

WOMEN'S RATIONALES AND PERSPECTIVES ON "MOSTLY" AS A NON-
EXCLUSIVE SEXUAL IDENTITY LABEL

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Abstract

The sexuality labels of "mostly straight" and "mostly gay" are used by men to understand their non-exclusive sexualities, yet the value of these labels in understanding women's sexuality has not been investigated. The current qualitative study addresses this issue by examining how women with non-exclusive sexualities view the term "mostly" to understand their sexual desires and identities and explores their experiences as women with non-exclusive sexualities. Participants were 30 cis-gendered women who indicated having gender non-exclusive desires, yet did not identify as bisexual. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted and analysed using thematic analysis. Participants reported mostly lesbian and mostly straight identities as meaningfully different to bisexual identities, citing sexual, romantic and intellectual reasons as rationales for their non-exclusive orientations. Participants viewed "mostly" as more indicative of sexuality as a fluid construct, serving to de-emphasize sexual identity labels. Participants' narratives support the notion that sexual identity labels "mostly lesbian" and "mostly straight" are useful to understand non-exclusive sexual desires and provides support for sexuality understood as a continuum interpreted through multiple overlapping categories. Implications for the understanding of women's sexuality as fluid and flexible and how this relates more broadly to their identity are considered.

Keywords: bisexuality, heterosexuality, homosexuality, sexual identity, sexual orientation.

Public significance statement: The study uses the experiences of women who identify as sexually non-exclusive to provide support for the sexuality labels of "mostly straight" and

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"mostly lesbian". Participants highlight complex rationales behind identifying as sexually non-exclusive, describe how identifying as sexually non-exclusive differs from bisexuality and provide support for the sexuality label of mostly. The study provides support for sexual fluidity and for sexuality understood as a continuum with multiple overlapping categories.

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An enduring debate within sexology is whether sexuality is a tripartite model of sexuality with distinct categories (straight, bisexual, gay) or a continuum on which individuals place themselves and interpret their desires through overlapping categories (see Bailey et al., 2016; Gangestad, Bailey & Martin, 2000; Savin-Williams, 2014). The categorical and continuum approaches are often difficult to distinguish, not least because the Kinsey 7-point scale is regularly used to assess sexuality by proponents of both approaches, with participants then classified into one of normally three categories in the categorical model (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). The emergence of "mostly gay" (predominant attraction to the same sex, but with some attraction toward the non-same sex) and "mostly straight" (predominant attraction to the different sex, but with some attraction toward the same sex) as sexuality categories has been a useful intervention in these debates (Savin-Williams, 2018; Semon, Hsu, Rosenthal & Bailey, 2017) and have brought renewed consideration of the Kinsey scale in contemporary sexuality research.

People classified as "mostly straight," effectively Kinsey 1s, have unique behavioural patterns, physiological reactions and self-report characteristics (Thompson & Morgan, 2008; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012), with people classified as "mostly gay", effectively Kinsey 5s, also having unique characteristics on the gay end of the sexuality spectrum (Savin-Williams, Cash, McCormack & Rieger, 2017). Despite being categories, "mostly" labels support a continuum approach to understanding sexuality because of the significant diversity that occurs within them (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Savin-Williams et al., 2017), supporting the contention that sexual identity categories are social constructs by which people make sense of their diverse sexual and romantic desires (Plummer, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2014; Weeks, 1985). This narrative approach whereby people make sense of their sexual selves through stories and narratives (Hammack & Cohler, 2009) is one reason why

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qualitative interviews are an important methodological tool in assessing sexuality, particularly when used alongside other measures (McCormack & Savin-Williams, 2018; Weinrich, 2014).

Incorporating terms such as heteroflexible, research on "mostly" categories has also emphasized the importance of socio-cultural factors in understanding sexuality (Carillo & Hoffman, 2018; Scoats, Joseph & Anderson, 2018). In their qualitative study of young men with non-exclusive sexualities (i.e. men who do not identify as either *exclusively* straight or gay), McCormack and Savin-Williams (2018) found that, in addition to sexual and affectional components of sexuality consistent with the existing literature, cultural and intellectual issues influenced how some young men on the gay side of the sexuality spectrum negotiate sexuality labels. Here, they highlight the importance of recognising the influence of social context in how mostly sexualities are processed intellectually (see also Plummer, 2015). Their exploratory research provides important insight into how young men process non-exclusive desires through sexual, emotional, internalised homophobic and intellectual rationales; yet, their focus on the participants' rationales for adopting particular categories meant that other issues – such as perspectives on fluidity, and the role of gender – are alluded to but not studied systematically.

