

# Redefining Queer: Women's Relationships and Identity in an Age of Sexual Fluidity

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Published online: 30 March 2013  
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**Abstract** This paper examines ways some women work to define their sexual identities outside of or between traditional binary categories today. How does one's own gender and the gender of one's sexual and relationship partners through the life course affect the creation and maintenance of a sexual identity? Does our current system of sexual categories fit women's experiences and identities? This study looks at women's sexual experiences through an examination of female sex store patrons. Using Anthony Giddens theories of the pure relationship and plastic sexuality and ideas from queer theory alongside qualitative data about women's sexual and relationship experiences, this paper sheds light on relationship and identity choices some American women are making today around their sexuality and provides new views on identity maintenance, gender, and sexual relationships.

**Keywords** Sexual identity · Gender · Relationships · Sexual categories

## Introduction

As a product of both gender and sexual liberation movements, women coming of age in America today are learning new ways to experience and understand their bodies, relationships, and sexual identities. Shifts in socialization made through new understandings of ways to learn and relearn one's bodily sensations can lead to social change. Culture surrounding women's sexuality is changing, leading to other transformations. Women have the opportunity to experience new identities and relationship potentials in this new modern era. Through the decoupling of sex with reproduction through advances in contraceptive technology women have begun to

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redefine their relationships, bodies, and pleasures. These changes also present women with an opportunity to relearn bodily, sexual, and relationship techniques to enhance the project of the self by learning new body pedagogies, engaging in pure relationships, and embracing plastic sexuality.

In this era of high modernity, women's sexual experiences and identities are shifting. These changes are affecting all levels of social interactions, from changes in the self, to redefined meanings of relationships, to new ways of experiencing pleasure, and new ways of (re)understanding our bodies through socialization. These new meanings provide women with new potentials for identity and intimacy. With these changes have come new ways of constructing a sexual self in American society.

In this paper, I will examine how gender serves to effect women's ways of defining their sexual identities in contemporary American society. Does one's own gender and the gender of one's sexual and relationship partners through the life course affect the creation and maintenance of a sexual identity? Does our current system of sexual categories fit today's women's experiences and identities? How do the language and categories available to women to define their sexual selves fit in and match up with their lived experiences with sexualities and relationships? Using Anthony Giddens theories of the pure relationship and plastic sexuality and ideas from queer theory alongside qualitative data about women's sexual and relationship experiences, this paper will attempt to shed light on identity choices women are making around their sexuality in America.

## Theoretical Background

Building on the previous discussion of heightened consciousness and greater freedoms around the body, theoretical work from Anthony Giddens guided and framed this research endeavor. Giddens, a modern sociologist, connects his concept of the reflexive project of modernity with a new paradigm of sexuality, intimacy, and relationships (Giddens 1991:31). By this he means that the self is constantly evolving through experience and self-reference. The reflexive project in the context of modern complexity is more autonomous to monitor its own experiences and development. The self, therefore, is not a static or passive recipient of experience.

Two of Giddens' theories are useful to explore in this context. By examining his concepts of plastic sexuality and pure relationships we can see where women's revolutionary status as the harbingers of a new sexual order begins to emerge. Giddens marks relationships between two reflexive selves as the pure relationship. The pure relationship is very important for the reflexive project of the self (Giddens 1991:88).

The pure relationship is a relationship entered for its own sake. The pure relationship is not borne out of obligation or necessity. It is used for what each party can derive from the other and from their connection. The pure relationship exists for as long as each party derives satisfaction from its existence (Giddens 1992:58). This new relationship model can provide insights on changes in the socialization of intimacy and sexual relations, shifting us away from a traditional marriage paradigm as the only conception of intimate long term relationships.

Giddens also introduces the concept of plastic sexuality which “is crucial to the emancipation implicit in the pure relationship, as well as to women’s claim to sexual pleasure. Plastic sexuality is decentered sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction” (Giddens 1992:2). Plastic sexuality can be viewed as a trait of one’s personality; it is intrinsically bound up with the project of the self. Giddens posits that, in principle, plastic sexuality “frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus, from the overweening importance of male sexual experience” (Giddens 1992:2). As it provides for our understanding of a new sexual agency for women, plastic sexuality affords women power to control their own bodies and sexualities.

Giddens writes that sexuality is the property of the individual (Giddens 1992:175). Sexuality is seen as the property of the self in modernity, with the body becoming the venue for a range of new potential choices. Now delinked from the bounds of marriage, reproduction, and romantic love, the age of high modernity affords us the ability to reframe and redefine the meanings surrounding sexuality. We are living in the age of a sexual revolution characterized by the delinking of marriage, family, heterosexuality and sexual expressions and desires (Castells 1997:235). Giddens writes that heterosexual marriage, though appearing to hold its central position in the social world, has been undermined by the pure relationship and plastic sexuality (Castells 1997:236; Giddens 1992). Today, the delinking of sexuality from marriage and the family works to affirm women’s sexuality, homosexuality, and elective sexuality (Castells 1997:236). That said, there is an increase in the autonomy of sexual expression in people of all sexual and gender identities. In recent years sexual and relationship patterns have changed; there has been a steady decrease in age of deflowering, premarital cohabitation has become the norm, and there has been an increase in the practice of oral sex, autoeroticism, and masturbation, within all genders (Castells 1997:237–238). Giddens would suppose, under these conditions, that sexuality becomes the property of the individual (Castells 1997:239). In this new modern social order, sexuality can shift meanings on both the individual and cultural levels.

Sexuality, previously gained through marital relations has been transformed to being controlled by the individual through the agency of the body. The body’s new meaning in the age of plastic sexuality is becoming a consequence of the way we define ourselves (Melucci 1996:71). The body is a source of focus on the dimension of desire; today there is a move away from traditional ways of seeing desire as a source of sin. Melucci writes that:

Today, there is a growing awareness that the body expresses a vital energy which brings us into contact with reality and with others, an energy which enables us to create and to transform reality (Melucci 1996:72).

