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The Impact of Bisexual Identity on Sexual and Relationship Satisfaction of Mixed Sex Couples

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ABSTRACT

Despite advances in research into minority sexual identities, bisexual identity research has been limited. Studies conducted to date suggest that bisexuality is often perceived as a 'transitional' identity and bisexual individuals in relationships are often perceived to be either straight, lesbian, or gay based on the gender of their relationship partner. The current couple-based study focuses on the experiences of bisexual individuals in mixed-sex relationships and how bisexual identity may impact sexual and relationship satisfaction of both members of the couple. Cross-sectional data were analyzed from both members of 142 mixed-sex couples ($N = 284$). Analyses indicated that feelings of illegitimacy of bisexuality and outness to family were negatively associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction of both partners whereas intimacy was positively associated with sexual satisfaction for both partners. The results highlight the importance of acknowledging bisexual identity even in the context of long-term relationships and addressing issues surrounding bisexual identity in its function for sexual and relationship satisfaction with couples.

KEYWORDS



Bierasure; bisexuality; couples; relationship satisfaction; sexual satisfaction

Public significance statement

This study suggests that perceiving bisexual identity as illegitimate and being out to family are negatively associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction for bisexual individuals and their partners whereas feeling that bisexual identity enables greater intimacy is positively associated with sexual satisfaction.

Introduction

Sexuality and sexual orientation research has advanced in the past several decades and support for lesbian and gay individuals has grown (Hertlein,

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Hartwell, & Munns, 2016). Despite these advances, bisexual individuals have remained underrepresented in the literature (Dodge et al., 2016; Hartwell, Serovich, Reed, Boisvert, & Falbo, 2017; Zrenchik & Craft, 2016) and societal acceptance has moved at a slower pace. The extant literature suggests that bisexuality is actually more common than monosexuality (Gates, 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). Bisexual individuals often face additional challenges related to bisexual invisibility and binegativity, and may be ostracized by the lesbian, gay, and queer community as well as the straight community which negatively contributes to the mental health and wellbeing of bisexual individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Rust, 2000). Furthermore, while bisexual individuals in mixed-sex relationships (a relationship involving partners of both sexes) can benefit from majority status when perceived as a 'heterosexual couple', they may struggle with the erasure of their identity (bi-erasure) that accompanies this privilege (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Diamond, 2000; Rust, 2000). The language of 'heterosexual couple' in itself can also contribute to bi-erasure (Hacki, Boyer, & Galupo, 2013). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine how bisexual identity impacts the satisfaction of bisexual individuals and their partners in mixed-sex relationships.

Minority stress and sexual identity

Recent research has explored the role of minority stress and heterosexism among LGBT populations (e.g., Feinstein, McConnell, Dyar, Mustanski, & Newcomb, 2018; Szymanski, 2009). Minority stress theory is an extension of social stress theory (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Link & Phelan, 2001), which suggests that conditions in the societal environment can cause stress in individuals adversely affecting their physical and psychological health. Minority stress theory suggests that stigmatized minority groups experience minority stress associated with social status and identity as a result of living in a heterosexist society (Meyer, 2003). The experiences of minority stress include sexual orientation-related prejudice, rejection, concealment, internalized negative feelings about one's sexuality, and identity-related experiences (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Further, LGBTQ+ individuals of color may experience additional minority stress (Flanders, Shuler, Desnoyers, & VanKim, 2019; Ramirez & Galupo, 2019). Individuals who choose to disclose their identity may face more external stressors whereas individuals who choose to conceal their identity are more likely to face internal stressors (DiPlacido, 1998; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007).

Minority stress has been associated with decreased quality of life and an increased risk of poor mental health (Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, West, & McCabe, 2014; Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Ross et al.,

2017; 2018; Szymanski, 2009), suicidality (Salway et al., 2019), substance abuse (Feinstein, Dyar, & London, 2017; Nawyn, Richman, Rospenda, & Hughes, 2000), and other health-risk behaviors (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009). Research examining minority stress in bisexual populations has suggested that bias and stigma against bisexual individuals may be greater than against gay men and lesbian women (e.g., Dodge et al., 2012; 2016; Eliason, 1997; Feinstein, Franco, Henderson, Collins, & Davari, 2019; Friedman et al., 2014; Herek, 2002) highlighting the importance of studying minority stress in this population. Bisexual individuals who are in mixed-sex relationships thereby displaying a more conventional gender expression, may receive protection against some stigma due to their relationship status; however, they may still experience proximal stressors including rejection, concealment, and internalized binegativity (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 2003).