An interesting component of the emergent research in "mostly" categories is the concentration of research on men (e.g. McCormack and Wignall, 2017; McCormack, 2018; Savin-Williams, 2017) rather than women (see Thompson and Morgan (2008) as a key exception). This may be an effect of prior beliefs that heterosexual men are less open to sexual non-exclusivity than heterosexual women (Anderson, 2008), or it could be an ecological effect of how men report their non-exclusive sexual practices in research. One critique of the mostly label as applied to men is that it can structure men into reporting more

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categorical understandings of sexuality, rather than viewing sexuality as a continuum; other terms, such as "heteroflexibility" or fluidity, can create a different emphasis on sexuality as less categorical (Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018).

The use of "fluidity" as a term to explain women's sexual practice while "mostly" labels used primarily for men's practice can be seen to re-inscribe this gendered divide. Yet, it is important to recognize the multiple meanings attached to fluidity. Savin-Williams (2017) documents three key forms: increased attraction to one's non-preferred sex (e.g. heterosexual men having sexual desires for other men); erotic response that changes by context; and erotic response that changes over time (see also Diamond, 2008b). Each of these forms also relates to the "mostly" categories (Savin-Williams, 2017), suggesting that fluidity and "mostly" categorizations are different ways of conceptualizing similar phenomena.

Our interest in the "mostly" labels of sexuality for the current study seeks to connect how people with non-exclusive sexual orientations negotiate this beyond the label of "bisexual" with contemporary debates about the categorical or continuous nature of sexuality. Growing research has explicitly used the language of fluidity in men (Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018; Katz-Wise, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2017), and in the current study, we address the relative lack of qualitative research on how women understand and engage with the mostly label and situate these findings in research on mostly more broadly. In the current social context where there is a growth in labels used by individuals to understand their sexualities (see Morandini, Blaszczynski & Dar-Nimrod, 2017; White, Moller, Ivcevic & Brackett, 2018), and where existing labels are seen as restrictive and inadequate (Galupo, Henise, & Mercer 2016), the aim of the current study is to qualitatively explore the utility of "mostly" labels. Indeed, we now turn to research on women's sexual fluidity to understand the broader context in which the mostly label may be used by women.

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Perspectives on non-exclusive sexualities in women

The great majority of research on women with non-exclusive sexualities has used the label bisexuality. Bisexuality is commonly understood to mean equal attraction to men and women; yet bisexual identification is a complex process and differs between individuals (Galupo, Ramirez & Pulice-Farrow 2017; Shepherd, 2019). Bisexuality is often not viewed as a legitimate long-term stable sexual identity and can be ignored or denied by both bisexuals and non-bisexuals (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Gonzalez, Ramirez & Galupo, 2017; Hayfield & Jowett, 2017); this is a potential consequence of the privileging of monogamism and highlights the need for diverse understandings of sexual relationships (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Hammack, Frost & Hughes, 2019). Relatedly, bisexual women report more mental health issues than straight or lesbian women (Ross et al., 2018), have higher alcohol consumption (Fish, Watson, Porta, Russell & Saewyc, 2017) and experience stigma when accessing some mental health services (Page, 2004). Similarities also exist between the experiences of bisexual women and sexually non-exclusive women who do not adopt identity labels (Galupo, Mitchell & Davis, 2015). Exploring sexual identity patterns for lesbian, bisexual and unlabelled women, Brooks and Quina (2009) found bisexual and unlabelled women were both more person-focused in their sexual attractions with the partner's sex/gender seen as less important compared to lesbians, with similar understandings of their sexual orientation.

Complex personal and cultural factors have led women to adopt fluid sexual identities and practices at various times (Baumeister, 2000; Rust, 1993). Exemplifying this, Diamond (2008a) studied 79 lesbian, bisexual and unlabelled women over a 10-year period, conducting biennial interviews to document shifts in sexuality. At the end of the research, 67% of

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participants had changed their sexual identity at least once, with 36% changing their sexual identity label twice. Discussing these changes, Diamond (2008b: 68) states:

Women who are drawn to both sexes face a more complex set of issues when adopting an identity label than women with exclusive same-sex attractions and relationships. In order to settle on the 'right' identity, women with nonexclusive attractions have to go beyond just *acknowledging* their same-sex attractions – they must consider exactly how strongly they lean toward women versus men; whether sexual and emotional feelings are equally important; whether behaviour trumps fantasy or vice versa; and whether social networks and ideological beliefs should play a role in their self-identification.

