

Is What I Do Who I Am?

A Study of Romantic and Sexual Partnering and Identity

by

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### Abstract

Prior research on sexual fluidity, defined as shifts in sexuality across time or social context, has documented shifts in sexual orientation identity, attractions, and partnering behavior. Given the theorized role of social context and specific interpersonal relationships in these changes, the experiences of polyamorous and consensually non-monogamous individuals are of interest. Polyamory refers to a relational approach of having or seeking multiple romantic and/or sexual partners. This study seeks to broaden the literature on sexual fluidity and polyamory by exploring how different domains of sexuality may or may not shift together for different groups of people. A sample of 63 polyamorous or otherwise consensually non-monogamous individuals and 73 monoamorous individuals completed questionnaires regarding sexual identity, attractions, and partnering behaviors across multiple timepoints. Key findings include the diversity of identity terms used by the polyamorous group, the prevalence of individuals who identify between exclusive heterosexuality and bisexuality (e.g. mostly straight), and the multiple pathways of sexuality change.

*Keywords:* sexual fluidity, polyamory, sexual identity

## Is What I Do Who I Am?

### A Study of Romantic and Sexual Partnering and Identity

Popular cultural notions of sexuality often fail to reflect the reality of many people's sexual and romantic experiences and desires. One such discrepancy may be seen between the extensive evidence for sexual fluidity, defined as situational flexibility or change in sexuality over time and social context (Diamond, 2008, 2012, 2014; Dickson, Paul, & Herbison, 2003; Mock & Eibach, 2012; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), and the political and scientific discourse characterizing sexual orientation as innate and stable (Sullivan-Blum, 2006; Jayaratne, Ybarra, Sheldon, Brown, Feldbaum, Pfeffer, & Petty, 2006). Furthermore, sexual orientation is often assumed to determine the gender of one's romantic and sexual partners. However, research on sexual fluidity suggests that for some people, relationships may in fact influence sexual orientation (Diamond, 2003b; Peplau, 2001), meaning that emotionally intimate relationships may lead to sexual attractions toward a gender to which one had not previously been attracted.

Along similar yet different lines, American culture values monogamy as the only natural or healthy relational style, yet a consensually non-monogamous approach to relationships known as polyamory exists and is so widespread that at least 265 polyamory groups exist across 158 countries (Modern Poly, n.d.). A book with practical advice for practicing polyamory and similar relational styles, *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Hardy, 2009; Easton & Liszt, 1997), has sold around 120,000 copies in two editions (Hardy, 2012). According to Robins (2004), polyamory was practiced in communes in the 1970s before burgeoning into the current, more diverse polyamory movement. Resources including books, magazines, online networks, and local communities both reflect and have contributed to the growth of this movement (Robins, 2004).

Studies examining changes in sexuality over time have found considerable evidence that shifts in sexual identity and possibly sexual attractions may be normative for some groups. In one study, the majority of bisexual women reported having identified as lesbian in the past, and many lesbians had previously identified as bisexual (Rust, 1993). Another study found that 84% of sexual minority women and 78% of sexual minority men changed identities again after coming out (Diamond, 2014). In a 10-year prospective study of young sexual minority women, two thirds of the sample changed identities at least once, and one third changed identities more than once (Diamond, 2008). Another study of sexual minority men and women (ages 14-21 years old) found that slightly over half of the gay/lesbian participants retained their sexual identity over a one year period, while only 15% retained a bisexual identity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). A 10-year longitudinal study examining identity change in both women and men of a wider age range reported that heterosexuality was the most stable sexual identity for both men and women, and sexual minority women and bisexual men had the least stable identities (Mock & Eibach, 2012). Gay male identities in this sample were less stable than heterosexual identities but were the most stable sexual minority identity. Though these studies utilized different samples and measured sexual orientation in different ways, the literature seems to suggest that sexual minority women and bisexual men report the most change in sexual identity, gay men less, and heterosexual men and women least, though men remain understudied.

Some studies of sexual fluidity have included questions on aspects of sexuality other than identity, such as partner gender, attractions, and fantasy. In one study, women rated their sexuality on a 0-6 scale from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality, and approximately 80% of the women maintained their rating one to one and a half years later (Pattatuci & Hamer, 1995). Most changes in these ratings were by only one increment. A

retrospective study of heterosexual, bisexual, and gay women and men included measures for identity change, attractions, fantasy, and behavior (Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005). Similar to Mock & Eibach (2012), the participants currently identifying as bisexual men, bisexual women, or lesbian women were more likely to have changed identities in the past. Again, the gay men were less likely to have experienced change than other sexual minority identities, but more likely than the heterosexual men or women. For reports of sexual fantasy, romantic attraction, and sexual behavior, lesbian women reported more change than gay men on all three dimensions, whereas heterosexual women reported more change than heterosexual men on sexual fantasy and romantic attraction only. As with identity, bisexual men, bisexual women, and lesbian women tended to report the most change in sexual fantasy, romantic attractions, and sexual behavior. However, a recent study found that a majority of both gay men and lesbian women reported other-gender fantasies and attractions (Diamond, 2014). Additionally, half of heterosexual women and a quarter of heterosexual men in the study reported same-gender attractions.

From these studies, it is apparent that many individuals do experience some amount of change in various aspects of sexuality. Sexual minority women and bisexual men may be particularly likely to experience change. However, most of the existing work on sexual identity change categorized participants as heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual (or “unlabeled” in the case of Diamond, 2008). Other identities such as queer, mostly heterosexual, or asexual are either excluded or combined with one of the three conventional categories, although attractions and identities that do not fit within a three-category system have been increasingly documented.

The bulk of the research that goes beyond heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality has noted the existence of “mostly heterosexual” and “mostly lesbian/gay” individuals. A cluster analysis of responses to a multifaceted sexuality measure found five

subgroups for both men and women: heterosexual, bi-heterosexual, bi-bisexual, bi-homosexual/lesbian, and homosexual/lesbian (Weinrich & Klein, 2002). More than 10% of women and more than 3% of men in a national database chose “mostly heterosexual” to describe their orientation (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). In a later wave of the same study, 15.8% of women and 3.5% of men chose “mostly heterosexual” (Savin-Williams, Joyner, & Rieger, 2012). Other studies provide evidence that “mostly heterosexual” women are behaviorally distinct (Thompson & Morgan, 2008) and “mostly heterosexual” men physiologically distinct (Savin-Williams, Rieger, & Rosenthal, 2013) from those who are exclusively heterosexual or bisexual. Other publications have argued for the validity of both “mostly heterosexual” and “mostly gay/lesbian” identities (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012).

However, even the added specificity and nuance of five-category systems (including “mostly heterosexual” and “mostly homosexual”) may blur relevant distinctions. For example, would a participant who considers about 40% of her attractions to be towards men choose “bisexual – that is, attracted to men and women equally” or “mostly heterosexual” (Savin-Williams et al., 2012)? Individuals with 5% of their attractions toward the same sex and individuals with 45% of their attractions toward the same sex may both be “mostly heterosexual,” but they are likely to perceive themselves and behave in very different ways.

Still others may not identify their sexuality on a continuum of heterosexuality to homosexuality at all. In one study of bisexual and polyamorous individuals, seven percent of the sample (150 participants) said that they could not describe their sexual orientation on a scale of exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality due to reasons such as being attracted to personality and not gender, being most attracted to transgender or androgynous people, or being attracted to different genders in different ways (Weitzman, 2007). Diamond (2014) found that

men reported identities such as “bi-curious,” “mostly gay,” “unsure,” “gender blind,” “varies,” “pansexual,” “open,” and “attracted to masculine women.” Because such varied identities have not been considered in studies of sexual fluidity, it is unknown how frequently people may move between nontraditional sexual identities.

Many variables have been proposed to explain why some individuals experience shifts in sexuality over time. Biology, individual characteristics, intimate relationships, and social contexts have been included in various explanations of sexual fluidity. Many researchers have suggested that women are more sexually fluid, and some have associated women’s greater capacity for fluidity to their nonspecific physiological sexual arousal (Diamond, 2003b; Diamond, 2012; Peplau, 2001). When exposed to visual sexual stimuli featuring women or men, heterosexual women’s physiological arousal was not specific to their preferred gender (Chivers, 2010). Both heterosexual and gay men and, to an intermediate degree, lesbian women, showed more category-specific arousal. This may be tied to sexual fluidity because if a woman’s physiological sexual arousal is gender non-specific, her romantic and sexual attractions may depend more on other variables, such as social context.