It is in this new light of sexuality as a positive expression of self that desire is losing its negative connotations. Sexuality, says Melucci, “is no longer consigned to the dark realm of the instincts, but is taken to be a profoundly human form of communication, a relational instrument that introduces us to love. Passion loses its negative meaning and becomes synonymous with feeling rooted in the body” (Melucci 1996:72). This is the plastic sexuality that Giddens speaks about, sexuality for the sake of pleasure and not for reproductive purposes. In the age of

reproduction ceasing to be a destiny and a move into a world where it is transformed into a field of decision, action, and choice, passion and sexuality now come with newfound control over the outcomes of sexual encounters. Desire is now separate from reproduction, shifting women's sexual potentials radically (Melucci 1996:117).

Giddens provides local-level theories of sexuality and love which better coincide with the data I gathered from modern women about their sexual choices and sexual selves. The theory of plastic sexuality mentioned earlier, gives us a new notion of sex in a world where reproduction can take place without sex and sex does not need to lead to reproduction. This allows women new sexual potentials freed from the constraints of childbearing. A new sexual revolution has occurred in the past 50 years, what Giddens calls a "gender-neutral advance in sexual permissiveness" involving two components, a "revolution in female sexual autonomy" and "flourishing of homosexuality, male and female" (Giddens 1992:28).

One major point that is echoed in the data which follows is explored in a quote by Giddens. Giddens' ideas resonate through my data in explanatory narratives; their echo best reflects itself in the following:

Once sexuality has become an 'integral' component of social relations, as a result of changes already discussed, heterosexuality is no longer a standard by which everything else is judged (Giddens 1992:34).

To sum up, Giddens' theoretical framework, especially his theory of plastic sexuality, helps to inform potentials and transformations in women's understandings of their sexuality, pleasures, and broadens their intimate horizons. When reproduction is removed from the center of sexuality, we began to see moves away from heterosexuality as well, as it is no longer fundamental to one's sexual needs, as we see sexual needs shifting towards pleasure and away from conception. We are talking here about a new woman, negotiating her intimate life reflexively and critically with a strong integration in her chosen social and institutional lives.

Giddens' theoretical perspectives provide us a starting point for a discussion of the changes around sexuality and relationships found in modernity. Queer theorists help us to push these ideas even further questioning the identity markers themselves, sexual categories, and the social organization of sex in society. Sasha Roseneil finds that "we are currently witnessing a significant destabilization of the hetero/homosexual binary" (Roseneil 2002:33). Her examination of Giddens ideals in light of the breakdown of the sexual binary explores the desire for many people, regardless of gender or relationship type to seek qualities of the pure relationship. Due to changes in social production of identity along with gender and family changes, the dominant norms of heterosexuality are losing hold in modern relationships (Roseneil 2002:34). We are finding a new openness developing around modern relationships in these changing times.

The public telling of new, modern sexual stories helps to expand our understanding of social and sexual possibilities. Though some of these stories come from loss, violence, and addiction, some stem from positive steps of sexual identity development such as coming out (Jamieson 1998:114–117). These narratives of lived experiences provide us a view of how sexuality is being explored today. This allows private and

often silenced aspects of self to become central to public discussions and this new knowledge can lead to wider social understandings and potentials for change.

The body also remains important to our understandings of self and relationships as we examine ways women are redefining their social experiences in changing times. Budgeon connects women's identities to Giddens theories and reminds us that our identities are embodied and this process is vital, active, and recurring (Budgeon 2003). Women's bodies and their experience in relationships are not passive, but women are actors creating new realities. These new realities can shape both personal identity and relationships with others.

The social organization and acceptance of new family forms and diverse relationships has been a product of social movements around sexuality and gender in America as well as change within individuals and families (Weeks 2007). Families of all types exist and are reflected in popular culture, media, and literature. Adherents of the pure relationship are beginning to put together families of choice. These families fit the needs of the people involved and do not conform to heteronormative ideals held by the larger social structure. Much has been written about lesbian and gay families of choice (Weston 1991; Weeks Heaphy and Donovan 2001; Stacey 1996). Queer theory provides us a framework to understand ways to challenge the normative and dominant sexual culture, establishment, and understandings (Sullivan 2003:44). While queer theory has provided an abundance of work questioning and challenging identity and relationship categories (see Fuss 1991; Seidman 1996; Sullivan 2003), we do not have much connecting these theories to lived experience with empirical data. My hope is that the data contained herein helps connect Giddens along with queer and feminist theories to changing identity and relationship patterns that are emerging for American women in this new modern era.

As identities and relationships are changing, we need to examine the literature on non-heteronormative sexual identities as well. While it seems that a woman in a relationship with a man would be seen and read as heterosexual, identity may not always be that simple. Lynne Segal urges women engaged in relationships with men to shift power dynamics in their sexual relationships in an attempt to queer both gender and sexuality (Segal 1997). Nikki Sullivan writes:

Since Queer need not be simply equated with same-sex relations, and sex between men and women need not be heteronormative, then queering what we usually think of as 'straight' sex can allow the possibility of moving away from stabilized notions of gender and sexuality as the assumed foundations of identity and social relations. (2003:134).

If we accept a wider understanding of gender and sexuality in relationships we allow for a decoupling of expected sex of partner and sexual identity of the individual and we may find a broader spectrum of both relationships and sexual identities expressed. Our current system of social categorization may be erasing sexual identity if identity is a lifelong process and our current partner is only a one time snapshot.

We also must ask who gets to identify as queer, if this is a definition given by the self or by others. The ideas brought up in the Giddens theories of relationships as well as in queer theories views of sexualities provide new perspectives on self, identity, and sexuality. Can women with male partners continue to affirm their queer identity, even if it is not seen by others? How might queer serve as a marker to push the inflexible and heteronormative boundaries of straight identity (Thomas 2000)? Are we allowed to choose our identities to best match our feelings and experiences (Whisman 1996)? Since traditional heterosexuality and heteronormativity play on normative gender and sexual roles for women (Jackson 2006), is women's adoption of queer identities despite the gender of her partner a feminist political act or another way to regain some power in an otherwise unjust system?

