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Page | 1

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**Narrating self-identity in bisexual motherhood.****Abstract**

*Our qualitative study investigated the ways in which bisexual mothers came to identify as such and how their identity interconnected with their personal relationship and parenting histories within the social contexts they experienced. Eight women (aged from 28 to 56-years-old) who had experienced sexual relationships with both women and men over their lifespan were interviewed. At the time of their interview the participants were mothers to children of various ages from infancy to adulthood. A Labovian narrative analysis was conducted to highlight key points in their understanding of their sense of self in relation to particular social contexts and their story of how they came to identify as a bisexual mother or not. Our findings pointed to involvement in various self-identity projects that were variously integrated and resolved within their life course story, namely, the construction of a positive sexual identity and the development of a romantic relationship and the desire to parent. Our life course development study emphasized sexual self-identity as providing a source of agency and organization with respect to personal development in embracing or side-lining opportunities as these occurred or did not occur within changing social contexts over time.*

*KEYWORDS: bisexuality; life course; motherhood; narrative analysis; parenting; self-identity.*

While there are a growing number of studies on same-sex parenting, few have considered how LGBTQ sexual self-identities and parenting experiences interconnect over the life course (Tasker, 2013). Yet studies examining self-identity point to considerable variation in the ways in which individuals identify as non-heterosexual and to variation over the life-course, particularly in how women define a fluid sense of their own sexual identity (Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). The fluidity of non-heterosexual identities, coupled with the relative absence of literature on bisexual parenting (Ross & Dobinson, 2013), suggest that perhaps a bisexual identity is a difficult identity to sustain through the life course into parenthood. Thus our research study was aimed at understanding how mothers who experienced sexual attractions to both men and women over the course of their lives developed and sustained a bisexual self-identity.

### **Existing Research**

**Empirical Research on Bisexual Parenting.** The “Work, Love, Play Study” (WLPS) is one of the few surveys to describe specific circumstances of bisexual parenting and has provided a valuable snapshot of diverse parenting structures (Power et al., 2012). Concerning the different pathways to parenthood, 80% of the 48 WLPS respondents were parenting their own biological children, nearly 70% of which had been conceived through heterosexual sex. Further, respondents reported living in varied family situations and structures: while over 80% of respondents reported parenting with someone else or with others, only a quarter of the sample were raising their children with the child’s other biological parent. Nearly 60% of WLPS respondents were in a same-sex relationship at the time of the survey, while the rest were either in an other-sex relationship, not in a relationship, or in two cases recorded current intimate relationships including more than one partner.

In highlighting the need for further research on bisexual parenting, Ross and Dobinson (2013) found just seven papers reporting any considerations specific to bisexual parents in their review. Previous studies and first person accounts have indicated that bisexual individuals desired parenthood as much as their homosexual and heterosexual counterparts, and also that they were perhaps even more likely to have children than gay and lesbian adults (Paiva, Filipe, Santos, Lima & Segurado, 2003; Wells, 2011). And whilst some of these parents' experiences might be similar to those of lesbian or gay parents, bisexual parents additionally encounter specific and particular challenges, such as heterosexual passing (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a, 2010b), feelings of invisibility or erasure (Ross et al., 2012), or double discrimination from heterosexual and some lesbian and gay communities (Arden, 1996; Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer, 2008; Moss, 2012). Possibly these challenges make it difficult to identify as a bisexual parent or to sustain a bisexual parenting identity.

**Bisexual invisibility and sexual fluidity.** This invisibility of bisexual parents in LGBT parenting studies can be related to a broader invisibility and erasure of bisexuality in western societies. Bisexuality is often not acknowledged as a valid identity whether it is in the media, the gay and lesbian communities, or in the scientific literature. Yet Kinsey's early research had pointed to the need for a multidimensional view of sexuality taking into account different components: emotional and social preferences, life-style, self-identification, changes in identity over time, sexual attractions, fantasy and behaviors (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948, 1952; Klein, 1993). Nevertheless often cited theoretical models concerning the development of human sexuality have postulated the existence of a sequence of stages leading to the positive formation of either heterosexual or homosexual identity (e.g. Cass, 1979, 1990; Troiden, 1979, 1989). This "either...or" dichotomy carried with it the implication that a healthy sexual identity was equal to a monosexual identity. According to these

premises, bisexuality was perceived as transitional or as a form of unachieved or immature identity (Barker & Langdrige, 2008; Fox, 1995). Longitudinal studies and reviews examining self-identity have pointed to considerable variation in the ways in which individuals identify as non-heterosexual and to variation over the life-course, particularly in how women define a fluid sense of their own sexual identity (Diamond, 2008; Hammack, 2005; Peplau & Garnets, 2000).