Individual characteristics may also play a role. Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) discussed how individual features such as inhibition, sex drive, and attractiveness may interact with social networks and settings to create changes in sexual identity trajectories that are entirely unrelated to the quality or strength of same-sex attractions. Similarly, Lippa (2006) found that high sex drive was associated with stronger sexual attractions to one sex or the other in men and with stronger attraction to both sexes in women. Therefore, sex drive and gender may interact to predict exclusivity of attractions, and changes in sex drive could be related to changes in attractions.



Relationships and social context have also been linked to sexual fluidity. Diamond (2003b) proposed that romantic love and sexual desire, though often linked, are biologically separate, and romantic love is not inherently oriented toward a particular gender. Thus a close emotional relationship with someone of any gender could potentially lead to sexual desire for that person. The role of intimate relationships may be greater for women, as women often experience sexual attraction within the context of emotionally intimate and relational contexts (Peplau, 2001). Likewise, intimacy may be a more important goal of sex for women than for men, and committed relationships may be a more preferred context for sexual activity (Peplau, 2003), perhaps because women are socialized to conflate emotional intimacy and sexuality (Hynie, Lyndon, Côté, & Weiner, 1998). Because relationships and emotional intimacy may be more salient for women, women may be more likely to experience relationship-specific attractions that deviate from their past sexual orientation. There is some evidence that for men, relationship orientation (i.e., are they currently seeking out new partners) is more important, and for women, relationship status (i.e., are they currently partnered) is more important, at least in the context of testosterone levels (van Anders & Goldey, 2010; van Anders, Hamilton, & Watson, 2007). This pattern indicates that relational identity, relationship status, and gender may interact in complex ways. Additionally, if relationships status is more important for women, this could point to the role of current partnership status in women's sexual fluidity. For many women, changes in sexual identity tend to be consistent with gender of relationship partners (Diamond, 2008).

Social context beyond specific relationships should also be considered, such as the norms of mainstream culture and subcultures, exposure to the existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities, or living in a gender-segregated environment. Rust (1993)

highlights changes in conceptualizations of sexuality and the meanings ascribed to identity terms over time, as well as variations in different communities and subcultures. Individuals may describe themselves differently in an LGBT community than with their families. Furthermore, family relationships, friendship and community ties, ethnicity, social class, access to sexual information, and opportunities for relationships likely also play a role in how individuals experience their sexuality (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000).

Polyamory, an approach characterized by consensually non-monogamous romantic and/or sexual relationships, has also been found to relate to sexual fluidity. Aguilar (2013) studied communal living groups where polyamory was encouraged, and all thirty-two participants identified their sexuality as fluid, claiming labels of “mostly heterosexual,” “heteroflexible,” “pansexual,” or no label. Similarly, a study of a local (but non-communal) polyamorous community found that bisexual women were particularly numerous and socially valued, as female-male-female triads were considered the ‘ideal’ (Sheff, 2005). Many of the women in this study had not identified as bisexual or experienced same-sex sexuality prior to involvement with the polyamorous community.

Despite evidence for the significance of relationships and social contexts in sexual identity, previous studies on sexual fluidity have seldom addressed polyamorous identity. The existing research on polyamory has focused largely on issues of therapy (Weitzman, 2006; Weitzman, 2007), the politics and power within polyamory (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Klesse, 2006; Deric & Abbey, 2010), and the development, phenomenology, and language of polyamory (Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Robins, 2004). With such a small amount of prior research focusing on polyamorous identity, much remains to be understood about how relational identity and sexual fluidity intersect.

Additionally, little research has examined how relational identities may themselves be fluid. Weitzman (2007) found that 64% of their polyamorous sample had preferred monogamy during an earlier point in their lives, while 36% had never preferred monogamy. Another article discusses how some individuals may be “poly-fluid,” meaning they are able to be either monoamorous or polyamorous (Weitzman, 2006). Of course, an individual need not identify as polyamorous to shift between relational identities or practices. However, no existing research has focused on the relational fluidity of monoamorously identified individuals.

The current study seeks to bridge the gaps in our understanding of sexual fluidity in polyamorous and monoamorous individuals and contribute to the cultural understanding of patterns of change and stability in relationship configurations, attractions, and sexual and relational identities. The overarching hypothesis for this study is that individuals with non-normative relationship configurations will be more likely to change identities, meaning that if an individual’s relationship configuration does not normatively fit their sexual or relational identity, they will likely change how they identify. For example, a gay-identified man with a female partner would be more likely to change his sexual identity than a gay-identified man with only male partners, even if their sexual attractions are the same. Based on previous studies of sexual fluidity, we also predict that sexual minority women and bisexual men will be the most likely to experience change in identity, attractions, and gender of partner(s). Furthermore, from the literature on identity change in sexual minority women, we hypothesize that individuals whose attractions straddle traditional identity categories (e.g., primary but not exclusive other-sex or same-sex attractions) will be more likely to change identities (Diamond, 2000; Diamond, 2003a). We predict that this will hold less true for those who understand their sexuality as fluid or who reject traditional identity labels, for example, by adopting the label “queer,” because interpreting

one's sexuality as fluid may create less pressure to fit conventionally into an identity category (Diamond, 2003a).

## Method

### Participants

As part of a larger study, participants were recruited through advertisements posted locally, printed in newspapers and magazines, posted on internet websites such as Craigslist, or sent through organization listservs, and word of mouth. Recruitment occurred in two waves, with the first wave of recruitment between August 2009 and February 2010 and the second wave between August 2010 and April 2011. The second wave of recruitment allowed for recognition of polyamorous individuals with no current partners or one current partner, whereas the first wave characterized respondents based on number of partners. Depending on relational grouping (polyamorous or monoamorous), respondents were directed to one of two versions of an online survey. Respondents in the polyamorous group were given the option to participate in five follow-up questionnaires over a period of about two years, and those in the monoamorous group were able to participate in two follow-up questionnaires over approximately the same period. Monetary compensation was provided for baseline participation and each follow-up completed.

In order to compare responses across time, individuals who did not participate in at least one follow-up ( $n = 159$ ) or who responded to the wrong survey version at baseline ( $n = 4$ ) were excluded from analyses. The total sample for analysis ( $N = 134$ ) thus consisted of 84 cisgender women ( $M$  age at baseline = 32.89 years,  $SD = 10.86$ ) and 50 men including one transgender man ( $M$  age at baseline = 33.92 years,  $SD = 13.52$ ). Ages at baseline ranged from 18 to 76 years. Sixty-three participants responded to the polyamorous survey, and 71 to the monoamorous survey. Participants self-identified race/ethnicity, which we coded as White/Caucasian ( $n = 86$ ),

Black/African American ( $n = 20$ ), Asian ( $n = 11$ ), Hispanic/Chicano ( $n = 6$ ), Multiracial ( $n = 5$ ), Indian ( $n = 2$ ), or Middle Eastern ( $n = 1$ ), with three non-responders. The majority of participants lived in the United States for the duration of their lives ( $n = 115$ ); only five participants had lived in the United States for less than 10 years. More participants were recruited during the second wave ( $n = 78$ ) than the first wave ( $n = 56$ ). Fifty-one participants (38.1%) were students, and participants reported diverse levels of education, occupations, and incomes.

Of the 134 participants who completed at least one follow-up, many did not participate in all follow-ups available to them. The number participating decreased at each subsequent timepoint, although many participants skipped a follow-up and resumed participation in a later follow-up. For the polyamorous group, 63 participated in baseline, 57 in the first follow-up, 44 in the second, 32 in the third, 22 in the fourth, and 18 in the fifth. Twelve participants in this group took part in all six possible timepoints. For the monoamorous group, the numbers were 71 at baseline, 64 at the first follow-up, and 38 at the second. Thirty-one participated in all three possible timepoints. For the purposes of this paper, only the baseline and first follow-up are considered in most analyses. The mean time between the baseline and first follow-up questionnaire was 7.41 months overall ( $SD = 3.00$  months). Due to the different timelines for the two questionnaire versions, polyamorous individuals tended to have a shorter period between these timepoints ( $M = 5.45$  months,  $SD = 0.59$  months) than monoamorous individuals ( $M = 9.09$  months,  $SD = 3.21$  months). Additionally, an error in the timing of one participant's baseline data rendered their data from this timepoint unusable. In order to include this participant's data, their responses from the first follow-up were counted as their baseline data and their second follow-up responses were used as their first follow-up.