Diamond (2008b: 84-85) conceptualises sexual fluidity to help explain such fluctuations in sexual identity labels, suggesting four tenets to understand women's sexuality: women have a sexual orientation preference, with the majority attracted to men; women have capacity for fluidity (or sensitivity to context); attractions triggered by fluidity can change over time; and not all women are equally fluid. While sexual fluidity is useful in understanding the complexities of women's sexuality, and documenting that sexuality is not purely static, it lacks the meaning that sexual identity labels have for many people (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Indeed, Diamond's (2008b) participants who exhibited sexual fluidity regularly reported their orientation shifting between bisexual and lesbian or heterosexual and they used sexual identity labels to make this shift. Given this, examining the potential benefit of non-exclusive sexual identity categories beyond bisexuality is a worthy endeavour (McCormack & Savin-Williams, 2018).

Partly because of the ground-breaking nature of Diamond's longitudinal study of women's sexuality, sexual fluidity is often primarily associated with changes in sexuality

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over time. Yet this minimizes the other forms of sexual fluidity that exist (see Diamond, 2008b; Savin-Williams, 2017), which is often labelled as bisexual or other similar terms (Galupo et al., 2015). Fluidity (or non-exclusivity) beyond bisexuality is relevant for a significant group of women: in a national probability sample in the U.S., when asked to identify their sexuality using tick boxes, approximately ten percent of the young women chose "mostly heterosexual (straight) but somewhat attracted to people of your same sex" (Udry & Chantala, 2006). A more recent U.S. survey found 5% of women (380 of 2175) identified as "heteroflexible" (Legate & Rogge, 2019). Yet, this research investigates how women with sexually non-exclusive desires engage with labels like "mostly" categories. For example, in analysis, participants were either grouped with those who identified as exclusively straight (Udry & Chantala, 2006). While other research explores differences between mostly straight and exclusively straight individuals on a range of measures (e.g. Calzo, Masyn, Austin, Jun & Corliss, 2016; Lorenz, 2019) or the life histories of heterosexual and non-heterosexual women (e.g. Luoto, Krams & Rantala, 2019), it does not explore *qualitative* differences.

One notable exception is Thompson and Morgan's (2008) mixed-method exploratory study that found significant differences in sexual attractions, fantasies and relationships between women classified as exclusively straight, mostly straight and bisexual. In the qualitative component of their study, women who identified as mostly straight described being open to sexual exploration, felt uncertain about their sexual attraction, and had varying levels of confidence in their sexual identity label. Their study provides insight into the experiences of women who identified as mostly straight, although the richness of the qualitative data is limited because of the use of a survey method. An analysis of the developmental patterns of mostly straight compared with lesbian, gay and bisexual

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individuals suggest mostly straight individuals develop their sexual orientation over a longer period of time and often experience different health outcomes (Calzo et al., 2017). Relatedly, women who are attracted to men and women report worse mental health compared with their straight and lesbian counterparts (Persson, Pfaus & Ryder, 2015) and report higher substance misuse (Kuyper & Bos, 2016). Despite this, there remains limited research into the experiences of mostly straight women and understandings of their sexual identity, reflecting a lack of understanding around sexual non-exclusivity more generally (Boislard, van de Bongardt & Blais, 2016; Brooks & Quina, 2009); no existing research explores the experiences of women who identify as mostly lesbian either as a comparison or as a unique sample.

Method

The purpose of this study was to address the gap in the literature on how women with non-exclusive sexualities understand their sexualities and engage with sexuality labels of mostly lesbian and mostly straight. We situate our theoretical framework within the narrative identity approach in developmental psychology, seeking to move beyond sexological approaches of orientation to think about how desires are narrated by the self (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Plummer, 2002). Our focus in this study is on the potential utility of these labels in a broader context of diversification of sexual identity labels at the same time as social science research remains focused on the tripartite model of sexuality (Morandini et al., 2017; Savin-Williams, 2014, 2017; White et al., 2018). To negotiate the complexity in distinguishing sexual orientation and sexual identity (Savin-Williams, 2017) we employed a qualitative approach which explores what participants mean by their sexually non-exclusive label.