Bisexual individuals also often face both internalized and externalized binegativity, which refers to negative attitudes and beliefs about bisexuality (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 2003). Some of the beliefs toward bisexuality include a belief that bisexual individuals need to be in a relationship with both men and women, are sexually promiscuous and unable to be in a monogamous relationship, and that they are confused about their identity (Feinstein et al., 2019; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 2002; Sumpter, 1991). These negative beliefs affect how bisexual individuals navigate relationships expressing fear of disclosing their identity and being more vigilant to signs of disapproval (Decapua, 2017). Some of these attitudes and beliefs may become internalized, which can result in higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of life satisfaction (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Feinstein et al., 2019; Flanders et al., 2019).

Although being part of a sexual minority group comes with a host of challenges, there are some positive components to being part of a sexual minority group that receive far less attention (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008; Mayfield, 2001; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Paul, Mohr, Smith, & Ross, 2014). Feeling good about, and pride toward, one's identity can contribute to better psychological health and social functioning (e.g., Keyes, 1998; Mohr & Kendra, 2011). For example, a qualitative study found 11 distinct positive aspects of bisexual identity including freedom of sexual expression, having a unique perspective, freedom to love regardless of gender, and an increase in awareness and insight (Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010). As a bisexual person, acknowledging these positive aspects of bisexual identity may not only impact their individual health and social functioning (Rostosky et al., 2010) but has the potential to impact satisfaction in their relationships.

The extent to which one is open and honest about one's sexual identity to important others is another aspect of sexual identity that significantly

impacts health and social relationships. Previous research has shown that outness among lesbian and gay individuals is associated with better health outcomes (e.g., Juster, Smith, Ouellet, Sindi, & Lupien, 2013; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). Positive aspects of sexual identity and identity pride can facilitate being out to others while negative feelings toward one's identity have been associated with lower levels of outness (e.g., Brewster & Moradi, 2010). More research is needed to examine the role of outness among bisexual individuals, especially in the context of a mixed-sex relationship, and the current study included a measure of outness to establish whether it influences the satisfaction of bisexual individuals and their partners.

Sexual and relationship satisfaction and sexual identity

Sexual and relationship satisfaction are important contributors to overall life satisfaction for individuals and more satisfied couples are likely to experience more enriched long-term relationships (Sprecher, 2002; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006). Sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction refer to the extent to which an individual is fulfilled and happy in their sexual relationship and overall romantic relationship, respectively (Byers, 2005). Couples who are relationally satisfied also tend to be sexually satisfied, and this link is complex (Byers, 2005; Vowels & Mark, 2018). However, the majority of the research examining these constructs has been conducted in heterosexual individuals and heterosexual couples (e.g., McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2016; Vowels & Mark, 2018). Previous research has shown mixed findings on the impact of sexual identity on satisfaction. For example, Mark, Garcia, and Fisher (2015) found that individuals in committed relationships did not differ in their levels of emotional or sexual satisfaction regardless of their sexual identity. However, sexual identity did influence emotional and sexual satisfaction among casual sexual relationships (Galinsky & Sonenstein, 2013; Mark et al., 2015). Other researchers have found an inverse relationship between sexual satisfaction and internalized homonegativity (Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni, 2009), between minority stress and sexual satisfaction (Sevic, Ivankovic, & Stulhofer, 2016), and a positive relationship between identity pride and sexual satisfaction (Shepler, Smendik, Cusick, & Tucker, 2018). Studying sexual satisfaction among bisexual individuals in mixed-sex relationships has been limited, but research from over 30 years ago indicated that as many as 94% of bisexual men and 86% of bisexual women experienced sexual problems in mixed-sex relationships (Coleman, 1982; 1985). Furthermore, the lack of sexual problems and higher sexual satisfaction has been linked to a higher degree of relationship adjustment and satisfaction

(Coleman, 1985). Several researchers have suggested that individuals in same-sex relationships are more satisfied than married mixed-sex couples (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008), while others have shown no differences between mixed-sex and same-sex couples in terms of their relationship satisfaction (Kamen, Burns, & Beach, 2011; Mark, Vowels, & Murray, 2017), and yet others have found similar factors that are predictive of relationship satisfaction for both types of couples (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986). Researchers have also found that internalized homonegativity (Mohr & Daly, 2008), identity, and variables related to discrimination (Green & Mitchell, 2002) were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction.