## Measures

At each timepoint, participants responded to an online questionnaire with measures relating to a variety of topics, including demographics, sexual and relational identity, attractions, and relationships. The measures used primarily in analyses for this paper are described below. Although relational identity and sexual identity were components of the Background Questionnaire, they are described separately due to their particular significance in this study.

**Background Information.** The Background Questionnaire addressed demographic information such as age, gender/sex, race and ethnicity, and occupation. These questions were primarily open-ended and many such as gender/sex and race were later coded into discrete categories. Several of the demographic questions (e.g. occupation) were asked only in the baseline questionnaire.

#### **Sexual Orientation and Identity.**

**Sexual Identity.** To assess participants' descriptions of their current sexual identity, they were asked the open-ended question: "How do you identify your current sexual orientation?" Based on the collection of responses, answers were qualitatively sorted into seven categories: Heterosexual, Predominantly Heterosexual, Bisexual, Predominantly Gay/Lesbian, Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual, Asexual, and Queer. The Predominantly Heterosexual category captured a range of responses including qualified heterosexuality (e.g., Kinsey 1 or heterosexual (but bi-comfortable)) and a middle-ground between heterosexuality and bisexuality (e.g., "heterosexual-to-bisexual"). The Predominantly Gay/Lesbian category contained only one response ("mostly gay"), but was coded as a separate category because this response was judged to be qualitatively distinct from the Bisexual or Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual categories. Responses were coded as Queer if the word "queer" was used, unless a specific qualifier of queer was also

named. Thus, the response “queer/bisexual” was included in the Bisexual category, as queer is often used as a less specific umbrella term.

***Sexual Orientation.*** The Sexual Orientation Questionnaire captured several elements of attraction and sexuality, including past change and current attractions. This questionnaire differs from the sexual identity question because it assesses attractions and preferences rather than how the individual identifies. For example, two people may have the same orientation of predominantly same-sex attractions, but one may identify as bisexual and one as gay.

In this questionnaire, participants rated sexual experiences and fantasies on a scale from 1 (exclusively heterosexual) to 7 (exclusively homosexual). Participants indicated the intensity of their strongest attraction to a man and to a woman in the past six months from 1 (no attraction) to 9 (maximum attraction), how frequently they felt that attracted to a man or to a woman from 1 (almost never) to 6 (about every day), and to how many men or women they felt that attracted. For each gender, other questions addressed what participants found attractive, frequency of fantasies, and strength of desire for sexual activity. Additionally, two questions addressed to what extent participants felt attractions for the person rather than the gender.

***Klein Sexual Orientation Grid.*** The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985) includes ratings of seven dimensions of sexuality for three time frames. The seven dimensions of sexuality consisted of sexual attraction, behavior, fantasies, emotional preference, and social preference, rated from 1 (other sex only) to 7 (same sex only), and lifestyle/socialization and self identification, rated from 1 (heterosexual only) to 7 (gay/lesbian only). Participants responded to these seven measures for their past, their present, and their ideal, for a total of 21 responses.

### **Partner Number and Relational Identity.**

***Relational Identity.*** To gauge participants' identification with polyamorous or monoamorous labels, another question asked, "Do you currently use any particular terms to describe your approach to relationships (e.g. monogamous, polyamorous, single by choice)?" If participants responded yes, an open-ended question allowed participants to describe this approach. Responses were used to determine whether participants completed the correct version of the survey, and to assess changes in relational identity over time.

***Partners.*** The polyamorous survey version asked participants to list initials of their current partners. These initials were used later in the survey for items specific to each relationship, such as relationship quality. Additionally, both survey versions contained questions regarding participants' current relationship status, in which participants could indicate one or more of the following: single, sexual encounters, dating, committed relationship, or other. Definitions and examples were provided for each category, and participants choosing "other" were asked to specify in an open response box. Other questions asked about the length of time and number of partners for each relationship status participants had indicated. For example, a participant who indicated "single" and "dating" would be asked how long they had been single, and with how many partners and how long they had been dating. These questions were accompanied by instructions to count each partner in only one category (e.g., the same partner would not count as both "dating" and "committed relationship"). Participants' open-ended responses were coded into numeric data for each relationship category and for total number of partners.

## **Procedure**

The study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board. Before enrolling, participants passed an online eligibility screening (in which they provided information on their



relationships and relational identity) and provided informed consent. Participants completed the online questionnaire in their own homes, which required approximately 45-90 minutes at each timepoint. Polyamorous participants were given the option to participate in five follow-ups and monoamorous participants two follow-ups, encompassing a time period of about two years.

Those who agreed to continue with the study past baseline were re-contacted via e-mail or phone to participate in each follow-up for which they were eligible.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Nontraditional Sexual Identities**

Many participants' responses to the sexual identity question were not constrained to the traditional answers of "straight/heterosexual," "bisexual," or "gay/lesbian/homosexual." Instead, many wrote about complex patterns of attraction or qualified their identities in some way. These responses included identities that were asexual, pansexual, queer, mostly straight or heteroflexible, used Kinsey scale numbers, or described behavioral, cognitive, or context-dependent departures from the traditional identity system. For example, one participant wrote that he was "Kinsey 1: mostly heterosexual," while another responded that she was "heteroflexible? I prefer males, but I find my current partners' pheromones and time of month influence my feelings toward women." These examples show qualified heterosexuality, similar to the "mostly heterosexual" orientation that has received considerable study (Savin-Williams et al., 2013; Thompson & Morgan, 2008; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). However, participants who identified as bisexual or gay also qualified their responses. For example, some participants noted that they were "bisexual but leaning toward men currently," "bisexual but heterosexual most of the time," or "gay, mostly."

These nontraditional identity responses were not infrequent. Of the 134 participants, 21 (15.67%) provided such a response at baseline and/or the first follow-up. While participants' responses often contained multiple terms (e.g. "pansexual/queer"), two participants described themselves as asexual, seven as pansexual, two as queer, four as being Kinsey Scale 1 or 2, and eight qualified their heterosexuality, two qualified their bisexuality, and one qualified her homosexuality. Notably, these more nuanced responses were much more common among the non-monogamous and polyamorous participants. Nineteen of the 63 participants in the polyamorous group (30.16%) reported such a response, as compared to two of the 71 monoamorous participants (2.82%). A chi-square test demonstrated that this difference was significant,  $X^2(1, N = 134) = 18.89, p < .001$ . Furthermore, the two monoamorous participants with more complicated sexual identities also reported more complicated relational identities. One reported liking the idea of monogamy, but being unsure as to how she should identify as she had recently left a relationship with a polyamorous partner. The other described herself as asexual and "nonromantic/nonsexual."

Interestingly, nine of these 21 participants with nuanced responses qualified themselves as fitting between traditional heterosexual and bisexual categories; they were either more same-sex oriented than simply heterosexual or more other-sex oriented than simply bisexual. Even more notable is that four of these nine participants were male. Unlike past studies (e.g., Udry & Chantala, 2006; Savin-Williams et al., 2012) which have indicated that women were more likely to report being "mostly heterosexual," women in this sample were no more likely to identify themselves in the predominantly heterosexual category than were men. However, on questions of current attractions, women were indeed more likely than men to identify their sexual attractions as either "other sex mostly" or "other sex somewhat more" (29.1% vs. 19.5% at Time 1; 34.2%

vs. 20.0% at Time 2). The gender difference in “mostly straight” attractions but similarity in “mostly straight” identities may suggest that women and men use different criteria in making decisions about how to identify their sexual orientation.

