians who have previously identified themselves as bisexual or who feel attracted to men are less adamant about avoiding association
with bisexual women than are lesbians whose past and current experiences are more "purely" lesbian. One might expect that bisexual women's feelings about associating with lesbians would similarly reflect their own personal experiences with heterosexuality, lesbian identity, and feelings of sexual attraction. For example, one might expect that bisexual women who have a history of lesbian identification would be more inclined to associate with lesbians than bisexual women who have never considered themselves lesbians would, either because they feel a kinship to a community of women with whom they once shared an identity or because they adopted lesbians' biases while they were lesbians themselves.

The findings of this study indicate that no aspects of bisexuals' identity histories or past heterosexual experiences are related to their feelings about bisexual women vis-à-vis lesbians. However, bisexuals' current heterosexual relationships and feelings are related to their social and political preferences. In other words, the degree to which bisexual women trust each other and want to socialize with each other depends on the genders of the people to whom they are currently attracted or with whom they are currently romantically involved.

The stronger a bisexual woman's feelings of heterosexual attraction are, the less she is willing to associate with lesbians and the more she prefers to associate with other bisexual women instead (figure 7.9). In intimate social situations, bisexuals' preferences mirror their feelings of attraction; on average, those whose feelings are predominantly heterosexual prefer to date and make friends with bisexuals, those who are equally attracted toward women and men do not care whether their dates and friends are lesbian or bisexual, and those whose feelings are predominantly homosexual prefer to date and make friends with lesbians. In larger group situations, those whose feelings are as little as 30% heterosexual are more comfortable among bisexuals than lesbians, but those with only 10 to 20% heterosexual feelings still prefer to be among lesbians. Presumably, bisexual women with strong heterosexual feelings prefer to associate with other bisexual women because they would not be able to express or discuss their heterosexual (or bisexual) feelings as easily with lesbians, who might dismiss them as remnants of heterosexual socialization. Other bisexual women would be more likely to validate all of their sexual desires because they share the experience of being attracted to both women and men. But if other bisexuals share
both their attractions to women and their attractions to men, why then would any bisexuals—even those whose feelings are predominantly homosexual—prefer to associate with lesbians?

The relationship between the gender of bisexuals’ current romantic partners and their social and political preferences raises the same question because bisexual women who are in relationships with other women prefer to associate with lesbians, whereas bisexual women who are in relationships with men prefer to associate with bisexuals (figure 7.10). This is true in a variety of social and political contexts, though bisexuals’ preferences are stronger in some contexts than others. For example, bisexual women who are involved with women are, on average, just as comfortable among lesbians as they are among bisexual women, but if their relationship is serious they prefer to discuss it with lesbians. In contrast, bisexual women who are not involved with women are more comfortable and more willing to discuss their romantic lives with bisexual women than with lesbians, especially if they are dating or involved with a man. Those who are involved with both women and men simultaneously prefer to discuss their romantic lives with other bisexuals.

Bisexuals’ preferences for friends follow a similar pattern. Bisexual women who are involved with women prefer to have lesbian rather than bisexual friends—even if they are simultaneously involved with men—whereas those who are involved with men only prefer to have bisexual friends.

Bisexuals’ dating preferences do not show as marked a relationship to the genders of their partners as their preferences in less intimate social situations do; although the pattern is similar, it is not statistically significant. This might be because the question about dating was prefaced with the contingency phrase, “If you were not involved in a relationship now, . . . ” Therefore, respondents who are in relationships would have imagined what their preferences would be if they were single; i.e., in the absence of their current partner. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that the gender of their partners is more weakly related to the preferences bisexuals expressed in answer to this question than to the preferences they expressed in answer to other questions.

Bisexuals’ political preferences show the same pattern as their social preferences. On average, bisexuals who are in serious relationships with women prefer to work with lesbians and be represented by lesbian lobbyists in the struggle for “gay rights.” Those who are involved with
both women and men simultaneously, whose relationships with women are only casual, or who are not romantically involved with anyone would be equally happy to trust their political fate to a bisexual woman as to a lesbian. Only those who are involved exclusively with men have more political confidence in bisexual women than in lesbians. When the situation in question is giving a speech to a local citizen’s group, however, bisexuals’ political confidence in each other increases. Unlike rights campaigning or lobbying, giving a speech is not an overtly political situation, and I hypothesized above that bisexuals are more willing to trust their peers in this situation either because the speaker being replaced (the respondent herself) is bisexual anyway, or because they reason that a largely heterosexual audience would be able to relate better to a bisexual speaker than to a lesbian speaker. Bisexuals who are involved with women partners only are, on average, just as willing to send a lesbian as another bisexual woman in their place, but bisexuals who are not involved with anyone, who are involved with men only, or who are involved with both women and men simultaneously prefer to be replaced by another bisexual.