Participants

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Data came from semi-structured interviews with 30 cis-gendered women with an age range of 19-65 years (mean = 31.6). All participants reported a non-exclusive sexuality. 17 participants classified themselves as non-exclusive straight and 13 classified themselves as non-exclusive lesbian. Most of the sample were White, with two mixed-race participants. Participants were compensated £20 in vouchers for their time.

Procedure

To ensure diversity in participant experiences, traditional techniques for recruitment of sexual minority individuals were eschewed (see McCormack, 2014). Participants were recruited through adverts on the University of Sunderland institutional and personal social media seeking women who identified as sexually non-exclusive, or mostly straight or mostly lesbian, to take part in academic research. Snowball sampling was also used, and the sample is non-random. Care was taken to ensure that snowballing was limited to no more than three people per individual. The research assistant ensured that most participants came from distinct networks and that the sampling did not rely on any one particular community group.

We did not use scales or classifications to identify mostly straight or mostly lesbian women; instead, determining eligibility according to participants' self-definition. Not all participants had used "mostly" labels prior to the study, but all responded to the advert looking for women with non-exclusive sexualities. Participants who contacted the research team were provided with information sheets, and informed consent was gained. Interviews were mostly conducted in person, with three conducted over skype, by a research assistant. This was a key way that trustworthiness was established, including this strategic disclosure within the formalised setting of the interview. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used which lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews began with basic demographic information. Questions were oriented around understandings and meanings of a non-

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exclusive sexual identity, differences to bisexual identity, disclosure of sexuality and relationship between sexuality and gender. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed as soon as possible.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the University of Sunderland. All participants signed consent forms prior to the interview, were given opportunities to ask questions throughout and reminded of their right to withdraw. The principles of the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics were adhered to. To preserve anonymity, participants were assigned numbers at the point of data collection and pseudonyms are used in this article.

Analysis

Data were analysed inductively through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved initial coding of the data by the first and second author independently. Potential codes were grouped together to form more focused codes. At this stage, the authors compared their codes for similarity and discussed each one. Focused codes were grouped together into potential themes using mind-maps and referring to the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 88). The themes and relationships between the themes were discussed with the independent research assistant who collected the data, due to her level of immersion in the data. Themes were also compared to the research question to ensure the themes addressed the question. As Braun and Clarke (2006:10) note, "the "keyness" of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question."

The analysis was refined until a consensus was reached between the two authors and the independent research assistant and labels for themes and sub-themes were generated.

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Themes were then compared to the interview transcripts to ensure that they were grounded within the data. It is through this process of ensuring consistency of judgement across coders that inter-rater reliability was assured (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). Two overarching themes were identified: (1) motivations for identification; and (2) exploration of sexual identity labels.

Positionality statement

It's important to consider the influence of the research team's own experiences and our positionality in relation to the study. The authors consist of a White, working class, gay, cisgendered non-disabled male who has previously conducted research with individuals with non-exclusive sexualities, and a White, working class, straight cisgendered non-disabled female. All interviews were conducted by a White, working class, mostly-lesbian cisgendered female. Prior to interviews, we discussed how our combined experiences of sexual minority status, non-exclusive sexuality and gender could influence the questions asked, allow for the diversity in participants' experiences to be explored and how our positionality may impact on the analysis.

Results

Motivations behind non-exclusive sexualities

When asked about their non-exclusive sexuality, participants provided three main rationales: sexual; emotional; and temporal. This theme describes the importance of each of these rationales for participants in justifying their sexual identification.

Sexual rationales

The most common reason for identification with a non-exclusive sexuality was sexual desire. Some participants reported sexual attractions to men and women, but with a stronger intensity toward one sex over another. For example, Laura, mostly straight (MS) aged 39 and

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White, said, "For me, sexual preferences are on a continuum... I've always tended to be toward the straight end of the spectrum, that I feel like it's more of a continuum, that's fluid." Similarly, Aline, mostly lesbian (ML) aged 45 and mixed race, said, "I'd have to think hard about my attraction to a man because it rarely happens. My attraction to women would be predominantly physical. It would be the shape of her body, the way she walks, maybe something she's wearing." Katy, an ML aged 52 and White, used the intensity of her sexual arousal for women to justify her ML label, saying, "It's a weird one because it's who I am... I suppose to put it simply; I look at women on the High Street, while I don't look at men on that level." Gemma, an ML aged 38 and White, indicated increased sexual intensity for men, saying, "I feel... it's complicated to say, but I would say organic attraction is there (toward men) ... it isn't as intense with a woman." Similarly, Alexa, an MS aged 31 and White, said, "My attractions for men and women are definitely both sexual... just to say that male is maybe more immediate, both in terms of actually feeling an attraction, but also where I go to in my head." While these participants indicated other reasons for their non-exclusive sexuality label, their sexual attraction was deemed the most important motivation.