Following these perspectives, various authors have called for an integrative understanding of human sexuality acknowledging complex pathways and self-identification (for example, Barker & Langdrige, 2008; Fox, 1995; Hammack, 2005). Galupo (2011) has pointed to the unique position of bisexuality in exposing the quandary posed in reconciling self-identification and social classification, the former being inherently psychological and the latter being embedded in social definition. Social definitions focus on when specific sexual attractions are identified, psychosocially acknowledged, or acted upon, and when changes in cultural understanding redefine the sexual identity meanings of particular social interactions over time. As Galupo said of herself:

“Despite the real shifts in social context, my identity has remained a constant – even when different dimensions of my experience elicit a classification that appears to others as ever changing, constantly revised, inherently confused and contradictory. It is the lack of specificity in our language and the limits in our conceptualizations of sexuality, however, that fail to simultaneously capture the coexisting dimensions of constancy and fluidity that shape the contours around that which is my identity” (Galupo, 2011, pp. 546).

Bearing in mind the variety of ways of identifying or living as bisexual we did not want to close off explorations of self-identity by imposing a narrow definition of a bisexual

identity on the mothers we wanted to recruit into our study. We wanted participants to tell their own story as they reviewed their self-identity journey. Thus, we sought to interview individuals who either identified as bisexual, or who could speak to a bisexual experience of parenthood, and we sought to encourage participants to prepare and narrate their own life story related to sexual self-identity and parenthood at interview.

### **Life course perspectives**

In taking a post-structural perspective on self-identity we have argued that self-identity is not an essential or constant quality, but a personal interpretation that is constructed within ever changing sociohistorical contexts. However, self-identity is not merely a passive social construction. Developing ideas about the self also become an increasing source of personal agency from childhood through to adulthood in the making, maintaining, and dissolution of relationships (Bandura, 2006). Thus, definitions of self-identity are fluid and dynamic in different social contexts, yet a growing sense of self throughout the life course becomes an important part of interpreting and engaging with different social contexts.

Personal characteristics, immediate social interactions, subcultural, and predominant historical contexts provide arenas and meanings through which the self is interpreted and reinterpreted (Hammack, 2005; Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Self-definitions in particular are mediated by the social meanings assigned by families as family is at the interface between private and public worlds (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1998). Families and peers provide a social network of others with lives linked to a greater or lesser extent with one's own (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Becoming a parent entails linking further into family systems: the parent takes on the responsibility for their child and the parent's connections with other family members change as the parent and others relay expectations of parenthood. However, most family interactions are unlikely to be affirming of a non-heterosexual identity (Patterson,

2000). Friendships and emotionally or sexually intimate relationships also buffer the social meanings interface between the private and the public world and have been identified as a particular site for women's explorations of intimate emotional and sexual feelings for other women and self-definition of sexuality (Morgan & Thompson, 2006).

### **The current study**

The aim of the current qualitative investigation was to explore the way in which bisexual parents came to identify as such and how they structured their sexual and family relationships around parenting. In listening to a life course perspective account from a particular point in an individual life span we expected to hear a portrayal and sequencing of life events around bisexuality that fitted with, or responded to, socioeconomic and cultural circumstances and the social meanings attributed to these (Bengtson, Biblarz & Roberts, 2002). We employed a Labovian narrative analysis to analyze life story interviews. Our approach allowed each participant to structure their own presentation both of self and others within the particular social contexts they had experienced, thus the life stories they told highlighted key points of self-transition over time (Bamberg, 2004).

The main research questions in our study were: How do individuals develop an identity as a bisexual parent or non-heterosexual parent? How are intimate and family relationships conceptualized with respect to this identity? And how do these parenting, family, romantic and sexual identities intertwine over the life course? Thus we analyzed our data to examine: participants' accounts of constructing their bisexual identity and how each participant described their route to parenthood. We considered whether participants described an integrated life story account or gave distinct accounts of romantic and/or sexual relationships and parenting. We also considered whether a sense of current resolution of self-identity projects was conveyed.

## Method

### Participants

Adverts for the UK Bisexuality Parenting Project were posted on a total of eight internet websites, 15 social network groups, and one mailing list. Participants were required to be: over 18 years old, parents of at least one child of any age, and either to identify as a bisexual parent or to relate to a bisexual parenting experience. Recruitment targeted bisexual men and women equally and 14 individuals contacted the researchers. Of these 14 contacts six were not included in sample for the present study as they did not identify as women who were already mothers or they were not available to interview within the study period.

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Page | 8

The sample of eight cisgender women who were interviewed for this study included seven bisexual-identified biological mothers and one lesbian-identified biological mother. All were white British or Irish, engaged in careers in middle class professions (e.g. university academics; theatre and stage professionals; psychotherapists; media professions). All had graduated with at least college degrees and three had PhD qualifications. Table 1 displays a brief family context for each participant in terms of her stated relationship status at the time of interview and her children's ages, together with each participant's pseudonym chosen at interview.