Political trust is often based on the perception of a shared oppression. Given the relationship between bisexuals’ political preferences and the genders of their current romantic partners, it is not surprising that bisexuals’ perceptions of the severity of prejudice against bisexuals also depend on whether they are in relationships with women or with men (figure 7.11). Bisexuals who are involved with both women and men believe that lesbians experience substantially more prejudice than bisexual women do, whereas bisexuals who are involved exclusively with men or not involved with anyone believe that bisexuals experience almost as much prejudice as lesbians.

These findings suggest that bisexuals’ perceptions of their social needs and political interests flow out of the nature of their current relationships. If they are involved with women, then they perceive their social needs and political interests as being more like lesbians’ than like bisexuals’. This might appear reasonable on the surface, since a bisexual woman who is involved with another woman shares the social and legal problems of lesbians. But, everything else equal, this fact would justify an equal willingness to associate with lesbians or with bisexuals; it does not explain a preference for lesbians. Apparently, everything else is not equal. Bisexuals who are in relationships with women, even though they
continue to call themselves bisexual, obviously feel they have more in common with lesbians on the basis of their relationship status than they have in common with bisexuels on the basis of their sexual orientation or sexual identity. Bisexual identity can withstand changes in one's relationships; a woman can call herself bisexual whether she is involved with a woman, a man, both women and men, or no one at all. But this bisexual identity does not form a bond with other bisexuels that is strong enough to withstand the same changes in relationships. The bisexual women who participated in this study apparently do not feel a sense of social connection or political trust with other bisexuels on the basis of shared bisexual identity. They do not perceive themselves as having social needs or political interests that stem from their bisexuality and that are capable of surviving changes in their romantic involvements; that is, they do not perceive themselves as having bisexual social needs or political interests.

SUMMARY

The two most striking findings about bisexual women's attitudes about bisexuality are the extent to which they resemble lesbians' attitudes and the extent to which they reflect an apolitical view of bisexuality in which bisexuels lack unique political interests. Bisexual women, as marginal members of the lesbian community, are exposed to lesbians' attitudes and have apparently adopted many of them as their own in spite of their unflattering nature. Given this fact, it would be easy to blame lesbians for oppressing bisexual women. We have to keep in mind, however, that the lesbian ideologies that give negative definitions and political meanings to bisexuality are ideologies that arose out of lesbians' own attempts to give positive definitions and political meanings to lesbianism. Lesbians, as well as bisexuels, live in a culture in which sexuality is conceptualized dichotomously, and lesbian ideologies developed to speak to lesbians' needs within that culture. These lesbian ideologies have had oppressive consequences for bisexuels, but the heterosexist ideologies they challenge are no less oppressive to bisexuels. The fact that this book is concerned with lesbians' attitudes toward bisexuels, and not with the possibly more antagonistic attitudes of the larger heterosexist society,
reflects not lesbians' greater blame in the oppression of bisexuals, but their closer cultural relationship with bisexuals and their greater potential as political allies.

The resemblance between bisexuals' and lesbians' attitudes about bisexuality is evident in bisexuals' images of bisexuality and feelings about other bisexuals as well as their definitions of bisexuality. For example, a substantial minority of bisexuals expressed the same variety of detailed negative images of bisexuality as lesbians did in answer to the question "What is your opinion of bisexuality?" The fact that negative attitudes exist at all among bisexuals is remarkable and shows the extent to which bisexual women's images of themselves have been shaped by lesbian feminist discourse. Moreover, the minority of bisexuals who spontaneously expressed these negative attitudes might in fact represent a much larger proportion of bisexual respondents who hold these attitudes but did not happen to express them; findings from a few closed-ended questions suggest that particular negative attitudes are in fact much more widespread among bisexuals than their spontaneous comments indicate, and there is no reason not to expect that the same is true of other negative attitudes. Also striking is the fact that among those bisexuals who did not express the same negative attitudes as lesbians, few bothered to attempt to refute lesbians' negative images of bisexuality. Positive images of bisexuality are actually more common than negative ones among bisexuals, but they are much less varied and refined, suggesting that they represent only the beginnings of the development of a more positive view of bisexuality among bisexuals.