Emotional rationales

Emotional motivations featured in the narratives of all participants, particularly referencing strong emotional connections to women. However, for a minority, their emotional attractions were the primary motivation for their sexual identity label. For example, Rachel, an ML aged 22 and White, said, "I think it's more emotional if you're with a woman... I feel like, because you're the same gender, when you're with another woman, you have more of an idea of what they like or what they want." Similarly, Dawn, an ML aged 39 and White, said:

If I never had sex again, I would still be a lesbian inside, because I want my lover, my best friend and companion to be female. And even if the love or sexual went away, I

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would still seek a female for companionship. So that's what I would define as being lesbian.

When asked why she does not identify as exclusively lesbian, Dawn added, "I do find men attractive to a point, but I would never choose to be in a relationship with one now." The strong emotional bond toward women was also present for MS women, although this tended to be about emotional attraction with minimal sexual desire. For example, Kayleigh, aged 47 and black, said, "When I got into my late 20s, I started to question certain things, because I had a crush on a woman. I knew it was a proper crush, the way I'd had crushes in Junior High School on boys."

Emotional rationales for non-exclusive sexuality were often complex for MS women, including disconnect between sexual and romantic attractions. For example, Jennifer, aged 23 and White, said, "I think I see my sexuality as being sort of in two separate fields, almost, and I think one being the sort of romantic relationship, definitely mostly straight, but in the more sexual orientation, I think I'm mostly lesbian." The importance of current relationships for understanding non-exclusivity were emphasised, with Jennifer adding:

I've managed to make relationships with men last longer and I'm getting married to a man - that's why I would identify myself as mostly straight. But then I've always had much more passionately involved sexual relationships with women so I suppose mostly straight for the - in one regard - but in another, mostly lesbian, so I think I fall into both your categories in different fields.

Using language that re-inscribes a sex binary, Taylor, aged 30 and White, said:

I am pretty much attracted to... the opposite sex, but I also am a little attracted or find myself drawn to women - maybe not necessarily in a sexual way... Women, I'm not necessarily interested in the sexual part to them. I want to get to know them. I don't

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know if that makes any sense, but I'm not necessarily interested in sexual parts.

Mostly I'm just looking to create like a very strong bond with them.

Participants found it easy to talk about their emotional attractions and how this influenced their non-exclusive sexual identity, but found it difficult to make sense of their emotional attractions.

Temporal rationales

Rationales extended beyond sexual and emotional attractions. A small number of participants cited their previous relationships as justification for their sexually non-exclusive desires, stating they could not identify as straight if they had sexual or emotional experiences with their non-preferred sex in the past - relating their sexualities to issues of temporality. For example, Lorraine, an MS aged 21 and White said, "I know from previous experience my sexuality isn't confined to heterosexuality totally." Not wanting to delegitimize previous relationships, Emma, an MS aged 27 and White, said:

I've always been in straight relationships, apart from I had one relationship with a woman for two and a half years, which was totally unexpected. It's not something that I'd really considered before, and it's not something I've really considered since, either. But I can't possibly say that I'm totally straight, when I was in a serious relationship for such a long time.

Similarly, Ellen, an ML aged 56 and White said, "I'm finding it quite a struggle to imagine being sexually attracted to a man again, but having had relationships with men in the past, I don't think I can rule it out concretely." Participants also indicated that their temporal sexuality could relate to future experience and not wanting to close off any future opportunities. For example, Jennifer, an MS aged 23 and White said, "How can I know in the future that I won't swing back round on the dial and go more percentage the other way?"

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Similarly, Rachel, an ML aged 22 and White, when asked if she would continue to identify as ML highlighted an openness to future experiences, saying, "I'm not sure, because I don't know what experiences I'm going to come up against in the future years." Temporal rationales are discussed more in relation to sexual fluidity later on.