### Procedure

Participants were provided with information about the study and their interest in participating affirmed. A time and place was arranged to conduct their individual interview. Between November 2012 and February 2013 seven individuals from those who contacted the researchers completed a face-to-face interview and one completed a skype<sup>R</sup> interview, lasting

between 1.5-2 hours with the first author. One woman chose to come to university premises for her interview; the others chose to be interviewed at home.

As part of the ethical protocol for the study potential participants looked over the interview questions before consenting to the interview. This prior inspection of the questions meant that participants had begun to structure their life course around telling their sexual identity story in advance of telling this to the interviewer. Participants therefore presented themselves in a pre-considered manner in some ways akin to a written account. Yet the open ended interview format meant that the account was presented to a white woman in her twenties from a different non-English speaking cultural background whom the interviewees had not met previously. After discussing ethical issues and obtaining consent to the audio recording, the interview began with the following invitation to the participant:

I just want you to tell me about how you came to define yourself as a bisexual parent and how this fits with other things that you do and relationships that you have, as if it were a story with a beginning, a middle and how you see your life developing. There is no best way to tell your story, just tell me as much as you feel comfortable in doing. Now, let's hear your story... How did it all begin for you as a bisexual parent?

The interviewer's brief was to sensitively appreciate the accounts given by participants. The interviewer also kept the research focus in mind if the interviewee paused and needed further questions to prompt her to continue her life story. Follow-up questions were asked if necessary to ensure coverage of sexual identity formation history and route to parenting. The interviewer sometimes also prompted the participant to expand on the stories she told about episodes in her life. In particular, the interviewer encouraged the interviewee to reflect on the feelings she had in relation to these stories, the attributions she made about

her experiences, and to consider how circumstances and social attitudes had changed over time.

Each interview was then transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. Subsequently, participants were able to check their transcript, and make any changes they saw appropriate, before the transcript was progressed into the database. The study received ethical clearance from a university Institutional Review Board before commencement.

### **Narrative Analyses**

**Labovian Structural Narrative Analysis.** In the narrative analyses in the present paper we have focused on how interviewees storied their lives to provide us with a structured account of the life events that they saw influencing their personal identity development. In looking for a storied account we sought narrated episodes in the transcripts that had a beginning set in a particular context, a middle (where a personally significant event happened) and an ending (usually indicating the way the participant saw their life changing subsequently).

We used Labov's structural narrative analysis method to analyse the storied accounts we identified in the transcripts (Labov, 1972, Labov, 1997; Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997; Patterson, 2008). Labovian structural narrative analysis has delineated six sequential elements that can potentially be seen in personal narrative accounts: abstract (summary, introduction or overview), orientation (setting: time, localisation, protagonists), complicating action (a significant event that initiates the story), evaluation (the narrator's comments, interpretations or emotions), resolution (outcome), and coda (end and present consequences of the story). However, any interview may contain additional statements that are not part of the narrated personal stories and narrated stories may not always be replete with all six Labovian elements (Bruner, 1991). For example, the narrator of the story may run the abstract and the orientation together. Likewise the narrator may include only a brief note of the point or implication of

the story by way of an evaluation, resolution, or coda. In Table 2 we have given an example of our Labovian analysis of one micro-story in one of our participant's interviews (Elena's storied account of self-identifying as bisexual).

In the interest of parsimony we have presented truncated transcript extracts from the micro-stories participants related to illustrate the findings below. Therefore the full development of Labovian sequences evident in the transcript is not always present in the brief quotes presented. In the extracts below brief pauses have been indicated with ..., truncation with (...), while text summarized or disguised by the authors has been indicated thus [xx].

**Narrative Analysis Procedure.** Initially the interviewer (lead author) wrote an overall life-story summary (macro-story) of each interview as soon as possible after completing the interview. She then transcribed each interview and read the interview a number of times before reviewing the macro-story and making amendments to this. Following the life-story interview format requested at interview, participants' macro-stories generally kept to a chronological framework with a beginning, middle, and an end point consisting of an evaluation of where the participant saw herself currently and perhaps her thoughts about possible future developments. After completing the macro-account, the lead author focused her analyses on identifying the different episodes that the interviewee denoted in their interview (micro-stories). Both the macro-story and micro-stories were analysed using Labovian story analysis described above.

The second author read each of the transcripts and then commented on the macro- and micro-stories the first author had identified. The authors then met for about an hour to discuss each interview analyses and transcript to agree on the final narrative analyses macro- and micro-stories.