## Methods

The data examined in this paper comes from a larger study of women's sexual pleasure and relationships (Better 2010). The data that follows is drawn from 39 interviews conducted with patrons, owners, and employees of sex shops in suburban and urban areas in the northeastern region of the United States. This data was collected between 2008 and 2009. In addition to learning about women's attainment of sexual pleasures, these interviews give a fuller picture of women's experience with sexual relationships and identity as well as the lived experience of women's sexuality and access to greater understanding of women's sexual choices. While the sample began as a study of sex stores and women's pleasure, interesting data emerged about identity and relationships that is worth exploring.

Interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 62. Most of the women I spoke with were white<sup>1</sup>; three women identified as members of other racial groups.<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted between August 2008 and October 2009. To recruit potential interviewees, I placed a flyer in three sex stores with varying clientele, one traditional, one romance, and one feminist store. Other interviewees contacted me after learning of this study through friends or other research participants. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. Women contacted me from information on these flyers; once we agreed to a time and place for interviews interviewees learned about the project and gave written informed consent before we began the interview. Interviews took place in women's homes, places of business, coffee shops, parks, and in my office. Two interviews were conducted over the phone. I sought to speak with women who were over 18 years of age and who had, at any point and for any duration, shopped or browsed at a sex store. Names of all participants have been changed. In the following section, a woman's pseudonym and age follows her quote.

The initial emphasis of the interviews was the experience around shopping at sex stores and the implications for one's understanding of embodied pleasure as well as enhancing sexual relationships through the education and consumption of products at these stores. Each interview had two sections, the first detailed the shopping

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<sup>1</sup> Though about half of those women further identified with an ethnic or religious group.

<sup>2</sup> South Asian, Hispanic, and bi-racial (White and Hispanic).

environment of sex stores and how the knowledge gained in that setting enhanced ones sexual life both alone and with partners. I asked each woman questions about her experiences shopping in sex stores, what she had purchased, and how these products fit into her sex life. The second half of the interview was about the development of women's sexual selves and sexual identities. In this section, I asked women to tell me about their sexual history, the role of sexuality in their life, reasons they have sex, the role of relationships in their sexual life, and ways their understandings of gender affects their understandings of sex and sexuality.

### **Limitations of this Sample**

These women have much to tell us about sexuality in the new modern era. Since they are a limited sample of women who were possibly more open than average due to their interest in sex stores and their willingness to discuss with a researcher their sexual histories and choices, this sample and the data gathered here are not universally generalizable. The qualitative methods employed here allowed for new stories to be told, ones we may not have known to go looking for. The depth of the interviews allowed for more nuance to unfold in the exploration of one's life history and desires.

In total, less than half of the women in this sample self-identify as purely heterosexual. This does not match with larger nationally representative statistics on sexuality, which place the non-heterosexual population at around ten percent. However, this data allows us to explore some changes in contemporary American women's sexual experiences that reflect Giddens' pure relationships and the effects of plastic sexuality along with the successes of the feminist and queer theories and social movements in both social and identity progress in new ways. As you read further, understand that there are both benefits and limitations to the methodology and the sample used here.

### **Exploring Sexual Identities**

In discussing the place of sexuality and pleasure in their lives, the women I spoke with also commented on the rigidity of societal categories marking sexual identity and explored moments where their lived experiences did not line up with the accepted social categories. This challenge to identity and social organization was internalized by these women who sought new language to discuss their sexual realities. In this section, I will explore ways women confronted the sexual binary of heterosexual and homosexual and look at how these categories and binary categories in general matched with their experiences of sexuality and identity.

Through popular culture, the media, family, and schools, we learn the social norms around sexuality and around gender, namely that there are two binary categories that we can ascribe. We are taught through our consumption of culture that heterosexuality is expected and compulsory (Rich 1980). Women today are beginning to question the rigidity of these binaries, both alone and with others.

When thinking about her socialization and learning process around sexuality, Tanya explained:

As a kid, you are taught that men like women, and women like men in the commercial methods through TV, and parents, and sex education, and whatever. I never thought that, up until I was in eighth grade, I never really realized that women can be with women, and men can be with men. I guess once I realized that, it didn't matter what your body was. I don't know. Sexuality is sexuality, and everything is legitimate. (Tanya, 21).

Tanya speaks to her early sexuality socialization where she was taught that men are sexually attracted to women and women to men. Once she realized that people could also have relations with others of the same gender, she found that it did not matter what your body or genitals consisted of, that relationships could occur between any people who enjoy each other's company. With that, she proclaimed that everything, or all sexual partner choice, is legitimate. This echoes the theories and ideas presented by Roseneil and Sullivan and serves as an important view of relationships in a changing modern landscape.

## Categories

Tina also tried to explore the issues Tanya raised when she commented:

I was certainly starting to explore it personally. I wrote on my sheet that I identify as mostly straight and I feel like there's—we just don't have a good vocabulary for sexuality, because we do try to compartmentalize everything so rigidly, that I'm a fan of the idea that attraction is attraction and that some people aren't attracted to the same sex at all, just because they aren't. Some people, like me, it just depends on the person. And so I think attraction largely depends on just where we fall in those two categories and they're not separate categories, right, they're part of a spectrum. So one is at one end and one is at the other, so you can fall anywhere in between and I think that we'll most often just find someone who kind of fits their piece of the puzzle to ours, regardless of how we label it. (Tina, 27).

For Tina, attraction to a potential mate depends more on personality than gender. She finds that we do not really have the language to discuss sexual fluidity or flexibility within the binary categories that organize our world. Tina notes that we are seeking potential mates that complement ourselves. This occurs for her outside of (or despite) labels of sexual or gender categories. Mindy brings this point one step further when she explains that in her view, the binary categories do not fit the world she sees and finds that all sexual identity falls somewhere in the middle. She said:

Well, that sexual orientation is more your preferences. I don't really tend to believe in fully homosexual or fully heterosexual; I feel like everyone is at least somewhere in between and it is just what they feel more comfortable with. (Mindy, 20).



Mindy feels that people are not 100 percent heterosexual or homosexual, that sexual identities and experiences often fall in between the binary categories. While Mindy thinks that we all inhabit the middle ground, Alexis wonders what the role of experience is when defining sexual identity.