Another interesting aspect of these nontraditional identity labels is that they were not constrained by age. Although it has been suggested that contemporary youth are more likely to use nontraditional identity terms than older generations (Thompson & Morgan, 2008), the age demographics barely differed between those who identified with traditional and nontraditional identity terms in this sample ( $M_{\text{trad}} = 33.25$ ,  $SD_{\text{trad}} = 11.76$  vs.  $M_{\text{nontrad}} = 33.43$ ,  $SD_{\text{nontrad}} = 12.75$ ). While a slightly higher proportion of those age 18 through age 35 (16 of 89, or 17.98%) identified in a nontraditional way than those age 36 or older (5 of 43, or 11.63%), it was notable that adults through age 76 (our oldest participant’s age) reported their sexual identity in nontraditional ways.

### **Changes in Sexual Identity**

To analyze changes in sexual identity, coded sexual identity responses were compared between timepoints. The coded sexual identity categories included Heterosexual, Predominantly Heterosexual, Bisexual, Predominantly Gay/Lesbian, Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual, Queer, and Asexual. If the codes for a participant’s responses differed between timepoints, this difference was considered a change. Overall, there were no significant differences in the number of identity changes between polyamorous and monoamorous groups (seven of 49 polyamorous and six of 57 monoamorous participants changed),  $X^2(1, N = 106) = 0.27$ ,  $p = 0.603$ . Nor were there overall differences in prevalence of identity change between genders (four of 36 men and nine of 70 women changed),  $X^2(1, N = 106) = 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.818$ . This was not the same for sexual identity.

Significant differences were evident between baseline sexual identity groups,  $X^2(5, N = 106) = 11.51, p = .042$ . The Predominantly Heterosexual baseline group was the most likely to change by the first follow-up (see Table 1). Three of the seven people identifying in the Predominantly Heterosexual group changed between these timepoints, either to the Heterosexual group ( $n = 1$ ) or to the Bisexual group ( $n = 2$ ). Interestingly, the two moving to the Bisexual group were both women, whereas the one moving to the Heterosexual group was a man (see Table 2).

In the Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual baseline identity group, two of nine participants (both women) changed identity groups, one to Bisexual and one to Predominantly Gay/Lesbian; thus, one quarter of Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual women changed identities between timepoints. Finally, about 10% of the Heterosexual group changed identities by the first follow-up, with four participants moving to the Bisexual group, three to the Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual group, and one to the Asexual group. A greater percentage of polyamorous participants than monoamorous participants moved from the Heterosexual group (15% vs. 8%). Between these first two timepoints, participants were most likely to change in such ways that their identity became less polar (such as Heterosexual to Bisexual or Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual to Predominantly Gay/Lesbian; see Table 3). About 9% of changes were in a less polar direction, as opposed to about 3% in a more polar direction and 3% without a change in polarity. Men changed in a less polar direction less frequently than women (3% vs. 12%), and monoamorous individuals tended to change in a less polar direction less frequently than polyamorous individuals (7% vs. 14%).

Although these patterns of change were not necessarily stable throughout further timepoints in the study, they were interesting to compare to existing research on sexual identity change. Between baseline and the first follow-up, no participants who identified as bisexual at

baseline changed their identity. This contrasts with prior studies in which bisexual women were more likely than lesbian women (Diamond, 2000) and bisexual men more likely than gay men (Mock & Eibach, 2012) to change identities. This difference could reflect the more nuanced identity options in this study, or the separation of identity from orientation. Additionally, almost 10% of the heterosexual participants in this sample changed identities after baseline, whereas past studies found heterosexual men and women were less likely than bisexual individuals (as well as gay/lesbian individuals) to report changes in their sexuality (Kinnish et al., 2005; Mock & Eibach, 2012).

The relatively high numbers of both polyamorous and monoamorous heterosexual participants who changed identities were unexpected. The higher proportion of polyamorous heterosexual participants (15%) who changed identities may be related to their polyamorous relational approach. At least one study has suggested that women are likely to shift from a heterosexual to a bisexual label after joining a polyamorous community (Sheff, 2005). Such changes may reflect how bisexuality is more valued within polyamorous subcultures, and female bisexuality in particular may be normative in these spaces. Indeed, two of the eight heterosexual participants who changed from a heterosexual identity were polyamorous women who adopted a bisexual identity. However, change within the monoamorous heterosexual participants is harder to explain, and may be an artifact of small sample sizes. Alternatively, it may be a self-selection effect such that heterosexual individuals who volunteered to participate in this sexuality study may be more sexually open or sexually fluid than other heterosexual people.

### **Relational Identity**

Participants were asked to list any terms they use or might use to describe their approach to romantic/sexual relationships. At baseline, 93 participants listed at least one term. Forty-four

responses included the word polyamorous or a variation thereof (e.g. poly-fidelous), and 12 added at least one additional term (e.g., single by choice, pansexual, swinger, open relationship). Thirty-three participants provided terms including the word monogamous or monoamorous, and four qualified their response with phrases such as “but open to experimentation” or “in current marriage.” Seven participants used single by choice as their primary term, and three described a presumably monoamorous relationship (e.g., married). Two participants described themselves in a way that was in between polyamorous or monoamorous. One said she “like[s] the idea of monogamy” but was confused, having ended a relationship with a polyamorous partner three months prior. Another said she and her boyfriend have an arrangement in which they can be sexually involved with the same sex, but not the other sex.

At the first follow-up, 69 participants responded to this item. Thirty-seven used terms including polyamory or polyfidelity, three said open relationship or open marriage, and 19 said monogamous. One participant made a clear shift from identifying as “poly-fidelous” at the first timepoint to monogamous at the second timepoint. Also, the participant who had said at baseline that she and her partner could be sexually involved only with the same sex now said that she was in an open relationship. Both of these participants identified as pansexual or bisexual women, and both experienced a considerable change in their attractions (of two points on a seven point scale). However, the change in their relational identity seemed more closely connected to changes in partnering than changes in attraction. One participant had been in a committed relationship with two other individuals, and she began identifying as monogamous when the relationship with one of them ended. The other participant identified her relationship as open after engaging in a sexual experience with another person. That only these two participants reported clear shifts in relational identity suggests that relational identity may be stable for most

individuals, but some people adopt or relinquish a monoamorous label according to changes in relationship status and partnering.

### **Overview of Romantic and Sexual Partners**

Of the participants reporting valid data on their number of partners at baseline ( $N = 127$ ), most participants had one or two partners. Partners included dating, sexual, and committed relationships. While 13 participants reported no current partners, 57 reported one partner, 24 reported two, 16 reported three, and the remaining 17 participants reported between four and 18 partners ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ). Of 113 participants who provided data on the gender of their partners at baseline, 52 participants reported partnering with only men, 39 with only women, 21 with both men and women, and one participant reported partnering with both women and a genderqueer female.

At the first follow-up ( $N = 115$ ), 14 participants reported no partners, 63 participants reported one partner, 13 reported two, 11 reported three, and the remaining 14 reported between four and 20 partners ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 2.80$ ). Similar to baseline, 52 participants reported partnering with men only, 37 with women only, 13 with both women and men, one with only a genderqueer female, and one with a genderqueer female and other women.

These data illustrate the extent to which lived experiences diverge from cultural values of monogamy and the invisibility of bisexuality. Almost one in five participants (22 of 113) reported partners of more than one gender at baseline, and over 14% (15 of 104) reported partners of more than one gender at the first follow-up. This sizable subsection of participants does not fit within cultural expectations that individuals will partner with only one person or with only one gender.

### **Change in Partner Genders**

Approximately 17% of the sample that reported having partners at both baseline and the first follow-up indicated a change in the gender of their partners (16 of 95). The most frequent changes reported were shifts from partners of both genders to either men only ( $n = 5$ ) or women only ( $n = 5$ ). Two participants shifted from women only to men only, two from women only to both genders, and two from men only to women only.

The changes in partner gender were often associated with participant gender and relational approach. The two participants who partnered with women only at baseline and men only at the first follow-up were both monoamorous men who also changed identities from heterosexual to either bisexual or gay. The two participants who changed from only women partners to partners of both genders were more diverse. One was a gay-identified monoamorous woman, and one was a polyamorous man who identified as “Kinsey 1” at both timepoints. Both of the participants shifting from only men partners to partners of both genders were polyamorous women who identified as bisexual at the second timepoint.