The present study

Most of the research to date has focused on mixed-sex couples without regard to orientation or, to a lesser degree, same-sex couples. Little research has been done on the impact of minority stress and identity on bisexual individuals' satisfaction in long-term, committed, mixed-sex relationships despite the important implications these links have for the overall well-being of bisexual individuals and their romantic partners. Bisexual individuals in mixed-sex relationships struggle just like anyone else with issues such as communication, parenting, and finances (Coleman, 1985; Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003) but they may also face unique struggles with identity and bi-erasure (Paul et al., 2014). Given that bisexual individuals are often perceived as heterosexual, lesbian, or gay depending on whether they are in same-sex or mixed-sex relationship (Paul et al., 2014), negative attitudes toward bisexuality from community, family and friends, or self can lead to marital difficulties (Buxton, 2001; 2004).

Furthermore, in the limited research that has been conducted on partners of bisexual individuals, findings suggest that bisexual identity influences not only the bisexual individual but also their partner highlighting the importance of studying the dyad rather than just individuals. For example, heterosexual partners may experience feelings of sexual rejection and blame themselves for not being good enough (Buxton, 2006). The partners may wonder whether they are able to maintain their bisexual partner's sexual interest in the long-term or if they would prefer to have someone of another gender. Additionally, while some research has found that bisexual individuals desire long-term committed relationships (Diamond, 2008), some may experience monogamy as restrictive or limiting (Mark, Rosenkrantz, & Kerner, 2014).

A recent study conducted by Vencill and colleagues (2017) explored how sexual minority stress (e.g., identity affirmation, internalized binegativity,

vicarious trauma and isolation) influenced bisexual individuals' sexual and relational functioning (Vencill, Carlson, Iantaffi, & Miner, 2018). The participants were all in mixed-orientation relationships (one bisexual and one heterosexual or monosexual partner). The results provided some support for the link between sexual minority stress and sexual and relationship satisfaction (Vencill et al., 2018). However, the study only considered the impact on the bisexual individuals rather than their partners. To our knowledge, there are no previous studies to date that have investigated how bisexual identity influences both partners' outcomes simultaneously. Additionally, no studies to date have established whether the bisexual individual's level of outness impacts their sexual and relationship satisfaction. The purpose of the present study was to bridge the gap in the literature by investigating the roles of identity and outness on the sexual and relationship satisfaction of bisexual individuals and their partners in long-term, committed relationships. More specifically, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do bisexual individuals' feelings toward bisexual identity and bisexual individuals' level of outness influence bisexual individuals' and their partners' sexual satisfaction?

RQ2. How do bisexual individuals' feelings toward bisexual identity and bisexual individuals' level of outness influence bisexual individuals' and their partners' relationship satisfaction?

Method

Procedure

Participants were recruited for the current study utilizing targeted recruitment in bisexual spaces primarily online (e.g., bisexual-focused websites, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit). The recruitment messaging explicitly stated that the study aimed to recruit bisexual individuals and their partners in mixed-sex relationships. Potential participants expressed interest in the study by clicking on a link that took them to an eligibility survey. A participant met eligibility criteria if they were over the age of 18, identified as bisexual, had been in their current romantic mixed-sex relationship for a minimum of three months, had in-person contact with their partner at least four days a week, and were willing to provide the email address of their partner to also participate. A total of 573 individuals met the inclusion criteria that allowed them to create a login and start the survey. A total of 501 participants completed the baseline survey. Of those, 372 individuals contributed to a dyad (186 couples) and 198 individuals had partners who did not complete the survey. Only mixed-sex couples in which one partner was bisexual and other partner was heterosexual were included

in the analytic sample for this paper (44 couples were excluded from the analytic sample for the current research because both partners identified as bisexual). The final analytic sample consisted of 142 mixed-sex couples (284 individuals).

Participants

Participants were 30 years old on average ($SD = 6.83$; range 18-50). Ninety-two (65.2%) of the bisexual partners were women, 47 (33.1%) were men, and two (1.7%) were transgender/genderqueer. In turn, 47 (33.1%) of the straight partners were women, 93 (65.5%) men, and one (1.4%) transgender/genderqueer. The vast majority of the participants were White ($n = 247$; 88%), married ($n = 189$; 67%), and had completed at least some college ($n = 251$; 89%). Many participants did not identify with a specific religious identity ($n = 109$; 39%) or were Christian ($n = 108$; 39%). On average, participants had been in their current relationship for 5.72 years ($SD = 5.29$). The majority ($n = 221$; 78.4%) of those relationships were monogamous and 61 (21.6%) were consensually non-monogamous. See [Table 1](#) for additional demographic details of the participants.