And I wonder a lot about women like this sexually, how do they know that? How do they know that they're not straight, because a lot of them I feel like haven't slept with a woman. And if they had maybe they'd wake up the next morning and be like okay, I'm definitely straight or okay, I'm gay. But then again, I can't really say much because I'm also one of those women who defines themselves as somewhere in the middle. But I don't know, I think I get to—I'm 28 years old. I have a lot of experience and it took me a long time to decide where I stood. But also maybe because it's cool to be that way now, more women are gonna be open about it, like the other thing. Maybe they are that way. It's hard to tell if people are following the crowd or they're actually just like oh, thank God, I can finally be open about who I am. (Alexis, 28).

This brings up the question of experience in contrast with identity. Can we define ourselves in any social or sexual category prior to experience? Is desire enough to form the basis of a person's sexual identity? Unlike gender which tends to be correlated with biological sex and marked at birth, how and when do we define our sexual identities and put ourselves into sexual categories? Alexis finds her current self definition of somewhere in the middle to come from a lot of experience and a long time of self discovery. Since so many women are beginning to define themselves outside the sexual binary, she wonders if this is done because it is cool or if this is a mark of true identity and freedom.

Cleo explained that she found most women as sexually fluid, though her experiences mixed fluidity with rigid categorization. Cleo defined her sexuality from age fifteen to twenty-three as lesbian and from 23 forward as heterosexual. Her newfound identity as heterosexual seemingly erased her lesbian identity and experience, even though she initially talked of herself as sexually fluid. She explained:

So I do see that women are fluid like that and I do consider myself fluid in that I could suck a dick a couple of months after having eaten out a girl and been, like, I will only ever eat out a girl, I will never put a dick in my mouth. Like, that's pretty fluid, I guess. But I guess fluid also involves going back and forth and I would never go back. So maybe that fluidity needs to—you need to be sure that you're always doing what's healthy for you, because girls who just make out with girls at parties, like either you actually want to be dating girls, or why the fuck are you doing this? Or even if you want to, like really, is that a good choice? Like, there were people who I wanted to have sex with, but really, was that a good choice? So fluidity, be careful still, make your choices and for me, honestly the reason that I could be like that is I was raised with very black and white thinking. Because my mom, like, it's either this or this. So honestly, that could just be a personal thing for me because I was raised that way, that it's either this or this, it's all or nothing. But no, I'm not fluid.

Like, when I was gay, I was not at all open to guys and now I'm straight, I'm not at all open to girls. (Cleo, 23).

For her, despite her experiences identifying with both sexual categories, she finds that she does not feel her sexuality is fluid since she would never switch back again. This logic is very interesting and inspired by very binary thinking she has held her whole life. Once she decided she was no longer a lesbian her experiences and identity developed over 8 years of sexual experience and thoughts were now erased to make room for her new heterosexual identity. This rigidity in categorical identification is complicated by the sharp turn from one end of the binary to the other. While others might mark these feelings as indicative of sexual fluidity and proof that the categories do not fit our experiences, Cleo finds a way to make both fluidity and binary sexual categories fit her experience by changing her self definition and her partner choice drastically at age 23.

While Cleo shifted identities to make room for her new self understandings, Vanessa questioned her authenticity in her desire for women since she had also had relationships with men. She explained:

I knew that I couldn't take back the feelings that I've had for the men in my life or the relationships I've had with boys. So I knew that I intrinsically wasn't a lesbian. So it made me really afraid to be in relationships with a woman who identified as lesbian, which when you're that young I think most people either identify as gay or not or even if they say bisexual it still means lesbian in some way or something, I don't know. It's very confusing. I kind of stopped pursuing my relationships with women at that point and considered myself for many years a straight woman who had sex and dreamt about women. So stupid and it wasn't actually until after I moved to London and had my first orgasm and met my first girlfriend. We were living in the same flat together, but she invited me out to a club. She's like, "Hey, do you want to hang out? We should go to this club." I'm like, "Isn't that a lesbian club?" She's like, "Yeah." I'm like, "I'm not a lesbian." She's like, "You like girls, don't you?" I'm like, "Yeah." She's like, "Don't you think you should be around other girls who like girls?" I'm like, "Yeah, they won't like me because I also like boys." She's like, "No, that's not how it works. It doesn't matter." I needed somebody to say like, "You're welcome, you're invited, you belong." It wasn't until somebody like literally said the words, "You belong.", that I was like, oh, epiphany, I can just be who I am and it doesn't matter. I don't have to not be who I am because of my fear of how people will perceive that. There's no right way to be who I am. I can just be and people will like me or they won't, but it's not about me fitting in. It's about me making my own destiny. (Vanessa, 31).

Vanessa's experience trying to make sense of a self identity was complicated by her feelings of not being authentic or pure in her identity. After beginning a relationship with a woman after years of dating men, she still did not feel that she would be accepted into the lesbian community since she was sexually interested in both men and women. Once she was personally invited to a lesbian club she began

to understand that her complicated identity would not preclude acceptance to the community at the lesbian club. She realized that fitting into social categories and their corresponding norms was not the most important thing, but finding herself and making her own destiny was paramount.

## Relationships and Gender

Nicole explored changes over her lifetime to women's sexual self definitions. At thirty-three she feels that sexual identity has become less categorized as time moves forward. She explains:

I almost envy like the world in terms of like how adults are growing up nowadays because it was more categorized, much more so I think when I was growing up. I've played with men. I'm partnered with a male. I did not want to be with a male, and that was a really tough decision to decide to spend my life with him, and a little bit of a letdown every time I dated a guy. So gender's been a big issue in terms of like—'cause I always like—my politics, my sexual play has always been more woman focused in terms of like how I identify and stuff like that, and playing with a boy was like, really, am I gonna, you know, go into that box and be with the white, you know, male that is heterosexual and vanilla. Great. I ended up with that. Okay. (Nicole, 33).

While she finds that both her politics and her sexual play tend to be more women focused, Nicole is now in a committed relationship with a man. She has mixed feelings about what that means for her identity, as that now makes her body and relationship read as heterosexual, erasing any desires for women from both her past and present public identities.