Eight of the 10 participants with partners of both genders at baseline and only one gender at follow-up identified as bisexual or pansexual at both timepoints, and all 10 were polyamorous. All five participants who changed from partnering with both genders to only men were women, and three participants whose partners shifted from both genders to only women were women. One woman who changed from partnering with both genders to men only identified as heterosexual at both timepoints, while another woman who shifted from partnering with both genders to women only changed her identity from heterosexual to gay. These patterns show that identity does not always align with behavior, as three participants reported identities that did not align with their partnering choices (e.g. heterosexual or gay and partnering with both genders). However, these individuals tended to change either their identity or partnering behaviors at the



next timepoint. As seen in Table 4, two heterosexual women had partners of both genders at baseline, but none did at the first follow-up. One of these women changed her identity to “gay” and partnered with women only at the first follow-up. The other maintained her heterosexual identity, but partnered with men only at the next timepoint. Another woman who had identified as gay at baseline later described herself as “gay, mostly” and partnered with women only at the first follow-up. Participants who identified in nonpolar ways (e.g. Kinsey 1, bisexual, or pansexual) did not change identities when they changed partner gender(s).

### **Number of Partners**

Many participants reported one or more partners. To determine whether the number of partners was related to gender and relational approach (i.e., polyamorous or monoamorous), a two-way univariate analysis of variance was conducted. One participant who reported 100 partners was excluded as an outlier, leaving  $N = 127$  who reported partner data. A significant main effect of relational approach emerged,  $F(1, 123) = 37.31, p < .001$ , in which polyamorous individuals reported more partners ( $M = 3.31, SD = 2.91$ ) than monoamorous individuals ( $M = 1.12, SD = 1.11$ ). This was expected because of polyamory’s definitional involvement of multiple partners but also because our first wave of recruitment confounded polyamory with multipartnering. A main effect of gender also emerged ( $F(1, 123) = 7.40, p = .007$ ). Men reported significantly more partners ( $M = 2.85, SD = 3.49$ ) than women ( $M = 1.69, SD = 1.15$ , see Table 5).

There was also a significant interaction between relational approach and gender,  $F(1, 123) = 4.75, p = .031$ . Simple effect tests revealed that polyamorous men ( $M = 4.38, SD = 4.04$ ) reported significantly more partners than polyamorous women ( $M = 2.53, SD = 1.24$ ),  $F(1, 57) =$

6.36,  $p = .014$ , but there was not a significant difference between monoamorous men ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ) and monoamorous women ( $M = 1.05$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ),  $F(1, 66) = 0.52$ ,  $p = 0.473$ .

Results indicated that polyamorous individuals overall and within each gender reported more partners than their monoamorous counterparts, although the difference was greatest for men. Notably, many individuals who described their relational approach as monoamorous or monogamous also reported more than one partner. This pattern may be explained by the coding system used, in which casual dating and sexual encounter partners were counted alongside committed relationships. Because monogamy may be defined culturally as having only one partner in a long-term committed relationship such as marriage (Monogamy, 2014), individuals may perceive themselves to be monogamous while casually dating or having sexual encounters with multiple people, particularly when they still intend to find one long-term exclusive partner.

Interestingly, polyamorous men reported more partners than polyamorous women, but no gender differences appeared within the monoamorous group. Although feminine identification mediated the relationship, a past study found that men reported desiring more sexual partners than women but had equal numbers of actual partners (Tate, 2011). The samples used in prior research likely included few or no polyamorous participants, who are more likely to pursue multiple partners. Thus, results from the present analyses make sense in the context of the prior research, as polyamorous and monoamorous individuals may have the same desired number of lifetime partners, but polyamorous individuals may perceive fewer barriers to pursuing their ideal.

It should be noted that these analyses make no suggestion as to whether gender differences are due to sociocultural or biological factors. For example, from an evolutionary perspective (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), polyamory may be a way for men to gain sexual access to

more people and thus satisfy an evolutionary drive for many partners. However, other theories have emphasized social and cultural influences on gender differences in partnering. Women's participation in casual sex tends to be more stigmatized than men's, and stigma expectancies have been shown to mediate gender differences in acceptance of casual sex offers (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2013). Furthermore, socialization theories argue that girls are socialized to value intimacy and emotional expression, whereas boys are encouraged to inhibit their emotional expression and avoid emotional intimacy (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992; Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995). From a sociological perspective, gender differences in partner number may be due to these differences in gender socialization and the sexual double standard of stigma (Gentry, 1998; Milhausen & Herold, 1999).

### **Correspondence between Present (Actual) and Ideal Sexuality Measures**

As part of the Klein sexuality grid, participants rated their past, present, and ideal sexuality (including attraction, behavior, fantasy, and self-identification) on a seven-point scale (from 1 = "other sex only" to 7 = "same sex only"). Correlations showed a high degree of correspondence between present responses and ideal responses on these measures. Reports of actual versus ideal sexual behavior showed the lowest, though still high, correlation ( $r = 0.85, p < .001$ ). Correlations between the present and the ideal for attraction, fantasy, and self-identification ranged from  $r = 0.95$  to  $r = 0.97$ , all  $p$ -values  $< .001$ .

Nevertheless, a considerable number of participants provided a different ideal response than actual response for each of these four sexuality constructs. Over 15% of respondents rated their ideal sexual attractions differently than their actual sexual attractions. The group reporting current attractions of 2 = "other sex mostly" gave the most incongruent *ideal* sexual attraction responses. Of the twenty-seven participants in this rating group, sixteen gave a corresponding

ideal response. Five said their ideal attractions would be 4 = “both sexes equally,” five said 3 = “other sex somewhat more,” one said 1 = “other sex only.” Thus, more than a quarter of these participants with predominantly other-sex attractions reported that their ideal attractions would be more bisexual. A similar pattern appeared in Klein et al. (1985) where individuals primarily attracted to one sex reported a more bisexual ideal. This could reflect a perception of bisexuality as a positive identity, or as having benefits that being “mostly heterosexual” does not have. It is also possible that the individuals attracted to the other sex mostly tend to be more sexually open, which would be consistent with past studies of non-exclusive heterosexuality (Lippa, 2006; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010). These studies suggest that women who identify as heterosexual yet acknowledge same-sex attractions tend to be more sexually liberal (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010) and have higher sex drives (Lippa, 2006). In this study, 8 of the ten participants with a more bisexual ideal were women.

Actual and ideal sexual behaviors often diverged, with only 71% of participants providing the same actual and ideal responses. Eighteen of the 81 participants who reported having had sex with the “other sex only” also reported that their ideal sexual history would include more same-sex partners. Similarly, eight of the 14 respondents who reported sex with the “other sex mostly” reported an ideal with more same-sex partners, and six of the seven individuals in the “other sex somewhat more” group gave a different ideal response. Five of these six said their ideal would include more same-sex partners. The only two participants with sex partners of the “same sex mostly” both reported their ideal as including somewhat more other-sex partners.

Some participants’ ideal sexual fantasies differed from their actual sexual fantasies, with 7% reporting an ideal that was more same-sex oriented and 4% more other-sex oriented than

their actual fantasies. Finally, no participants reported an ideal self-identification that was more other-sex oriented than their actual self-identification, but 10% reported a more same-sex oriented ideal self-identification.

The data suggest that, for many people, current sexual attractions, behaviors, fantasies, and self-identification are not coincident with their ideal. For each measure, at least 10% of respondents in this sample provided divergent ratings between their actual and ideal sexuality. Individuals reporting attraction primarily but not exclusively towards the other sex were the most likely to report a different pattern of ideal attractions, and 10 out of 27 of these participants wished that their attractions were more evenly distributed between genders.

Because the differences in sexual behavior mostly appeared in people with little sexual contact with the same-sex reporting an ideal characterized by higher same-sex activity, the pattern may be explained by individuals with same-sex desire who have not had an opportunity to engage in same-sex sexual activity.

It is also interesting to consider the sexual identities of participants whose actual and ideal sexual attractions differed. For slightly over half of these individuals (11 of 19), the participants' sexual identity was closer to their ideal attractions than their actual attractions. For example, 10 participants reported "other sex mostly" actual attractions and more bisexual ideal attractions (either "other sex somewhat more" or "both sexes equally"). Of these, six identified themselves as bisexual or pansexual. Similarly, a participant with "other sex mostly" actual attractions and "other sex only" ideal attractions identified as heterosexual. This pattern was also apparent in two participants who reported actual attractions of "same sex mostly." One indicated an ideal of "same sex only" and identified as gay, another indicated an ideal of "same sex somewhat more" and identified as bisexual.