Measures

The measures incorporated demographic questions about age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, number of children, and education level. Additionally, the bisexual participants answered questions related to their perception of their identity including positive sexual identity, bisexual identity, and outness. Bisexual and heterosexual participants answered questions on their sexual and relationship satisfaction. Details regarding all of the measures are provided below:

Positive sexual identity. A multifactor Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Positive Identity Measure (LGB-PIM; Riggle, Rostosky, Mohr, Fingerhut, & Balsam, 2014) was used to assess participants' experiences toward their bisexual identity. The scale includes five subscales: self-awareness (e.g., "*My bisexual identity motivates me to be more self-aware.*"; $\alpha = .89$), authenticity (e.g., "*I embrace my bisexual identity.*"; $\alpha = .79$), intimacy ("*My bisexual identity allows me to understand my sexual partner better.*"; $\alpha = .78$), community ("*I feel included in the bisexual community.*"; $\alpha = .96$), and social justice ("*As a bisexual person, it is important to act as an advocate for bisexual rights.*"; $\alpha = .89$). For the purposes of this study, the wording for each of the items was changed from the original scale's "LGBT" to "bisexual" and items were scored from 1 ("*strongly disagree*") to 7 ("*strongly agree*"), and subscales were included individually.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample by partners' sexual orientation.

Age Relationship length	Bisexual n (%) M = 29.80 SD = 6.75 M = 5.76 SD = 5.32	Straight n (%) M = 29.90 SD = 6.93 M = 5.68 SD = 5.28	Total n (%) M = 29.85 SD = 6.83 M = 5.72 SD = 5.29
Gender			
Men	47 (33.3%)	93 (66.0%)	140 (49.6%)
Women	92 (65.2%)	47 (33.3%)	139 (49.3%)
Transgender/Genderqueer	2 (1.4%)	1 (0.7%)	3 (1.1%)
Relationship Status			
Married, living with spouse	95 (67.4%)	94 (66.7%)	189 (67.0%)
Partnered, living with partner	46 (32.6%)	48 (33.3%)	93 (33.0%)
Relationship Type			
Monogamous	111 (78.7%)	110 (78.0%)	221 (78.4%)
Consensually non-monogamous	30 (21.3%)	31 (22.0%)	61 (21.6%)
Education			
Not finished high school	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)
High school or GED	14 (9.9%)	13 (9.2%)	27 (9.6%)
Some college	26 (18.4%)	42 (29.8%)	68 (24.1%)
College/University graduate	73 (51.8%)	71 (50.4%)	155 (51.1%)
Graduate school	26 (18.4%)	14 (9.2%)	39 (13.8%)
Other	2 (1.4%)	1 (0.7%)	3 (1.1%)
Race/Ethnicity			
White or Caucasian	120 (85.1%)	127 (90.1%)	247 (87.6%)
Black/African American	3 (2.1%)	1 (0.7%)	4 (1.4%)
Asian	8 (5.7%)	5 (3.5%)	13 (4.6%)
American Indian/Alaska Native	2 (1.4%)	1 (0.7%)	3 (1.1%)
Multiracial	7 (5.0%)	6 (4.3%)	13 (4.6%)
Religion			
Catholic	26 (18.4%)	28 (19.9%)	54 (19.1%)
Christian, other	22 (15.6%)	32 (22.7%)	54 (19.1%)
Hindu	2 (1.4%)	3 (2.1%)	5 (1.8%)
Jewish	2 (1.4%)	4 (2.8%)	6 (2.1%)
Protestant	6 (4.3%)	7 (5.0%)	13 (4.6%)
No specific religion	59 (41.8%)	50 (35.5%)	109 (38.7%)
Other	22 (15.6%)	15 (10.6%)	37 (13.1%)

Bisexual identity. The Bisexual Identity Inventory (Paul et al., 2014) was used to assess participants' feelings toward their bisexual identity. The scale consisted of a total of 24 items with four subscales: illegitimacy of bisexuality (e.g., "*Bisexuality is not a real identity.*"; $\alpha = .98$), anticipated binegativity (e.g., "*I feel that I have to justify my bisexuality to others.*"; $\alpha = .70$), internalized binegativity (e.g., "*My life would be better if I were not bisexual.*"; $\alpha = .93$), and identity affirmation (e.g., "*I am proud to be bisexual.*"; $\alpha = .82$). The items are scored from 1 ("*strongly disagree*") to 7 ("*strongly agree*"), and subscales were included individually.