Kate's experience with partnering with a man is similar to Nicole's. Kate finds that she and her husband are together because they are a good match, not because of their genders. She commented:

I don't believe that I'm with [husband] because he's a man. I believe I'm with him because he—we're just it. We're partners. It was like not wanting to be with a man when I met him, and then I—we had this connection and it was unavoidable, like I couldn't avoid him. I felt I was selling out at the time. I just wanna be with him because he's a man and it's easier, and I don't think that that's true. I think I just fell in love with him, and the woman I was with; I think it was the same thing. Not that I wasn't sexually attracted to both of them, but I just fell in love with her, and it just happened and now when I find myself attracted to people, it feels regardless to gender. When I develop these little crushes, they're on men and women alike. They look consistently the same. I can talk to a certain type of man or a certain type of woman, but—so then maybe it is about gender. I don't know. It doesn't feel inherently about gender. Maybe I'd just like to believe that. (Kate, 27).

Though she is attracted to both men and women and has engaged in relationships with partners of both genders, Kate explains why being with a man is not selling out

her flexible sexual identity. She does not think she chose this relationship because it is more socially acceptable and thereby easier. She finds that her attraction to people seems apart from gender and focused on other personal attributes. She worries, however, that she is just working to convince herself that her relationship with a man is not about gender but about love, attraction, and connection.

Heidi is finding her experiences to be similar to Kate's. She is also married to a man but has a sexual past that involves people of all genders. She said:

Well ever since college I've identified as bisexual. But, the reality of being in a married, monogamous relationship with someone of the opposite gender makes it, well it makes it interesting in terms of identifying. I find that there are situations where I very strongly identify as being heterosexual and there are situations where I work very hard to say please don't exclude me, I also have this bisexual aspect to my life. And, a very good friend, my best friend from college, identified as bisexual in college and has married a woman, and they're raising two children together, and now consistently identifies as a lesbian. And, so when I asked her about that she said well, that's who I am now, I'm in a monogamous relationship with a woman and I am therefore a lesbian and like, men are not a part of my life right now. But, it's very hard for me to just say yes, I am heterosexual partly because I enjoy trying to help open other people's minds as well and I feel like just being normal or average is not helpful to those purposes, but also because I feel like in ways that sort of denies the part of me that occasionally, you know, is excited by a really pretty girl who walks down the street, or somebody that I do feel an attraction to in a way that's not just gosh, you're a really neat person. I mean, I don't feel like just because we're married and we have chosen a monogamous relationship that other attractions don't still exist or aren't going to happen, and so I feel like by just saying heterosexual then somehow I'm kind of limiting why I'm...which doesn't feel right either. (Heidi, 35).

Heidi finds it hard to fit into any of the sexual categories available to her. As a monogamous married woman with a male partner, she feels the outside reading of her identity erases part of herself that she finds important. She does not identify as heterosexual despite her monogamous marriage to a man, while her formerly bisexual friend who married a woman now identifies as lesbian. These choices are especially interesting to note, as Heidi's bisexual identity keeps her in the gray area of the sexual binary while her friend's choice to identify solely as lesbian moves her from the middle to a polar category. Heidi also finds it important to assert her non-heterosexual identity as a way to open up the minds of others to the broad spectrum of sexual identities and choices.

### **Fluidity and Identity Acceptance**

Lisa's understandings about sexual categories came suddenly. While she had initially seen sexual categories as rigid, she began to explore fluidity in identity and sexual identification. She explains:

I feel like I've always been really open to other sexualities. But I never really felt like it applied to me. I've had a lot of friends who are either bisexual or are identified as lesbian. I have a very vivid memory of one girl who was like, "I'm really, I'm not a lesbian, I'm just really attracted to this one girl." That was something that I could never really wrap my mind around until last year. Then that was really the first time that I met a girl who I could, I wouldn't say that I, I don't know. I could see myself in the right situation falling in love with her, and after that I was like, "A-ha, this is what they meant. It really is about the person and not about the sex of the person." (Lisa, 24).

Lisa is beginning to see desire as a product of interactions and not necessarily of gender. She finds that sexuality might be more "about the person and not about the sex of the person." This continues to speak to the fluidity in sexual identification and category use among women today. While these desires are occurring for many women, they still lack a language to use to explain their feelings and behaviors. What happens when we outgrow commonly accepted social categories?

Rachel, an owner of a feminist sex shop, explains what she is seeing in her store regarding shifts in women's sexual identification. Many women today are eschewing binary sexual categories to identify as queer. She illustrates a moment that happened in her store:

But there are a lot of people and probably of course more women than men who are starting to get the whole like they're hip to different identities and they're hip to being hetero in the traditional sense but like identifying as queer in a lot of ways because of their openness or because of their just cultural identity or because of that's who their friends are, all these different reasons. And one of my favorite experiences at the store was this adorable woman who first of all she lived 45 min away. And so she called to get directions, she had written down directions and she planned on coming to the store. She basically made it right before closing and was so apologetic and was please let me shop, like I drove here. It was just me and I like locked the door and I said sure I'll help you and then I'll close after. The reason she was there and was very serious about it and seemed like she built up to be there and everything was to buy a strap-on for a guy that she was going to strap it on with, which I believe is next revolution and she like went on and on about—seemed to have this I want to identify as queer but I don't know if you'll let me kind of thing. And then went on to tell me about how she wanted to have it on, actually have to be a kind of black, dark dildo like she kind of—well Baby has this alter ego where she's kind of like a big black guy and wants to send it over for her guy and make him call her something else. And she was going on and on about this, her grandmother was gay and so she grew up with that and she's like I don't know is that queer like can I use that and I'm like, the way you just described what you want to do with this beautiful dildo, yeah I think you can call yourself queer, like you don't need my permission. But I think there is a growing number of people that have sex with the opposite sex and also identify as queer and get that concept, you know what I mean?