Subsequently an independent audit of the final narrative analyses was conducted by an experienced qualitative researcher who was unconnected with the research project (Riessman, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Analyses notes from the Labovian analyses alongside the transcripts were audited and only confirmed findings are presented below.

### **Findings**

Findings from the narrative analyses were of three different types. The first set of findings detailed below focus on the narrated self-identity projects that were apparent in the interview transcripts: the construction of a positive bisexual identity, involvement in romantic and sexual relationships, and entry into parenthood.

The second set of findings detailed the way participants integrated their varied narrated self-identity projects within their overall life story account, or whether particular identities were told as separate narrative pieces so creating distinct accounts of different self-identity aspects. In the integrated identity account we considered whether storied episodes of identities were fitted seamlessly into the main narrative form, i.e. the micro narratives were fitted into the macro-narrative in an approximate chronological order. In the distinct identities account micro-narratives could be considered as separate narrative pieces (i.e. micro-stories on the development of particular identities were given as asides that broke up the flow of the macro-narrative).

The third set of findings considered the way in which self-identity micro-stories were told within each account we reflected on the extent of identity resolution conveyed or whether particular identity micro-stories appeared to be left hanging or unresolved. Here we looked for instances in the micro-stories where the tale being told was left unfinished: where participants appeared to lose the point of the micro-story they were telling (seen in repeated

hesitations often followed by a request to be reminded of the question to be addressed).

Hobbs and Agar (1985) have labelled these instances as associative slides, where the speaker's attention to their global conversational plan lapses and the speaker appears to have become lost in a local train of thought, which they may or may not acknowledge to others.

### **Narrated self-identity projects**

**Construction of sexual self-identity.** All narratives contained a series of micro-stories indicating that their construction of a sexual self-identity was seen by participants as a process. Participants varied in whether they had experienced their journey to their current identity as easier or more difficult over time, but all conveyed positive feelings about their sexual self-identity.

Through their progression towards a positive and affirmed bisexual identity, some participants reported having briefly identified as a lesbian on the basis of their sexual attraction to someone of the same gender. However, Andrea, Elena and Lynn experienced their lesbian identification as stressful and not entirely of their own choice. For example, during Elena's interview she described periods of self-identifying as a lesbian because she had not thought it possible to be other than monosexual (see interview transcript extract displayed in Table 2).

Elena also reported that negative stereotypes of bisexuality and the absence of positive bisexual representations in the mainstream media or literature had complicated her questioning. Alongside the negative media portrayal of bisexuality, Elena pointed to the benefits of spotting someone "like me" to identify with. Elena said: *"[bisexuality] had such a negative portrayal in the media that I probably didn't want to think (...) And then there was that bisexual person in [a British tv show]. I suppose having a positive role model made me think: "Oh maybe this is not, not just deviants and sex addicts".*

Other participants similarly described broader social contexts pushing them to adopt a monosexual identity. Suzie noted being attracted to women during her adolescent years, but she was pleased to find that she also enjoyed men as she feared the consequences in her local neighbourhood if she was seen to be lesbian: *“I was apprehensive when it came to the fact that I seemed to find women attractive as anyone who was openly gay back then was bullied. So I came to the conclusion, after having several boyfriends, that... I enjoyed guys, therefore clearly I couldn't be gay.”*

Participants also related experiences of biphobia within the feminist movements and GLBTQ communities. For example, Carrie said: *“Interestingly the most vicious negativity has always come from lesbian women ... We were a group in a Pride March and we were spat at by a group of lesbians because we had a “Bi Women Group” banner with us.”*

Divergences appeared in Suzie and Elizabeth's sexual identity narratives, because unlike other participants they spoke more of their sexual self-identity project taking place during their adult rather than adolescent years. Having dismissed her early attractions to women Suzie had constructed her identity as “not gay”, gone on to marry a man, and had become a mother before she considered the possibility of a bisexual identity. Her maturity as an adult and a parent may possibly have helped to give her the security to recognize fully the same-sex desires that she had previously been apprehensive about as an adolescent:

*Suzie [when she was 30, married and a mother]: I had a dream one night about sex with another woman. And then I had another one a couple of nights later. And so I was thinking: “Okay, now I need to look more into what my dreams are trying to tell me.” And while surfing on the web I discovered there was a word for the feelings that I'd been feeling for many years and that was 'bisexual or bicurious'. (...) And there*

*was a bisexual event in a city nearby (...) that was the day when I was “Yes, I definitely am bisexual.”*

Elizabeth’s narrative concerning the construction of her sexual self-identity followed a different pathway. She identified as a lesbian during her interview and had felt comfortable with this self-definition since she first defined her sexual identity during her adolescent years. Elizabeth had become a single parent through using a gay friend as sperm donor and subsequently entered a relationship with him. Thus, while her current sexual relationship was with a man, she still mainly defined as lesbian. Elizabeth seemed at ease with this questioning and seemed to have reached a state of resolution where identity mattered but her daily practice did not have to concur with her self-identity.