Outness. The participants' level of outness regarding their sexual identity was assessed using the Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). The scale assesses outness across three main domains: out to family ($\alpha = .72$), out to the world ($\alpha = .77$), and out to religious community ($\alpha = .74$). There are 11 items measured on a 7-point Likert-scale with scores ranging from 1 ("*person definitely does not/did not know about your sexual orientation*") to 7 ("*person definitely knows/knew about your sexual*

orientation, and it is/was openly talked about”), with an option that the item is not applicable to the situation (for those who are not religious, for example).

Sexual satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction for both partners was assessed using the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction Scale (GMSEX; Lawrance & Byers, 1992). The scale is a 5-item measure used to assess satisfaction with the sexual relationship. The scale is scored on a 7-point semantic differential and higher scores are indicative of greater sexual satisfaction. The root of the question is “*In general, how would you describe your sexual relationship with your partner?*” and examples of the anchors include “good” to “bad” and “worthless” to “valuable”. The scale has shown strong psychometric properties (Mark, Herbenick, Fortenberry, Sanders, & Reece, 2014) and in the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha was .94.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction for both partners was assessed using the Global Measure of Relationship Satisfaction Scale (GMREL; Lawrance & Byers, 1992). The scale is a 5-item measure used to assess overall satisfaction with the relationship and is scored on a 7-point semantic differential with higher scores indicative of greater relationship satisfaction. The root of the question is “*In general, how would you describe your overall relationship with your partner?*” and the anchors are the same as the GMSEX. The scale has shown strong psychometric properties (Mark, Herbenick, et al., 2014) and in the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha was .97.

Results

Preliminary analyses were conducted to assess whether there were any significant differences between bisexual and straight partners in their level of sexual and relationship satisfaction. No significant differences were found between partners in sexual satisfaction, $t(139) = -1.53, p = .13$ (bisexual: $M = 36.16, SD = 7.82$; straight: $M = 37.19, SD = 7.47$), or relationship satisfaction, $t(139) = -1.75, p = .08$ (bisexual: $M = 38.23, SD = 7.51$; straight: $M = 39.27, SD = 6.39$). Only the bisexual partners completed questions regarding their bisexual identity. Table 2 provides the correlations between bisexual identity and sexual and relationship satisfaction for both members of the couple.

Analysis

The results were analyzed in SPSS 25.0 using two-intercept hierarchical linear models with restricted maximum likelihood estimation in which partners (level-1) were nested within dyads (level-2; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger,

Table 2. Correlations between the bisexual identity variables and sexual and relationship satisfaction separately for bisexual and straight partners.

	Sexual Satisfaction		Relationship Satisfaction	
	Bisexual	Straight	Bisexual	Straight
LGB-PIM				
Self-awareness	-.03	-.04	-.02	-.10
Authenticity	.11	.15	.11	.08
Community	.02	.08	-.05	-.08
Intimacy	.26**	.28***	.14	.08
Social Justice	.06	.11	.11	.14
Bisexual Identity				
Illegitimacy of bisexuality	-.22*	-.10	-.40***	-.32***
Anticipated binegativity	-.10	-.00	-.10	-.01
Internalized binegativity	-.17*	-.03	-.36***	-.27***
Identity Affirmation	.08	.16	.12	.12
Outness				
Out to family	-.11	-.22*	-.10	-.34***
Out to world	.06	.09	.11	.11
Out to religion	-.02	-.13	-.02	-.17

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Nesting partners within dyads takes into account the non-independence of the dyad members (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The partners were distinguished by sexual orientation (bisexual vs. straight) and only the actor's responses were used as predictor variables. Orientation was effect coded (-1 for bisexual and $+1$ for straight) and all of the continuous predictor variables were grand mean-centered. Separate intercepts and slopes were estimated simultaneously for bisexual and straight partners. This was done by creating dummy variables of straight and bisexual and multiplying them with the predictor variables and removing the overall intercept from the model (for a more thorough description of the process, please see Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013). We standardized the variables prior to running the multilevel models to get standardized coefficients that can be interpreted as a measure of effect size (Lorah, 2018). We included covariates that were significantly correlated with outcomes variables at the bivariate level: partners' age, gender, relationship length, relationship type (monogamous vs. non-monogamous), relationship status (married vs. cohabiting), and religion.