So I think that's growing big time, especially when you think if generations because obviously older generations see it as an insult or fear that and still wouldn't use that word. So I think it's very generational but the younger people coming up, like a lot of kids coming up will choose queer first, the kids who might have been bi 10 years ago they'll think about queer and maybe identify as queer when they're younger and feel more proud and comfortable with that and it's not a big deal. And I think so the fluidity thing I think is being way more embraced the younger we get versus the older labels that people are used to or fought for. I think what I was saying before about who's comfortable with sex toys, obviously would make sense that more of the queer or lesbian women or just queer women of any kind would be the ones who are more likely to be able to deal with sex toys in general and then start the shops and all that. (Rachel, 30).

Rachel found that this customer was seeking approval from the owner of a feminist sex store to use the term queer to define her sexual practices and identity. The customer looked to Rachel, as an owner of a feminist, sex positive business as an expert to meet her approval in using the identity term she found most fitting. It does seem that women are feeling that their sexual experiences do not fit the binary but are unsure what language they can use to better define their desires. Oftentimes an 'expert' on queerness, usually a sexual expert like a sex store owner or sex educator or a bona-fide lesbian (whatever that means), is sought by women who seek approval over their identities. This can be seen also in Vanessa's experience at a lesbian club and Lisa's new understanding of sexual desire.

Queerness today is used in a variety of ways to define non-normative sexual practices beyond sexual identity and orientation. This can include bisexuality, pansexuality, polyamory, BDSM, and the use of sex toys. While I'm referring to these practices as non-normative, there is no telling just how widespread these practices are. I would argue that there is more queerness and alternative expressions of sexuality and sexual behavior than we know to look for and that our lack of both language to describe it and the taboo on its discourse hinders our true understandings of the depths of the pervasiveness of these behaviors.

Of course, defining one's identity is a crucial step in self-development and socialization. The more identities and choices we have available to us, the easier it will become to match desire to defined categories. Vanessa explains why definitions matter differently over the life course.

You see kind of like junior high, high school kids, they seem so intent on—which I guess was my experience too—on boxing themselves and saying, “Am I queer enough? Am I gay enough? Am I lesbian enough? Do my behaviors make me be able to claim this label?” We're all just kind of like, “It's cool. Just be who you are. You don't have to fit a label and if you want to fit a label call yourself that. Nobody cares.” Like trying to kind of bridge that gap and I think then there's a second layer identity crisis that happens when people are like, “Oh, it's really not all that, but do I feel comfortable in it.” So then maybe by the time you get over that you're in your 40s and you're just saying, “Oh, who the fuck cares.” (Vanessa, 31).

In the teenage years, as part of identity development, youths ask if they fit into the categories they seek to belong. Seeking approval for queerness from some authority of peers or adults seems to be a step in this developmental process. As Vanessa mentions, to an outsider, she wants people to find labels that fit themselves, be it focused on experience, behavior, thoughts, or group membership. She hopes people find a place where they are comfortable, knowing as she ages that these categories and identifications seem to matter less than their enormity in the teenage years.

## Meanings

Tina wonders why it is acceptable for people to ask questions about others' sexual practices and identifications. She questioned:

People ask you outright, are you poly or are you monogamous? And I look at them and I go, "Does it matter? Why do we need to put these labels on?" There's so much why, why are we always asking ourselves and it's not, to me, it's like they're missing a social grace, to just come out and ask that. What does it matter? (Tina, 27).

Tina wonders why sexual categories and labels matter in social interactions. What are we learning about each other by trying to understand identity using these markers? We understand that people use social categories to learn about the world and about each other, but what happens when these categories and their meanings are rapidly shifting or expanding? Susan explored the commentary of language use in the choice between identifying as bisexual, an accepted interstitial category between the sexual binary, and queer, a newer, reclaimed term.

So it's a commentary on the language but it's also commentary on how one projects one's identity. I mean bisexual is a lot more neutral it sounds a lot more like census category. And queer is a lot more in your face. (Susan, 53).

Susan finds that bisexual as an identity marker sounds more neutral, like an accepted social category. She sees queer as more aggressive in its tone. Though these words often overlap in meaning, the difference in tone can portray differences in desired identification. Twenty-three women in my sample identified somewhere in the middle of the heterosexual-homosexual binary spectrum; ten of those women used the term bisexual to define their sexual identity while thirteen women chose other terms that eschew the binary.

Joanne has constantly questioned meanings of sexual categories in her own life. She explains:

And had pretty much sorted everything out by junior year of college and then spent the next 10 years or so figuring out, okay so I think I like boys and girls, what does that mean? And so it's been the fact that I'm bisexual, the fact that I am kinked, the fact that I am poly, the fact that I identify somewhere on the butch/femme spectrum that moves a lot and occasionally moves depending on

who I'm with. It has meant that I'm always actively engaged in figuring out what my sexuality is and what it means to me. So it's been all over the map. (Joanne, 36).

As someone who fits into several of the non-normative sexual identities, including bisexual, polyamorous, and kink/BDSM, Joanne has put a good amount of thought into meanings of these identities for her and how they play out both socially and on her gendered body that is also constantly shifting exploring the spectrum of presentations and possibilities. Joanne's case reminds us of both the flexibility and interconnectedness of identity categories marking gender and sexuality.

Beth provides an interesting thought bringing together sexual behaviors, desires, and identities. She explains her thoughts about sexuality by saying:

I just think that sexuality is a way of sort of managing the connections between our sex acts and sexual desires and what we conceive of as our identity because it's sort of the connection between our bodies and bodily pleasure and then like how we conceive of ourselves as selves and how it's become such an indicator of who we are. So I basically think it's this sort of way of identifying ourselves through our actions that is similar to other ways of identifying ourselves, but is almost more important because sex has become such an important marker of identity in our culture. (Beth, 28).

She finds it important to explore the connections between sex acts and sexual feelings that help make up our sexual identity. Since sexuality is so important in our culture and in our social relations, she finds these bodily and social connections to be fundamental. The development of these identities, steeped in embodiment and bodily actions are especially important to analyze.

Understanding and taking ownership of one's sexuality can help a woman feel free and liberated from social constraints. Kali explains:

And I know this isn't something that people automatically think of but it's a way to feel liberated and I have seen people—whatever way they express in sexuality, it is a way of defining one's self and finding liberation, whether it is through a monogamous thing between a man and a woman or multiple partners or BDSM. (Kali, 27).