### **Change in Attractions**

As reported above, participants rated their current attractions on a scale from 1 = “other sex only” to 7 = “same sex only” at each timepoint. After correcting for participants whose responses were judged to be errors (e.g. indicating exclusive same-sex desire when they likely meant to indicate exclusive other-sex desire), 26 participants of 111 (23%) changed attractions by at least one point on the scale. Eighteen participants reported a shift of one point, six reported a shift of two points, one of three points, and one of four points. Sixteen participants reported more same-sex oriented attractions at the follow-up, and 10 participants reported more other-sex attractions. While more than 10% of men indicated a change in attractions, a far higher proportion of women (more than 30%) reported such change (see Table 6). Polyamorous participants were more likely to report change than monoamorous participants (31% vs. 16%), but this difference was smaller than the gender difference.

Exclusively heterosexual attractions seemed to be the most stable, and attractions that were mostly heterosexual to bisexual were the least. In particular, all four participants who reported attractions to “other sex somewhat more” at baseline reported different attractions at the first follow-up. However, movement toward these attraction patterns was just as frequent as movement away from them (see Table 7). The most commonly adopted attractions at the first follow-up were also the mostly heterosexual to bisexual attractions, particularly “other sex somewhat more.”

These results are similar in some ways to a study by Pattatucci & Hamer (1995). In this study, 80% of the female sample retained their Kinsey rating over a 12-18 month period, most change was by one Kinsey point, and almost all movement was within the middle of the Kinsey scale (i.e., other sex somewhat more, both sexes equally, and same sex somewhat more). There

was more movement within the women of the present study, perhaps due to the inclusion of polyamorous women. However, most movement here was within the range of other-sex mostly through both sexes equally. Notably, no participants identified their attractions as “same sex somewhat more” in the present study, and there were very few participants with more exclusive same-sex attractions, so movement within this group cannot be compared.

The prevalence of attraction change contradicts notions of attraction as stable and partnering behaviors and sexual identities as more fluid (Diamond, 2000; Diamond, 2003a). Shifts in attraction were far more common than shifts in either sexual identity or partner gender. As discussed in more detail below, changes in attractions were not accompanied by changes in sexual identity or partner gender for the majority of participants.

### **Combined Changes in Sexuality Domains**

Only two participants reported coincident movement in each of the three measured domains of sexuality: attractions, partner gender(s), and sexual identity. Both were men who identified as monoamorous and heterosexual at baseline, and their sexuality moved in a more same-sex oriented direction (to either a bisexual or gay identity) at the first follow-up. This is interesting because very few monoamorous participants or men reported any sexuality changes. Half of the men whose sexual identity changed between timepoints at all were in this group. Moreover, one of the only two participants whose attraction ratings changed by more than two points was in this group with an identity change from heterosexual to gay, and the other participant whose attraction ratings changed by such a large amount also changed identities from heterosexual to gay. This suggests that attraction ratings may change dramatically (by three or more points) only when accompanied by changes in sexual identity and perhaps partner gender. However, it is unknown whether change in one domain drives the change in the other domains.

Seventeen participants changed their sexual attraction rating on the 7-point scale without also changing their sexual identity or partner gender(s). Three of these participant ratings changed by two points, and 14 changed by one point. All participants who reported only attraction change were women, except for one transgender man. Notably, three of the four attraction changes in men were accompanied by changes in partner gender and sometimes sexual identity. These results suggest that women may be more likely to experience shifts in attraction without changing their sexual identity or the gender(s) of their partners.

Six participants changed only their sexual identity. The lack of accompanying changes in attractions or partner gender for many of these individuals may be explained by the subtle nature of most of the identity changes. For example, one shifted from identifying as heterosexual to asexual and “heteroaffectionate.” Another began using the word “bisexual” when she had previously described herself only as a “2 on the Kinsey scale.” Six other participants changed only in the gender of their partners. Five of these six participants were polyamorous and four were bisexual.

Sometimes participants reported changes in two domains of sexuality. Five participants changed in the gender of their partners and their attraction ratings but not identity, though some of these shifts may have been coincidental. All five identified in nonpolar ways, including bisexual, pansexual, and “Kinsey 1.” Because these identities tend to be broader in their flexibility, it is perhaps not surprising that these participants would not modify their sexual identities even when both attractions and partner gender(s) shift. Finally, three participants reported changes in sexual identity and partner gender(s) without any change in attractions. All three were polyamorous women, and all identified in polar ways at baseline (either heterosexual or gay).



Taken as a whole, monoamorous participants were significantly less likely to experience sexuality changes than polyamorous participants (14 of 64 monoamorous and 27 of 55 polyamorous changed in at least one domain),  $X^2(1, N = 119) = 9.70, p = .002$  (see Figure 1). Men were significantly less likely to experience sexuality changes than women (8 of 41 men and 33 of 78 women changed),  $X^2(1, N = 119) = 6.18, p = .013$  (see Figure 2). Individuals who identified as bisexual or predominantly heterosexual at baseline were the most likely to experience some kind of sexuality change, with the majority in each group experiencing at least one change (see Table 8). Gay/lesbian individuals followed with almost half experiencing change, and about 19% of heterosexual individuals experienced some kind of change. These results illustrate how common shifts in attractions, identity, and partner gender are, as almost one in five members of the most stable sexual identity group reported some form of sexuality change.

These patterns reveal the diversity of sexual trajectories. Overall, more than one-third (41 of 119) of participants who participated in both baseline and the first follow-up reported some kind of sexuality change. The most fluid domain was sexual attraction (23.4%), followed by partner gender(s) (16.8%) and sexual identity (12.3%). Many participants reported change only in sexual attractions, while a smaller number reported change in only sexual identity or only partner gender(s). A very small number of participants reported concurrent change in multiple domains of sexuality. Factors such as gender, sexual identity, and relational identity were at times associated with what kinds of changes an individual may experience. Monoamorous men were the only participants to experience change in all three domains of sexuality in this study. Women were uniquely likely to experience change in attractions alone, and participants with nonpolar identities were less likely to change sexual identity when their attractions or partner gender(s) changed.

### **Revisiting Hypotheses**

In this study, we hypothesized that individuals with non-normative relationship configurations would be more likely to change identities. Three participants reported relationship configurations that did not normatively fit with their sexual identity at baseline (e.g. heterosexual identity and partners of both genders), and two of these three participants changed their sexual identities at the first follow-up. Additionally, one participant relinquished her polyamorous identity and adopted a monogamous one when the relationship with her other partner ended. While these numbers are small, they do support the first hypothesis, with people in non-normative relationship configurations more likely to change identities.

Another prediction was that bisexual men and sexual minority women would be the most likely to experience change in each domain of sexuality. This was not supported when using sexual identity. None of the four bisexual or pansexual-identified men changed identities between the first two timepoints, whereas a small but notable number of heterosexual and predominantly heterosexual men did. Likewise, four of 31 non-heterosexual women (12.9%) changed sexual identities between the first two timepoints, compared to 10.4% of heterosexual women.

However, when examining this prediction on the basis of participant attractions, the hypothesis received more support. Men with more “bisexual” attractions were more likely to change attraction ratings than men with more polar attractions. Among women, exclusive heterosexual attractions were the least likely to change of all categories except “same sex mostly.” Taken together, 43.2% of women with some degree of attraction to the same sex at baseline shifted attraction ratings at the first follow-up, compared to 10.7% of women with

exclusively heterosexual attractions. This suggests that for predicting sexuality shifts over time, patterns of attraction may be more reliable across studies than self-reported sexual identity.

Another hypothesis predicted that individuals with attractions between traditional identity categories (e.g., predominantly other-sex or predominantly same-sex) would be more likely to change identities, particularly if they identified with a polar sexual identity label. Indeed, participants with exclusive other-sex or same-sex attractions were the least likely to change identity labels (see Table 9). Yet contrary to predictions, participants who were attracted to both sexes equally did not report less sexual identity change than participants with predominantly other-sex attractions. The participants with nonexclusive attractions were less likely to change identity if their sexual identity was nonpolar (e.g., bisexual, heteroflexible) than if it was polar (e.g., heterosexual, gay/lesbian) (6.45% vs. 33.33%, see Table 10). Interestingly, different patterns emerged between monoamorous and polyamorous participants with nonexclusive attractions. Most monoamorous participants with nonexclusive attractions identified as heterosexual at baseline, while most polyamorous participants with nonexclusive attractions identified in nonpolar ways (e.g. bisexual/pansexual) at baseline. Because individuals with nonexclusive attractions were more likely to experience sexual identity change if they held a polar identity, monoamorous participants with nonexclusive attractions at baseline were significantly more likely to change sexual identity than monoamorous participants with exclusive attractions,  $X^2(1,61) = 15.32, p < .001$ . This was not true of the polyamorous group,  $X^2(1, 51) = .003, p = .958$ .