RQ1: Sexual satisfaction

We began with a model in which all subscales of the LGB-PIM, bisexual identity, and outness scales were included in the model along with the control variables. We then trimmed the sexual satisfaction model to include only variables that significantly predicted at least one partner's sexual satisfaction by removing non-significant variables one at a time from the highest p -value to the lowest p -value. We repeated this process until each

variable was significant for at least one partner. We retained all control variables in the model. Due to the inability to compare models using restricted maximum likelihood, we used maximum likelihood estimation to compare the -2 log-likelihood estimates of the model after deleting each variable (Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998). The chi-squared difference showed that the trimmed model did not provide a significantly worse fit to the data and therefore was used as the final model, $\chi^2(14) = 12.08, p = .600$. The final model was then estimated using restricted maximum likelihood, which does not rely on large sample sizes (Ledermann & Kenny, 2017). The trimmed model included intimacy, illegitimacy of bisexuality, internalized binegativity, out to family, and out to a religious community as predictor variables (see Table 3 for the full results).

The results indicated that higher scores of intimacy among bisexual partners were related to a higher level of sexual satisfaction among both partners. In other words, the more intimate they felt toward their partner, the higher the level of sexual satisfaction they experienced. Higher levels of illegitimacy of bisexuality were significantly negatively associated with both partners' levels of sexual satisfaction such that the more the bisexual partner felt their bisexuality was illegitimized, the less sexually satisfied both partners were. Higher levels of internalized binegativity were significantly positively associated only with straight partners' level of sexual satisfaction such that higher levels of internalized binegativity experienced by the bisexual partner predicted higher levels of sexual satisfaction in their straight partners. Additionally, the degree of being out to family members was negatively associated with both partners' levels of sexual satisfaction such that a higher degree of being out to family predicted lower levels of sexual satisfaction. However, this was only significant for the straight partner. In contrast, higher levels of being out to religious communities were positively associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction in both partners. However, as this association was negative and not significant at the bivariate level, this is likely due to something with the analysis or a ceiling effect and is not interpreted further.

RQ2: Relationship satisfaction

We followed the same process of trimming the model for relationship satisfaction as with sexual satisfaction. The chi-squared difference showed that the trimmed model was not significantly worse compared to the full model, $\chi^2(18) = 12.01, p = .847$. The final model included illegitimacy of bisexuality, out to family, and out to religious community. The results (see Table 3 for the full results) indicated that illegitimacy of bisexuality was significantly negatively linked to relationship satisfaction for both partners in that

Table 3. The unstandardized regression coefficients for the actor (bisexual) and partner (straight) effects of bisexual identity on satisfaction.

	Sexual Satisfaction					Relationship Satisfaction				
	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Bisexual (actor)										
Intercept	1.01	.35	2.85	.005	[.31, 1.71]	.83	.35	2.34	.020	[.13, 1.52]
Intimacy	.21	.07	2.98	.003	[.70, .35]					
Illegitimacy of bisexuality	-.47	.14	-3.42	.001	[-.74, -.20]	-.56	.11	-4.87	<.001	[-.78, -.33]
Internalized binegativity	.07	.11	0.62	.540	[-.16, .30]					
Out to family	-.13	.08	-1.57	.119	[-.29, .03]	-.11	.07	-1.57	.120	[-.26, .03]
Out to religion	.17	.08	2.04	.043	[.01, .34]	.17	.06	2.62	.010	[.04, .30]
Straight (partner)										
Intercept	1.01	.35	8.19	.004	[.32, 1.71]	.91	.35	2.61	.010	[.22, 1.60]
Intimacy	.18	.07	3.20	.004	[.06, .35]					
Illegitimacy of bisexuality	-.33	.12	-3.16	.008	[-.57, -.09]	-.23	.10	-2.28	.024	[-.44, -.03]
Internalized binegativity	.21	.10	2.16	.037	[.01, .41]					
Out to family	-.15	.07	-2.16	.036	[-.29, -.01]	-.26	.06	-4.06	<.001	[-.38, -.13]
Out to religion	.13	.07	1.76	.080	[-.02, .27]	.09	.06	1.62	.108	[-.02, .20]

Note. Partners' age, gender, relationship length, relationship type (monogamous vs. non-monogamous), relationship status (married vs. cohabiting), and religion were controlled for in the analysis.