*Elizabeth: I don’t know if I do identify as a bisexual parent. I think in terms of my practices I am. I suppose. But I came out as a lesbian when I was 16 and that’s how I’ve always seen myself. And I don’t necessarily not see myself in that anymore. But I am in this relationship with a man. So... hum... now... I don’t know. Oh this business of identity is such a funny one! (...) These are things that are politically enormously important and have shaped my experience in the world... about having lived most of my adult life identifying publicly as a lesbian. That experience matters.*

**Romantic relationship and parenthood.** For most of our participants their involvement in a romantic relationship preceded the emergence of a parenting desire. Nevertheless two women had followed different pathways to parenthood. Elizabeth, whose narrative we described above, and Laura who identified as bisexual, planned to co-parent with her gay friend, and then began a sexual and romantic relationship with him.

The other six women became parents within the context of a romantic relationship in each case with a male partner. In these cases desire for parenthood and partnership were to a

greater or lesser extent intertwined, although not necessarily contingent on having a male partner. For example, Carrie and Elena each explained the difference that historical social context might have had on the development of their desire for parenthood and partnership. They both answered a similar prompting question from the interviewer asking: “Do you think wanting children has had any influence on your choice of a partner?” Each of their answers could be understood in relation to the sociocultural context in which they became a mother. For example, Carrie had given birth to her first child in the early 1990’s and Elena post-2010.

*Carrie: I think it influenced a bit. I think it did a little bit because it was just a little bit easier. So ... not entirely because I was genuinely in love with my partner, who then became my husband... hum... and we were really happy. (...) But I still think that was probably... I had more relationships with men than I did with women. I think it was easier to find a partner of the opposite sex because the social environment was set up for that.*

*Elena: No... I don't think so. Up the time when we started going out I had mostly been in relationships with girls... And so... it wasn't like a conscious decision: “I want to have a baby so I need to find a man” or anything like that. I think I would have had kids anyway even if I had ended up in a long-term relationship with a woman.*

Andrea’s romantic history and path to parenthood involved different successive partners. She emphasised the fact that like other bisexual people she knew she had previously had several relationships in the past where the possibility of parenting had been considered. The “ticking of Andrea’s biological clock” could be seen as priming her involvement in a romantic relationship in which parenting was definitely on the agenda.

*Andrea: And I had this lesbian relationship. (...) This woman and I talked about having kids but we didn't really get any further with it. And then we split up. But this*

*thing about kids was still in my mind. (...) because by this point I was almost 30. And obviously as a female there was that biological clock. (...) And then... It was always there as an issue... wanting to have kids. I mean whoever I was involved with I was always thinking: Is it somebody who might want to have a family with me? (...) So anyway I met the father of my child not that long afterwards. He's not bisexual. He's straight. We fell in love and we had a really nice relationship for a few months. (...) And then we moved in together. And we both wanted to have kids.*

### **Narrative construction: integration or distinction of complex identity projects**

In the way they told their stories, participants either concentrated on telling one main integrated or unified narrative form or told distinct stories using narrative forms focused on different self-identity content domains (namely parenting, family, romantic and/or sexual, and professional domains). These distinct narrative forms, or structures, provided an opportunity to compare the ways in which participants had been able to manage and connect both their experiences of bisexuality and parenting, giving rich insights into the construction of different multidimensional and complex self-identities.

For three participants (Andrea, Laura and Lynn) one integrated narrative form could be identified in the way they told their stories. Their narratives mostly followed chronological linkages and few prompts from the interviewer were required since their story-telling was well-constructed and coherent. They offered numerous details as well as explanations and self-reflections on their own stories, but these occurred mostly at the end of a telling of a Labovian episode (within the evaluation or coda sections of their micro-stories). Their discourses included as well some non-narrative pieces where they expressed opinions or thoughts concerning some bisexual or parenting issues. Whilst the construction of their bisexual identity happened prior to the construction of a parenting identity in the chronology

of their lives, it would be difficult to interpret these different time periods as two distinct narratives in the way they told their stories. For these women their questioning concerning their bisexual identity, as well as their romantic involvements and expectations, appeared to be strongly linked with the evolution of their parenting desire, and then with the shape of their parenting experience. Their sexual, romantic, parenting and often their professional careers seemed to intertwine in an inclusive and complex single self-identity. For example, Laura's interview started with her giving the following orientation to her bisexual parenting career:

*Laura: So I was a lesbian, and he was my best gay mate. And then I think I came out as bisexual... a few years before, he came, moved in with me... as a friend, ahh, he was, was work, got, a job in [city], moved to [city], he used to live in another city before that, I used to go and stay with him there. Never occurred to either of us, I don't think, that we might have relationship potential, we just, we were just good friends. And erm (pause)... yeah I mean gradually, we lived together well. (...) And then, we, we were talking about parenting. We, we talked, we have a conversation going round about parenting over a few years... decided we wanted to parent together (long pause)... and one day, spontaneously, had sex. And then I was doing, give me the sperm, come on, come on. And he's going, well let's, well hang on, let's see if we've got a relationship, and I'm, doh, doh, doh, just, just, let's get on with the baby bit... (...) we waited a few months (laughs). And then I got pregnant straight away... Um... and that was [over a decade] ago.*

For the other five participants, distinct narrative pieces could be identified in the way they told their stories in parts. As was the case with participants giving a main narrative form, participants giving distinct narrative forms also mainly grounded their stories within their own life course chronology and this helped to make their life course story a coherent and

comprehensive account. However, distinct narrative forms could be seen in parenthesis or flashbacks, aside from the main thread of the tale that was being said at the time. Thus, sub-narratives could be identified in the form of concrete episodes or dialogues.

Transcripts from participants who told their accounts in distinct narrative forms usually contained two (and occasionally three) separate narrative pieces. The first piece concerned the construction of a bisexual identity, which had more or less reached its resolution before the beginning of the second narrative piece. The second narrative piece concerned the development of the participant's parenting life and identity. For example, Barbara had chosen to keep her romantic and sexual life separate from her parenting and family life in practice. Two distinct narrative forms emerged from the way Barbara told the story of her romantic and sexual relationships and of her family life. Barbara had shared a romantic relationship with her children's father until recently, thus making him her romantic and co-parenting partner. Nevertheless, the way she structured her story revealed that she generally perceived her parenting and romantic or sexual involvements as separate, although she clearly perceived a need to be honest with her male partner and her children about her involvement in other relationships. Barbara, like other participants in our sample, also effectively put on hold having a sexual relationship with anyone other than the father of her children when her children were young.

*Barbara: The father of my two children... When I started seeing him I did tell him that I was not looking for a relationship and he knew I wanted children. Nonetheless it was an accident when I did get pregnant. And I did not expect him to stay around, but he did anyway. He did stay around until both children went to university, so... good for him! (laughs) (...) I didn't have any other relationships with other people when they were small, not until they were teenagers. And actually when they were teenagers, before I started another relationship, I checked it out with my... with their*

*father, my partner at the time, to say “This is what I’m thinking of doing, what do you think about that?” And at the time he was fine. And the next thing was to say, first to my daughter (...) “I am going to be seeing someone, so... How do you feel about that?” And well... I made sure to say “It doesn’t change anything about our home life, it doesn’t mean that your dad is going to move out or anything like that”.*

A third narrative piece also could be identified in the life course stories of two participants and this concerned the construction of a romantic relationship. This shorter narrative piece concerning a romantic relationship was used in both Elena’s and Suzie’s story-telling as a bridge between the construction of their bisexual identity and the construction of their parenting one. In the extract below Elena’s husband is indicated as the bridge between her two self-identity narratives, yet despite being solely in a sexual relationship with a man for several years Elena reiterates and emphasizes her bisexual self-definition.

*Interviewer: So how have you come from that point... being 17 and finally identifying as bisexual... how have you come to define as you define today?*

*Elena: Well... let me see... I met my husband eight years ago. So... I’ve been with him since then but I still... always identify as bisexual so (...) I finished my [degree]. And then we got married. And then we started trying for a baby.*

### **Narrative Construction: Conveying a sense of resolution of identity projects**

All participants appeared to have reached a state of resolution concerning the construction of a positive bisexual identity (or in Elizabeth’s case, a positive lesbian identity including as she said her bisexual parenting experience and practices). Most of them also could be considered as having reached a state of settlement and resolution concerning the

way they managed both their parenting and sexual/romantic identities in their everyday lives. For example, Andrea's perspective on her future seemed to indicate a feeling of contented culmination regarding her identity projects, while she also hoped for further developments of existing projects as her life continued.

*Andrea: I think my son will gradually grow away from me... as he becomes more independent actually. I might get involved in parenting other kids. I have been thinking about fostering (...) I feel that I have more parenting energy to give. I like being a parent. I find that very fulfilling. (...) And... I've come out of this period that I had post-breakup where I didn't really have the space to engage romantically with anyone because I was too busy just trying to parent. And I don't think that's the case anymore. I do have the space now... to be blunt before I get too old I would like to have a romantic life! (laughs).*

Nevertheless, the experiences and questioning that Elena and Lynn shared during their interviews revealed a less resolved sense of their romantic/sexual identities and their parenting within our life story interview framework, seen in occasional fragmented narrative segments generated by associative slides where the thread of the story was lost. For example, Elena seemed at some points in the interview to be so preoccupied with parenting that it was difficult for her to engage with and keep track of the other identity stories that she had begun to narrate. And rather than giving a reflected upon life story during the interview, Lynn at points during the interview appeared to be engaged in an intense questioning of her life course and future direction and was perhaps using the uninterrupted opportunity of the interview to think about her self-identity.