### **Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions**

This study has strengths in both sample and methods. Participants were recruited from many cities in the United States and spanned a broad age range. Allowing participants to self-

report sexual identity in an open-ended manner provided a richer sense of how participants view their sexuality. However, the study also had several limitations. The questionnaires were fairly long, and participants may have made errors due to fatigue or inattention. Participants tended to be heterosexual, and there were very few participants with predominant or exclusive same-sex attractions. Furthermore, monoamorous and polyamorous participants responded to questionnaires at different timepoints, limiting confidence in group comparisons. Attrition was high after the first follow-up, precluding more detailed analysis of trajectories of change. Still, a direction for future research is studying the transition into a polyamorous identity, perhaps by following the sexual identity, attractions, and partnering behaviors of individuals who are new to polyamory.

Overall, several patterns emerged from this study. Polyamorous participants were more likely to identify their sexuality in nontraditional ways, particularly as predominantly heterosexual. Many participants had multiple partners or partners of more than one gender, and polyamorous men had significantly more current partners than polyamorous women. Polyamorous participants were particularly likely to report some kind of sexuality change. Although most participants reported coincident actual and ideal sexuality ratings, a considerable minority reported ideal sexual attractions, fantasies, and behaviors that differed from their actual, present experiences. Shifts in attraction ratings were the most common kind of change, particularly for individuals with nonexclusive attractions.

Taken together, these results suggest that while heterosexuality may be the most stable identity, it can also vary over time. The emergence of the predominantly heterosexual identity group and those with predominantly other-sex attractions was quite interesting, particularly considering that no special recruitment efforts were made to target such individuals. Participants

with predominantly other-sex attractions were among the most likely to change their attraction rating, yet these attractions were also the most often adopted. These results show the extent of experiences that are missed when scientific and popular discourse assumes that all individuals are monoamorous with stable sexual identities as heterosexual, bisexual, or gay/lesbian. This study also suggests that there is a great deal still to be learned about how and why polyamorous individuals may differ from monoamorous individuals in their sexual trajectories.

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Table 1

*Baseline Sexual Identities that Changed in Follow-up 1*

Sexual Identity Changed										
From	Frequency		Women		Men		Mono		Poly	
Heterosexual	8/79	10%	5/48	10%	3/31	10%	4/53	8%	4/26	15%
Gay/Lesbian	2/9	22%	2/8	25%	0/1	0%	1/6	17%	1/3	33%
Mostly Heterosexual	3/7	43%	2/3	67%	1/4	25%	1/1	100%	2/6	33%

Table 2

*Sexual Identity Changes between Baseline and Follow-up 1*

Type of Sexual Identity Change	Frequency		Women		Men		Mono		Poly	
Heterosexual to Bisexual	4/79	5%	3/48	6%	1/31	3%	2/53	4%	2/26	8%
Heterosexual to Gay/Lesbian	3/79	4%	2/48	4%	1/31	3%	2/53	4%	1/26	4%
Heterosexual to Asexual	1/79	1%	0/48	0%	1/31	3%	0/53	0%	1/26	4%
Gay/Lesbian to Bisexual	1/9	11%	1/8	13%	0/1	0%	1/6	17%	0/3	0%
Gay/Lesbian to Mostly Gay/Lesbian	1/9	11%	1/8	13%	0/1	0%	0/6	0%	1/3	33%
Mostly Heterosexual to Heterosexual	1/7	14%	0/3	0%	1/4	25%	0/1	0%	1/6	17%
Mostly Heterosexual to Bisexual	2/7	29%	2/3	67%	0/4	0%	1/1	100%	1/6	17%

Table 3

*Direction of Sexual Identity Change between Baseline and Follow-up 1*

Change in										
Polarity	Frequency		Women		Men		Mono		Poly	
Less Polar	8/89	9%	7/57	12%	1/32	3%	4/60	7%	4/29	14%
More Polar	1/30	3%	0/22	0%	1/8	13%	0/3	0%	1/27	4%
No Change in										
Polarity	4/119	3%	2/79	3%	2/40	5%	2/63	3%	2/56	4%

*Note.* Denominators in “Less Polar” include individuals identifying as heterosexual, gay/lesbian, or asexual at baseline. Denominators in “More Polar” include individuals identifying as bisexual, queer, or qualified heterosexual at baseline. Denominators in “No Change in Polarity” included all participants who responded to both baseline and follow-up 1.

Table 4

*Partner Gender(s) by Participant Gender and Sexual Identity*

		Baseline			
Gender	Sexual Identity	Men Only	Women Only	Men and Women	Other
Men	Heterosexual	0	29	0	0
	Bisexual	1	1	2	0
	Gay/Lesbian	1	0	0	0
	Mostly hetero	0	3	0	1
Women	Heterosexual	42	0	2	0
	Bisexual	5	0	15	0
	Gay/Lesbian	0	5	1	0
	Queer	0	0	1	0
	Mostly hetero	4	0	0	0
		Follow-Up 1			
Gender	Sexual Identity	Men Only	Women Only	Men and Women	Other
Men	Heterosexual	0	24	0	0
	Bisexual	1	3	0	1
	Gay/Lesbian	2	0	0	0
	Mostly hetero	0	1	1	1
Women	Heterosexual	35	0	0	0
	Bisexual	12	2	10	0
	Gay/Lesbian	0	6	1	0
	Queer	0	0	1	0
	Mostly gay	0	1	0	0
	Mostly hetero	1	0	0	0

*Note.* Other genders include genderqueer female only and genderqueer female and women partners



Table 5

*Partner Number by Participant Gender and Relational Identity*

	Men		Women		All	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Monoamorous	1.25	1.78	1.05	0.48	1.12	1.11
Polyamorous	4.38	4.04	2.53	1.24	3.31	2.91
All	2.85	3.49	1.69	1.15	2.14	2.40

Table 6

*Attraction Rating Change by Gender and Relational Identity*

Attractions Changed										
From	Frequency		Men		Women		Mono		Poly	
Other sex only	4/53	8%	1/25	4%	3/28	11%	3/37	8%	1/16	6%
Other sex mostly	10/28	36%	1/8	13%	9/20	45%	3/12	25%	7/16	44%
Other sex somewhat more	4/4	100%	1/1	100%	3/3	100%	1/1	100%	3/3	100%
Both sexes equally	7/18	39%	1/4	25%	6/14	43%	2/3	67%	5/15	33%
Same sex mostly	0/3	20%	0/0		0/3	0%	0/1	0%	0/2	0%
Same sex only	1/5	20%	0/1	0%	1/4	25%	1/5	20%	0/0	
Total	26/111	23%	4/39	10%	22/72	30%	10/59	17%	16/52	31%

Table 7

*Attraction Rating Change between Baseline and Follow-up 1*

Attractions Changed To	Count
Other sex only	2
Other sex mostly	5
Other sex somewhat more	10
Both sexes equally	4
Same sex mostly	1
Same sex only	1
Total	26

Table 8

*Frequency of Any Sexuality Change by Sexual Identity*

Sexual Identity	Sexuality Change	
Heterosexual	15/78	19%
Mostly		
Heterosexual	5/7	71%
Bisexual	15/22	68%
Gay/lesbian	4/9	44%

Table 9

*Frequency of Sexual Identity Change by Attraction Rating*

Attraction Rating	Frequency	
Other sex only	2/55	4%
Other sex mostly	4/26	15%
Other sex somewhat more	1/4	25%
Both sexes equally	4/18	22%
Same sex mostly	1/4	25%
Same sex only	0/5	0%
Total	12/112	11%

Table 10

*Frequency of Sexual Identity Change by Attractions and Sexual Identity Polarity*