higher levels of feeling that bisexuality is illegitimate among the bisexual partner was associated with lower levels of satisfaction in the relationship for both the bisexual individuals and their partners. Additionally, the degree of being out to family was negatively associated with straight partner's relationship satisfaction in that the more aware family members were of bisexual identity, the lower their relationship satisfaction. However, this association was only significant for the straight partner. In contrast, a higher degree of being out to a religious community was positively associated with both partners' level of relationship satisfaction but was only significant for the bisexual partner. However, as this association was negative and not significant at the bivariate level, this is likely due to something with the analysis or a ceiling effect and is not interpreted further.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to address whether bisexual individuals' positive and negative dimensions of their identity and their level of openness were associated with their own and their partners' level of sexual and relationship satisfaction. In line with previous research, the results showed that some dimensions of identity were associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction (Henderson et al., 2009; Sevic et al., 2016; Shepler et al., 2018; Vencill et al., 2018). Not only did these identity dimensions impact the bisexual person, but they also impacted their partner's experience of satisfaction. Specifically, we found that illegitimacy of bisexuality was negatively associated with both partners' sexual and relationship satisfaction. Previous research has found that bisexual identity is often viewed as a phase before coming out as lesbian or gay, rather than as a legitimate

identity (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Friedman et al., 2014; Rust, 2000). Bisexual individuals often report higher levels of identity confusion and lower levels of self-disclosure and sense of connectivity to a community (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). The present finding suggests that belief in the illegitimacy of bisexual identity may be adversely linked to both the bisexual individuals' as well as their partners' sexual and relationship satisfaction. This finding indicates the importance of acknowledging and working through deeply ingrained ideas of the legitimacy of bisexuality, especially for the bisexual individual, as this has implications for their success in a couple.

Previous research has found that bisexual individuals often face internalized and externalized binegativity (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 2003) and may fear disclosing their identity (Decapua, 2017). Internalized feelings of binegativity can also result in higher levels of psychological distress and lower life satisfaction (Brewster & Moradi, 2010). Internalized or externalized binegativity did not negatively predict sexual or relationship satisfaction in the present study. This may be because the bisexual individuals in the study were in a mixed-sex relationship where they may have benefited from the appearance of a majority status (as a "mixed-sex" couple). Internalized binegativity was, perhaps surprisingly, positively associated with straight partner's sexual satisfaction. One possible explanation for this could be that some heterosexual partners fear that they are not enough for their partner in the long-term and may experience sexual rejection (Buxton, 2006). But if their bisexual partner has negative views about their own bisexual identity, the heterosexual partner may experience less threat from the bisexual identity.

While minority identity has traditionally been framed negatively, as something that may pose challenges to overcome, previous research has suggested that positive and negative dimensions of identity are distinct and both should be considered (Mayfield, 2001; Mohr & Kendra, 2011). We found that intimacy developed through identity significantly positively predicted both partners' sexual satisfaction. Bisexual participants who felt their identity facilitated a deeper understanding of their partner, their partner's needs, and the ability to be closer and more intimate with them, had greater sexual satisfaction among both partners. Previous research has found that having a better understanding, sharing, and trust between partners are integral aspects of couples' intimacy (Ferreira, Narciso, & Novo, 2013) and intimacy can have positive effects on mood on a daily basis (Mehta, Walls, Scherer, Feldman, & Shrier, 2016), as well as on relationship satisfaction more generally (Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma, 2014). Sexual minority individuals can also experience challenges in intimacy due to internalized homonegativity (Sevic et al., 2016). Cultivating this positive

aspect of bisexual identity may, therefore, be beneficial and protective for the relationships of bisexual individuals and their partners.

In addition to aspects of identity, outness to family was also a significant predictor of both sexual and relationship satisfaction among bisexual individuals' partners. Previous research suggests that outness is associated with better health outcomes (e.g., Juster et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2001). However, the results from the present study suggested that outness to family is negatively associated with satisfaction for at least heterosexual partners. Although outness is traditionally thought of as something that is important to health, this finding may reflect the common belief that bisexuality is not a lasting identity. Therefore, it may be that for family members in particular, there is something about knowing a family member is bisexual but "chooses" to be in a mixed-sex relationship that negates or minimizes the bisexual identity for the family member, yet potentially contributing to feelings of bierasure among family members. Of note, 78% of the sample was in a monogamous relationship, challenging the stereotypical myth that all bisexual individuals are incapable of monogamy (Mark, Herbenick, et al., 2014). However, it is also important to note that the effect sizes for being out are relatively small and therefore these findings need to be interpreted with this in mind.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

The present study adds to the extant literature in several important ways and addresses an important gap in studying bisexuality which is often omitted from sexual minority research. We addressed how dimensions of bisexual identity and outness influenced both members of the couples and addressed the research questions from both partners' perspectives. We collected data from a sample of couples in mixed-sex relationships in which one partner is bisexual, an often hard to reach population. We also addressed both positive and negative dimensions of bisexual identity rather than simply focusing on the negative parts of sexual minority identity and found protective factors for satisfaction such as the intimacy gained from truly understanding one's partner.