*Lynn: I feel... not completely... but I do feel at least a little bit liberated from the... hum... obsessive kind of... my obsessive kind of sexual... hum... I mean that was just*

*the whole way that my life was... hand out... that I'd be falling in love or being sexually obsessed with people... So... hum... hum... I... I... d-don't know but I do know that I can't see that I would ever not identify myself as bisexual because it's the whole of my... it's the way... the whole of my life has been... kind of... perceived in that way. (...) Okay... What was the question again? (laughs) Where do I see myself going? Yeah... Like I said before I'm more interested in friendships these days. And in kind of... my own creativity. (...). So... that's... how I see it evolving... hum... but you know... I suppose... I can't... I... I mean it's really hard to... it's t-too hypothetical to know how...*

### **Discussion**

Our participants were able to allow both their experiences of bisexuality and parenting to coexist in a positive story of the development of compatible identities. For three participants, one main narrative form could be identified in the way they told their story as component identity projects intertwined in an inclusive and complex identity. For the other five participants, distinct narrative forms focused on bisexual identity and parenting could be identified in the way they told their stories. Participants accorded different significance at various periods in their lives to various component identity projects: the construction of a bisexual identity, their involvement in romantic relationships, and the evolution of their desire to parent. Consistent with a life course perspective, how various identity projects progressed, faltered, or paused was explained with reference to the psychosocial contexts participants experienced over their lifetimes.

Participants reported creative ideas arising from their self-awareness of attractions to both genders, but potential life course pathways flowing from their identification of these attractions were often obstructed by social pressures to be heterosexual or at least

monosexual. Findings from our study seemed to indicate that traditional sexual identity formation models, such as those of Cass or Troiden (Cass, 1979, 1990; Troiden, 1979, 1989), would have constrained the lived experiences of our participants. Our interview data also indicated that at a societal level pressure came from media portrayals of bisexual people, while at a local level it came from peer incredulity or from adolescent peer pressure for young women to have a boyfriend. Some participants also experienced having attractions and crushes on both genders as being confusing and stressful because they had expected to develop a monosexual identity. Hostility toward bisexual women also was recounted by participants who had been involved in feminist or lesbian groups. In these respects our findings concur with those reviewed by Ross and Dobinson (2013) on the dual pressures on bisexual identity from both heteronormative and homonormative sources.

A life course perspective framework can be used to contextualize our results. Our findings illustrate how bisexual women's lives are nested within the context of their immediate social environment: as girls during childhood within their circle of family and friends, from adolescence onwards as women in partnerships that entailed varying degrees of loyalty, commitment, and exclusivity, and also as mothers with children for whom they had responsibility. These immediate social environments suggested opportunities to our participants or constrained their sense of personal agency within the boundaries imposed by lives linked to their own that were situated within a particular historical social context. For example, as Carrie's and Elena's different perspectives suggested opportunities for same-sex parenthood could be more or less readily indicated or shutdown within the overarching sociohistorical context through which they lived: "Culture offers the landscape in which sexual orientation develops" (Hammack, 2005: 282). Hammack and Cohler (2009) have emphasized identity as a process of reciprocal narrative engagement between the individual and their historical social context. We only have individual interviews, which necessarily has

limited our consideration of interactive engagement. Dyadic or systemic data, including the perspectives of potential partner(s), co-parent(s) and children would provide additional opportunities for understanding of the experiences and processes of bisexual parenting, particularly in how relationships are negotiated or constrained interpersonally.

The apparent state of identity resolution in much of the material presented by most participants in their narratives indicated that these bisexual mothers had been ready to share their stories and were generally positive about them. Our pre-presented interview schedule no doubt encouraged a reflective approach to narrative and possibly allowed participants more time to frame positive coherent accounts prior to their interviews. Nevertheless, our ability to track processes was limited by data collection at a single point in time and participants' identity projects will necessarily evolve with subsequent changes over the life course. As Hammack (2005) has suggested prospective longitudinal research would effectively track well-being and identity.