Regardless of how sexuality gets defined by the individual, Kali feels that knowing one's own sexual desires and choices and having agency over that aspect of one's life leads to a feeling of liberation. Perhaps knowing ourselves, despite social and sexual categories that have not caught up to our lived experience is the greatest achievement.

Carrie continues this idea in her comments about sexuality when she mentioned:

I see it as something fluid that it is constantly changing and as you evolve, as people come in and out of your life, those experiences and knowledge come in and out of your life it is an evolution. But it would be a demeanor almost, a way of carrying yourself or...I think it's also confidence comes from it sometimes, a sense of you don't have to be the most beautiful woman in the



world but if you feel beautiful or if you feel sexy then you are going to carry yourself differently regardless of what anybody else thinks. (Carrie, 29).

Sexuality for women today is fluid and evolving, as both we age through the life course and add more experience to our understandings of the world, and as the social world around us changes allowing more freedoms in sexual expression and experience. As we progress through life, we can only hope our sexual experiences continue to grow in strength and intimacy as we develop a stronger sense of self and understanding of our own body and its pathways to pleasure. When we begin to have agency over our sexuality, including our experiences, relationships, and categorical definitions, we are taking ownership of a huge and unique part of ourselves, wrestling it back from social control and social forces to truly experience sexual pleasure, one of the most personal and evocative feelings available to individuals.

## Analysis and Conclusions

As a result of changing relationship dynamics coupled with more freedom to express one's gender and sexuality more openly, the data here show some interesting points about relationships and identity in this new modern era. Giddens plastic sexuality seems to have shifted women's ways of experiencing themselves as sexual agents and more women are finding themselves in negotiable pure relationships, at least among sex store patrons. New identities and relationship structures are leading to new ways of classifying the self as a sexual individual outside of the confines of a formal relationship (see Table 1).

Of thirty-eight women interviewed, fifteen classified their sexual identity as heterosexual or straight, while twenty-three provided a response that falls under the "queer identity" umbrella. While the heterosexual women used words like straight, hetero, and heterosexual to define their sexuality, queer women used a larger variety of words, phrases, and descriptions, including married but flexible, bi, heteroflexible, sexual, and queer. A full chart of women's responses to self-defining their sexual orientation or identity follows this paper (see Table 2). Women in this sample identified their desires and attractions in new ways, defying conventional categories to better reflect their realities.

Several of the women I interviewed were in committed relationships that seemed traditional on their surface. Though these relationships look like traditional heterosexual marriage or committed relationships, the women involved were also engaging in sexual activities with other partners. Several of the women I spoke with were having affairs outside their marriage, while others were in relationships and marriages that allowed for the partners to engage sexually with others outside of their relationship dyad unit.

Several women expressed concerns about their sexual identity category since they have partnered with a man but find their sexual desires to span across gender lines. The chart that follows presents data on sexual identity and relationship status (see Table 3). Eighteen women who defined their sexual identity as queer were in

**Table 1** Self-definition of sexual identity and relationship status

		Coupling	
		Single	Partnered
Identity	Heterosexual	Kelsey 25 Jenna 26 Lucy 30 Beth <sup>a</sup> 28 Judy 60 Sally 30 Amanda 38	Sue 28 Maggie 60 Toni 39 Cleo 23 Fran 62 Erin 35 Liza 55 Grace 38
	Queer	Clare 20 Lee 46 Julie 24 Tina 27 Tanya 21	Sasha 53 Melinda 36 Kate 27 Nicole 33 Kali 27 Carrie 29 Lisa 24 Amy 26 Vanessa 31 Joanne 36 Rachel 30 Mindy 20 Ellen 23 Rebecca 31 Alexis <sup>b</sup> 28 Valerie 37 Heidi 35 Kim 28

<sup>a</sup> None

<sup>b</sup> Mostly Straight, but not entirely

relationships, but only three of those relationships were with other women. Fifteen women with male husbands or committed partners defined their sexuality as somewhere along a queer spectrum. This is very interesting to note as it runs counter to conventional expectations of heterosexuality and provides a new focus on desire before or during a relationship towards other people. This highlights the importance of examining sexuality not just by looking at relationships but by exploring also desire, attraction, group membership, and fantasy. While some of the fifteen women currently with a male partner had prior experiences across gender lines, several of the women interviewed defined their sexuality as non-heterosexual based solely on attraction that has not yet been brought to fruition with a partner.

**Table 2** Participants self definitions of sexuality/sexual identity

Pseudonym	Age	Sexuality
Clare	20	Bisexual
Sue	28	Straight
Sasha	53	Bisexual
Melinda	36	Lesbian
Lee	46	Polyamorous bi
Kate	27	Category uncomfortable—married but flexible
Julie	24	Straight-ish
Nicole	33	Queer
Kali	27	Bi-sexual
Tina	27	...Mostly Straight
Carrie	29	Fluid—always changing and evolving. “bi” if you must have a label but still not completely accurate
Kelsey	25	Straight, close ties to LGBT Community
Lisa	24	From zero to ten, zero being homosexual, 5 being bisexual, and ten being heterosexual, 8
Jenna	26	Straight, but not exactly fixed
Amy	26	Bi
Vanessa	31	Sexual
Joanne	36	Queer
Rachel	30	Queer femme
Maggie	60	Heterosexual
Lucy	30	Straight
Mindy	20	Bisexual
Toni	39	Hetero
Beth	28	None
Judy	60	Straight
Ellen	23	“heteroflexible”?!
Rebecca	31	Bisexual
Alexis	28	Mostly straight, but not entirely
Valerie	37	Bisexual
Cleo	23	Age 15–23 Lesbian Age 23-on: Heterosexual
Sally	30	Heterosexual...with homosexual experimentation
Heidi	35	Bisexual—in a monogamous heterosexual relationship
Fran	62	Straight
Kim	28	90 % heterosexual 10 % homosexual
Tanya	21	Bisexual
Erin	35	Heterosexual
Doug	33	Normal
Amanda	38	Heterosexual
Liza	55	Heterosexual
Grace	38	Hetero