However, we utilized cross-sectional data and therefore cannot speak to causation in our findings. For example, it may be that bisexual individuals who are in relationships in which their identity is acknowledged and celebrated may feel better about their identity and this relationship may be reciprocal. Second, due to the limited research in this area, our study was exploratory in nature instead of addressing specific hypotheses. Future research is needed to confirm the findings of the current study. Third, we only included bisexual individuals who were in mixed-sex and mixed-

orientation relationships and cannot speak for bisexual individuals who are in other types of relationships but see this as a fruitful line of future research. For example, 44 couples were not included in this analytic sample because they both identified as bisexual; there are several lines of future research that could emerge from those couples. Fourth, we did not address the heterosexual partner's attitudes toward their bisexual partner's identity. It is possible that their perception of the identity would impact satisfaction for both partners as well.

In addition to the future research suggestions provided above, it would be important to examine how bisexual identity impacts satisfaction over time in long-term mixed-sex and same-sex relationships. To be able to compare and contrast the experience of bisexual individuals in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships would also be beneficial to further understand the nuanced dynamics of gender and heterosexism in the context of bisexuality. It is also important to address potential mechanisms and mediators that influence the association between bisexual identity and satisfaction and to examine whether there are constructs that buffer bisexual individuals and their partners from minority stress. Bisexual individuals may find ways to actively maintain their bisexuality, for example, by being in a consensually non-monogamous relationship or being actively involved in bisexual communities. Furthermore, it will be important for future studies to also address how the bisexual individual's partner views the bisexual identity and whether they see it as a positive aspect to be cultivated or whether it is something that causes anxiety and doubt in them being enough for their partner (Buxton, 2006).

Clinical relevance

The present study has implications for practitioners working with bisexual individuals and couples in which at least one partner identifies as bisexual. The study highlights the importance of assessing and discussing the role identity may play in bisexual individuals' and their partners' sexual and relationship satisfaction. Previous work has suggested that even when clinicians work from a lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)-affirmative therapy orientation, they may shy away from discussing how identity might influence sexual satisfaction because of their discomfort addressing sexual issues (Harris & Hays, 2008; Shepler et al., 2018). However, given that sexual and relationship satisfaction are strongly linked, by addressing factors that might influence sexual satisfaction, practitioners can help bisexual individuals to live fuller and more satisfying lives both sexually and relationally.

Additionally, interventions that address the development and strengthening of positive bisexual identity may provide fruitful in enhancing sexual

and relationship satisfaction for bisexual clients as well as their partners. This may in turn help reduce negative mental health outcomes of bisexual populations. Both bisexual clients (Page, 2007) and LGB-affirmative therapists (Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher, & Lund, 2006) state that facilitating a positive sexual identity is one of the most important therapeutic tasks when working with sexual minority clients. However, achieving this therapeutic task may be particularly challenging when working with bisexually-identified individuals (Rust, 2002). Therefore, creating and addressing interventions that specifically address cultivating positive aspects of bisexual identity and helping address felt illegitimacy of bisexual identity may provide especially useful in enhancing the quality of bisexual individuals' relationships.

Furthermore, the results from the present study showed that bisexual individuals' perception of their identity not only influences their sexual and relationship satisfaction but also that of their partners'. When working with couples in which at least one person identifies as bisexual, it may, therefore, be important to address how both partners view the minority identity, whether they are able to talk about it openly, and how both partners can work together to help foster more positive attitudes toward the bisexual identity.

Finally, the results also suggest that it might be important to address the role family plays in potentially influencing satisfaction for both partners. In the present sample, both partners experienced lower levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction when the bisexual partner indicated higher levels of outness to family members although this was not significant for the bisexual partner. While we do not know why this is the case, it may be because of the family's binegativity and not acknowledging the bisexual individual's identity due to their mixed-sex relationship status. Clinicians may benefit from talking about family of origin issues with clients in light of how they perceive the bisexuality and whether their opinions might be impacting the bisexual individual's relationships. It is also prudent to discuss how family members of bisexual individuals can help foster a more positive environment if working with families with bisexual members.

Conclusion

Perceiving bisexuality as an illegitimate identity is associated with negative outcomes in sexual and relationship satisfaction whereas feeling that bisexuality allows for greater intimacy sexually can help foster higher levels of sexual satisfaction. The results also suggest that there may be something about being out to family that negatively impacts sexual and relationship satisfaction, especially for the partners of bisexual individuals. It is

important to address issues surrounding bisexual identity in therapy especially in how it may impact sexual and relationship satisfaction with couples.

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