Bisexuals' negative images of bisexuality are reflected in their feelings about associating with other bisexuals. A substantial proportion of bisexual women actually prefer to associate with lesbians instead of other bisexual women in social situations, and have greater political trust in lesbians than they do in other bisexual women. Given the ease with which in-group preferences are induced among strangers in the laboratory, this finding points to the depth of bisexuals' self-denigration. Many believe, as lesbians do, that they and other bisexuals are less faithful as lovers, less desirable as friends, and less trustworthy as compatriots in the battle for sexual liberation. The value bisexuals place on their social and political relationships with other bisexuals reflects the value they place on themselves, which is almost as low as the value given them by the majority of lesbians, who shun them.
Bisexuals’ definitions of bisexuality also closely resemble lesbians’. The majority of bisexual women, like the majority of lesbians, define bisexuality in terms of behaviors or attractions and conceptualize bisexuality as a hybrid combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality. This does not negate the fact that bisexuals are more likely than lesbians to define bisexuality as gender blindness, but the fact remains that even among bisexuals this is a minority position. Bisexual women are also more likely than lesbians to make extreme claims about bisexual existence, but again this is a minority position even among bisexuals and those who took it gave many of the same explanations lesbians did for the transformation of bisexual potential into heterosexual and lesbian realities.

Perhaps the most surprising findings are that some bisexual women actually doubt whether bisexuality exists at all, and that several bisexual women are more skeptical of women who call themselves bisexual than they are of women who call themselves lesbian. Given the fact that they call themselves bisexual, these attitudes have serious consequences for their own self-images and reflect the powerful influence lesbian arguments—and dichotomous constructions of sexuality in general—have had on bisexual women. The bisexual women who did assert the existence of bisexuality did so on the basis of their experience of a bisexual essence; an argument that undoubtedly reflects the basis for bisexuals’ belief that bisexuality exists, but that fails to respond effectively to lesbians’ charge that bisexuality is politically illegitimate.

Like lesbians, bisexuals generally view bisexuality as apolitical. Insofar as bisexuals perceive themselves as having political interests, they perceive these interests as stemming from their gender or their “lesbianism,” not their bisexuality per se. Many believe that bisexuals are less politically trustworthy, most believe that bisexuals are more willing and able to pass as heterosexual, and about half believe that bisexuals experience less prejudice and discrimination than lesbians. In contrast to lesbians, who feel themselves more politically aligned with other lesbians in particular than with gays or women in general, bisexuals feel strongly aligned with women and make little distinction between lesbians’ interests and their own interests as bisexuals. Bisexuals’ lack of alignment with other bisexuals shows up in the fact that their preferences for social and political association are based not on their bisexual identity, but on the gender of their current romantic partners; if they are involved with a
woman they prefer to associate with lesbians, and if they are involved with a man they prefer to associate with bisexuals. In short, the bisexual women in this study generally lack both a sense of commitment to bisexuals as a group and a sense of a uniquely bisexual politics.

There are, however, some seeds of a bisexual politics to be found in bisexuals’ comments. For example, the claim that bisexuality is universal or ubiquitous has political implications because it effectively maximizes both the number of bisexual women and the importance of the issue of bisexuality to the population at large. Even if bisexuals make this claim for the simple reason that that is how they see the world based on their definition of bisexuality rather than for political purposes, the political implications remain. Another basis for a bisexual politics lies in the concept of bisexuality as a gender-blind form of sexuality. This concept defines bisexuality as qualitatively different from homosexuality and heterosexuality; not as a derivative form of sexuality, but as a form of sexuality in its own right. This definition provides the basis for an independent political analysis of bisexuality (Rust 1992a), and, with its implication that bisexuality is a morally superior form of sexuality because it is nondiscriminatory, it also provides the basis for a positive and political image of bisexuality. Finally, a few bisexuals indicated that they feel oppressed by both lesbians/gays and heterosexuals, thus identifying a uniquely bisexual form of oppression and an oppressor. Since the current study was done in the mid-1980s, these seeds have borne some fruit. In the last chapter, I will bring us up to date by examining the political arguments bisexuals made in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the impact of these claims on lesbian politics.