For the seven mothers in our sample who identified as bisexual, their sexual self-definition gave a sense of personal agency as it served as a signpost that suggested different directions to them, some of which were obscured within their proximal social context. A sense of personal agency from a bisexual self-definition manifested in various ways in different lives. For example, for some participants like Suzie it prompted them to make contact with other bisexual women and men. Intriguingly the importance of self-identity also was highlighted in the sample by Elizabeth, who spoke to an experience of bisexual parenthood but did not herself identify as bisexual. Elizabeth was in a committed long-term romantic and sexual relationship with her children's father, but Elizabeth emphasized that she had consistently self-identified as lesbian. As Galupo (2011) described a sense of self-identity represents continuity in a socially shifting landscape which self and others interpreted in various and often different ways.

When viewed from the phenomenological perspective that we have taken, it seems that the identity of our participants is not simply seen in their performances as narrated but as a personal guiding resource for them. Cohler and Hammack have described personal identity as “a product of linguistic possibility” (Cohler & Hammack 2009: 454). We would also see narrated identity as a personal resource for prospective engagement too. In considering an interdisciplinary framework for personal identity formation Côté (1996) postulated a culture-identity link and from this proposed the concept of identity-capital to suggest how individuals strive to achieve self-fulfilment in late-modern societies. Identity-capital is seen as a psychological resource assembled from the evaluation and re-evaluation of personal commitments to others, objects, or ideas to generate a developing self-image through which to interpret the array of opportunities on offer in the perceived social environment.

Nonetheless it is important not to reify the remembered self, i.e. to see it as more than an evolving psychological resource within an inherently relational perspective (Gergen & Gergen, 2006). The eight self-identities glimpsed in this paper were after all constructed by interviewees in response to the study interview and no doubt enhanced by our search for life-story coherence during the various stages of our narrative analyses. As such the narratives are teleological accounts not causal accounts. We have no method of independently assessing the events presented, or even evaluating the presence or absence of the biographical identity resolution or tension depicted. Williams wrote of his interviewees: “Their pasts were the pasts of those presents in which they were interviewed” (Williams, 1984:198). It is useful to keep in mind, as Barclay (1994) has argued, that different views of the self are constructed when autobiographical memories are re-assembled in social interaction. These created protoselves as Barclay has called them are referenced by the past, improvised in the present and can suggest possible innovations for the future. Thus, the usefulness of narrative

accounts seems to stand or fail not on their veracity but on their verisimilitude (Bruner, 1991).

### **Conclusion**

Life story interviews with our participants and our Labovian narrative analyses have foregrounded the ebb and flow of particular identity projects across women's life courses to enable the development of compatible identities into bisexual motherhood. Thus, our study has contributed a retrospective but process related approach to considering self-identity construction among bisexual mothers. Our findings point to a diversity of pathways and processing of lived experiences in the course of self-identifying as a bisexual mother. While some women chose to keep their romantic and sexual life separate from their parenting and family life, others chose to allow a connection between these two parts of their lives and identities. Nevertheless, all participants seemed to structure their story-telling and narrative forms in a way that coherently combined these different components of their identity.

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**Table 1. Participant information.**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age range (years)</b>	<b>Relationship status as given by participant</b>
Elena	20-29	Married to a male partner, dated women previously
Suzie	30-39	Married to a male partner, casually dating women
Elizabeth	40-49	Living with male partner
Laura	40-49	Living with a male partner and in a casual relationship with a male partner
Andrea	40-49	Single, casual sexual relationship with a male partner, intimate non-sexual friendship with partner
Carrie	40-49	Divorced from a male partner, living with a female partner
Barbara	50-59	Single, casual relationship (partner's gender unknown)
Lynn	50-59	Married a male partner, dated women previously

Table 2. Example interview transcript extract detailing Labovian sequential elements for micro-story analysis.

Labovian Element	Micro-story Elena's storied account of self-identifying as bisexual
Abstract	Interviewer ... how did you first became aware of your feelings or attractions towards both genders? Elena: Hum... I don't know... I was probably under 10... like... I can't... If I remember quite far back I... (...)
Orientation	I remember being quite young and... hum... and... obviously it wasn't about... sex ... maybe I was 7 or 8 (...),
Complicating Action	and I remember asking [my friend]: "Will I marry a man or a woman?" and she was like: "What?! What are you talking about? Are you insane?" (...)
Evaluation	I remember having childhood crushes on both males and females. It was kind of a developing stage. (...) from when I was 12 or 11, I was kind of going back and forth (...) it was quite stressful to just be getting to the point where you're like "Okay, I'm lesbian" and then from that to flip over and... "Oh no! I'm not... I fancy that boy, I can't be a lesbian!" That's quite stressful... maybe more stressful than just identifying as gay or lesbian because every time you think you got your head straight, it just gets stranger. (...)
Resolution	And then I realised when I was 17: "Hang out, I'm bisexual". It was actually a huge relief.
Coda	I remember writing in my diary: "Oh my god, how did this not occur to me before?!" (laughs).