**Table 3** Participants relationship status at time of interview

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship	Partner's gender
Clare	20	Single	
Sue	28	Partnered	Male
Sasha	53	Married	Male
Melinda	36	Married	Female
Lee	46	Dating	Male
Kate	27	Married	Male
Julie	24	Single	
Nicole	33	Partnered	Male
Kali	27	Partnered	Male
Tina	27	Single	
Carrie	29	Partnered	Male
Kelsey	25	Single	
Lisa	24	Partnered	Male
Jenna	26	Single	
Amy	26	Partnered	Male
Vanessa	31	Married	Female
Joanne	36	Married	Male
Rachel	30	Partnered	Male (trans)
Maggie	60	Partnered	Male
Lucy	30	Single	
Mindy	20	Partnered	Male
Toni	39	Married	Male
Beth	28	Single	
Judy	60	Divorced/Single	
Ellen	23	Partnered	Male
Rebecca	31	Married	Male
Alexis	28	Partnered	Male
Valerie	37	Partnered	Male
Cleo	23	Dating	Male
Sally	30	Partnered	Male
Heidi	35	Married	Male
Fran	62	Divorced/dating	Male
Kim	28	Partnered	Male
Tanya	21	Single	
Erin	35	Married	Male
Doug	33	Single	
Amanda	38	Single	
Liza	55	Divorced/dating	Male
Grace	38	Married	Male

Ones queer identity should count just on the virtue of the fact that one defines themselves as such. Maintaining an identity outside of the dominant power structure has political and social reasons that may be known only to the individual. Trying to ascertain ones sexuality from the outside by reading markers like current partner erases the internal aspects of sexual identity, including sexual desire and sexual history. For the women in this sample who were queer identified, their modern views of sexuality, informed by pure relationships and plastic sexuality along with views of sexuality that run counter to the heteronormative discourse may be hidden from others but were very salient for the self. As these new types of relationships begin to form in a world with changing understandings of sexual categories and sexual fluidity, more women will find themselves in this position where sexual identity and current relationship may not align.

### **Language and Categories—Reflections**

By examining women's relationships and experiences seeking sexual pleasure, we are left to wonder the importance of our current systems of classifying desire and identity using sexual orientation categories to better explain ourselves and our world. For many women, desire, experience, and relationships do not tell a simple story. What is the best way to understand and organize this extremely personal and often private identity category? For many of the women in this study, gender was not the focus of a potential sexual or relationship partner as much as having commonalities and serving as a good match for each other. Since we rarely see potential partners' genitals before disrobing, biological sex is less a factor in our sexual decision-making. Even gender, the socially constructed performance of sexed identity categories does not always serve as the marker of potential desire.

Why were women who seek to explore their own pleasures further by shopping for sexual goods finding themselves more likely to define their desires outside of a traditional normative realm? Though most of these women are partnered with men, only fifteen define their sexual identity as straight. Twenty-three women found their desires to better fit under the queer umbrella, despite the gender of their partner. If sexuality is located in the self and not in relationships, the gender of one's partner matters less than the internalized feelings and desires one has about other's bodies and selves. This seems to be the new direction of sexual identity, agency, and categories. In this view, a woman defines her own sexual category; it is not necessarily defined by the identities of the people who she engages in sexual relations with.

This move towards queerness or sexual fluidity is often erased in American society today due to a lack of language with which to define and explain our understandings of sexuality. While as a culture we are exploring the gray areas between binary categories in many arenas, sexuality becomes more complicated as it is an identity that is both personal and relational. Additionally, we have a middle category in our sexual spectrum, adding bisexual to the middle of the binary. Despite having an interstitial third category people today are finding that these

labels do not fit their experiences and are creating new words and phrases to better describe how they understand their sexual identity.

Ten women self-identified as bisexual in my sample, while thirteen women used new definitions that placed them under the queer umbrella, showing that even with a middle category, we still lack appropriate language and categories to capture women's experience. While it is important to have some commonality in how we speak about our identities, it is also helpful to have the freedom to define for oneself the way desire and sexuality should be portrayed to capture a more accurate portrait of our sexual experience. We need to further explore ways to talk about sexuality if we move our categorizations from a binary categorical scheme to a spectrum of experiences. We must also think about how and where, if at all, gender enters the picture in defining sexual identities.

As we examine the influences of queer theory and pure relationships we can see many changes in American coupling patterns. Maybe today no sex or sexual identity is normative. This may contribute to our difficulty fitting our experiences into current language and categories. Though sex and sexuality are changing for women on an individual level in private explorations of sexual desires, both in thought and in deed, our social categories and frameworks have not yet caught up to rapid shifts in sexual understandings, pleasures, and identities. Perhaps today all consensual sexual relationships, regardless of the genders of the partners or their prior sexual histories, can now be seen as normative. At the very least, we need more flexible categories to better contain our lived experiences. As we learn more about our bodies and potentials for pleasures during a time of sexual progress, women's private experiences of pleasure brought to light in public conversations with friends and partners can help break the remaining social taboos around women's sexuality. The lived experience of female sexuality provides a ripe ground for future theorizing. It is my hope that this exploration maintains its feminist roots and serves only to further empower women and people of all genders in their quests for understanding our sexual selves and identities.

Though this data was gathered from women who patronized sex stores, it is possible that changing social and sexual norms for women will affect relationships for many people, not just those involved in sexual communities or who seem predisposed to new sexual ideas. As a product of the social movements, legal changes, and consciousness raising that brought a variety of types of sex stores into our communities, many changes have occurred opening people's minds to a variety of sexual and relationship ideas. As our culture broadens its view of gender and sexuality, it is likely these new ideas will become incorporated into people's view of self and into couple's framing of their relationships in new ways.

As we explore the shifts in our views of the self as a sexual agent in relationships, we can gain a greater understanding of the social process of sexuality and analyze ways that sexuality is constructed for both individuals and within relationships. While these parts of both self and society are difficult to examine, they remain vital areas of importance in an era of rapid modernization of pure relationships, broadening of gender roles, and acceptance of a broad range of family forms.

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