Attractions	Polar		Nonpolar	
	Identity		Identity	
Other sex only	1/61	2%	1/2	50%
Other sex mostly	2/16	13%	2/11	18%
Other sex somewhat more	1/2	50%	0/3	0%
Both sexes equally	4/4	100%	0/16	0%
Same sex mostly	1/2	50%	0/1	0%
Same sex only	0/5	0%	0/0	

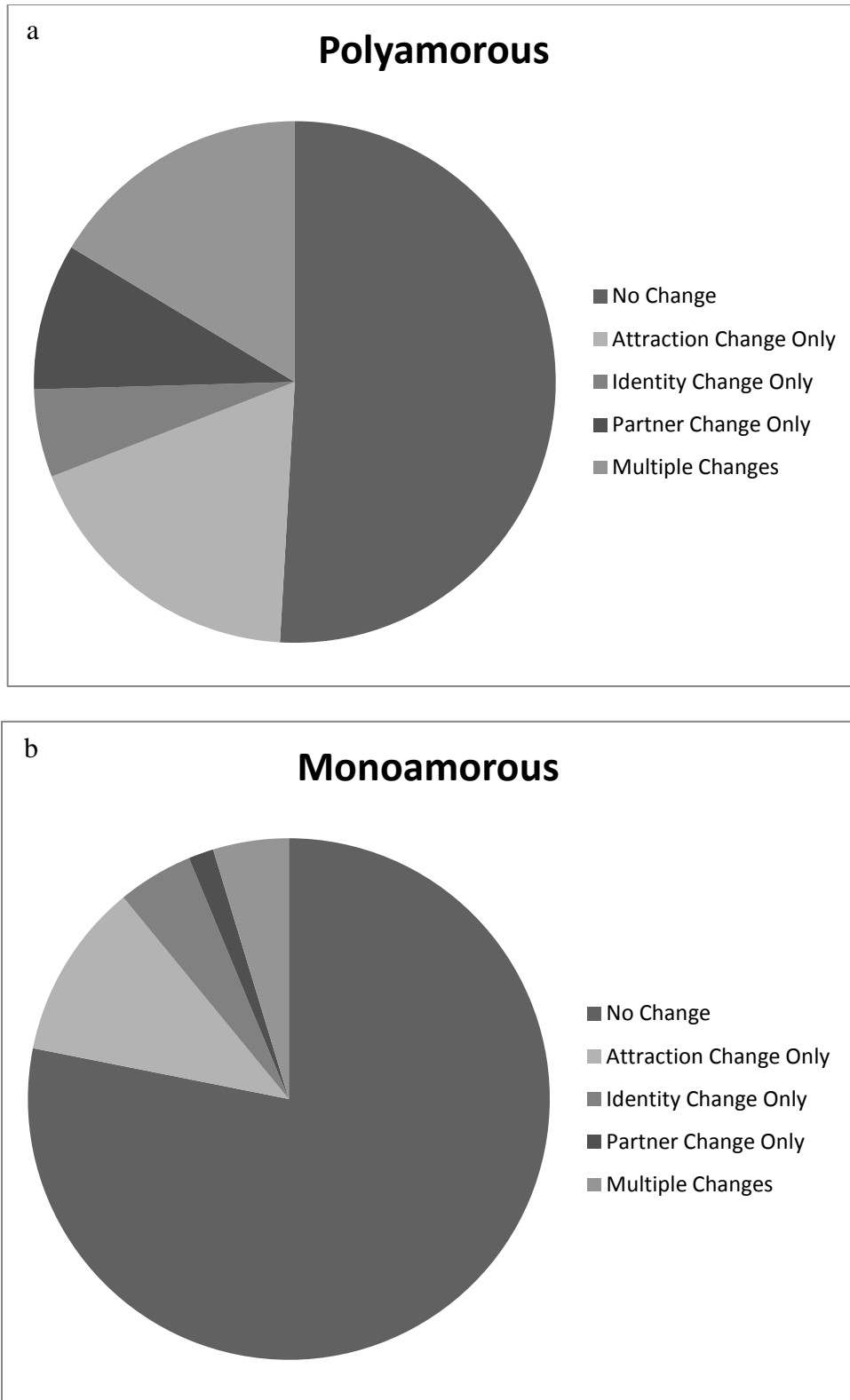


Figure 1. Sexuality Changes within a) Polyamorous Group and b) Monoamorous Group

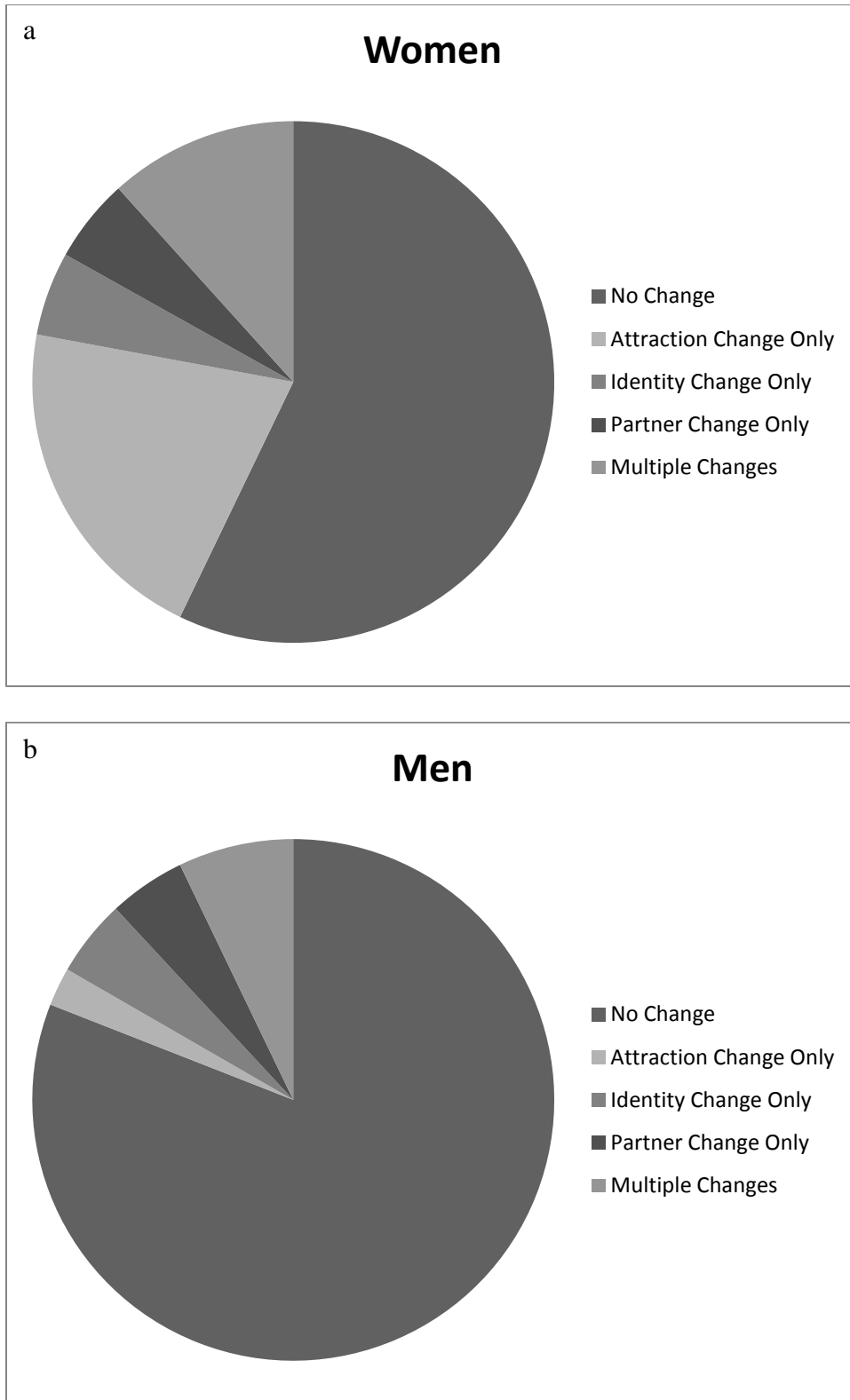


Figure 2. Sexuality Changes within a) Women and b) Men