Exploring sexual identity labels

When asked about their negotiation of sexual identity labels and experience of disclosing their sexuality, participants commented that they were often presumed to be bisexual by others. This often led to frustration for participants, leading to difficulties in explaining their sexuality. This theme explores the differences between MS/ML and bisexuality, sexuality as fluid, and the eschewing of sexuality labels.

Differentiating from bisexuality

All participants indicated that their non-exclusive desires were not accurately captured by the label "bisexual". Most participants perceived that bisexuality was an even split of attraction (both romantic and sexual) between men and women, whereas their non-exclusiveness included attraction to men and women but with a weighting toward one's preference. Here, sexuality was understood as being on a spectrum with participants placing themselves closer to one end of it than the other. For example, Laura, an MS aged 39 and White, said "I've always tended to be toward the straight end of the spectrum, that I feel [sexuality] is more of a continuum." Understanding sexuality as a spectrum and MS/ML participants positioning themselves near the end of these spectrums was summed up by Chris, an ML aged 27 and White, who said, "I see sexuality as a spectrum, which has exclusively attracted to the same sex [at one end] and exclusively attracted to the opposite sex at the other. I'd place myself at very nearly exclusively attracted to the same sex."

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Other participants framed sexuality as being on a spectrum but used different language to explain the difference. Rather than spectrum, the language of ratios and percentages were used, with weightings attached to them. For example, Aline, an ML aged 45 and White said, "For me, bisexual would be more of a 50:50 tendency toward either gender, whereas mostly lesbian would be about 75% attracted to women rather than men." Abby, an MS aged 20 and White, said:

I think if you're bisexual, it's very equal. You could go from a boy one day, to a girl the next and it would be very equal. But with mostly straight, it's like that little 30% in you that goes "yeah, I like women." But it's the other 70% that's toward men.

Jennifer, an MS aged 23 said, "I think it sort of works in percentages. If you were to say bisexual to me, I think it's 50:50, but if you say mostly straight, I'd sort of see myself on a scale of being 30:70 or 60:40, something like that."

When expanding on the difference between bisexuality and MS/ML, some participants highlighted preferences for emotional relationships with one gender and preferences for sexual relationships with another gender. For example, Sophie, an ML aged 32 and White, said:

When I think of somebody who's bisexual they're definitely attracted to [both genders]. Also, I think usually they could probably have a relationship with someone of the same gender or somebody of [another] gender, whereas for me I don't know that I would be that interested in [a relationship with] somebody of the opposite sex. They might be a fleeting [attraction] rather than lasting.

Similarly, Amée, an MS aged 29 and White, said, "mostly straight or mostly lesbian would be that you prefer to be in relationships with, have sexual relationships with mostly of a particular sex, whereas bisexual is that you don't have that preference." She added, "I would

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naturally seek out men for a relationship, whereas if I was to identify as more in the middle [as bisexual], I suppose, then it would naturally occur with women as well." When asked why she identifies as ML and not bisexual, Dawn, aged 39 and White, said:

Hmm, that's tricky. I think it's about which people I want to spend the rest of my life with... if I was attracted to a man, and potentially fell in love with him, I wouldn't want a relationship with him.

While participants framed sexuality as on a spectrum, they recognised that an individual could place their emotional and sexual attractions at different points along this spectrum. This belief relates to the next sub-theme.

Sexuality as fluid

Related to temporal rationales for non-exclusive sexual orientation, most participants described their sexuality as a fluid construct which has the potential to change either over time or based on context. For example, Amée, an MS aged 29 and White, said, "I don't really see sexuality as falling into categories... I think it's all a bit contextual really... I always think my sexuality identity is a bit fluid." Similarly, Sarah an ML aged 22 and White, recognised the fluidity in her desires saying, "I think I identify [as a ML] because I don't want to label myself, because there's a fluidity there." Rachel, an ML aged 22 and White, highlighted the impact of the environment on her sexuality, saying, "I've not always identified as [ML], I think since I've been at university... because there's a lot more females here, I've tended to go more toward that, especially the societies I've been in." Two participants indicated that it was their monogamous relationship which was the deciding factor in their sexual fluidity, with Tracy, an MS aged 22 and White, saying, "I am in a long-term relationship, so that's the deciding factor", with Aline, an ML aged 45 and White, adding, "now I'm in a committed monogamous relationship, [sexually exploring] isn't

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something that would feature and it's not something that I would want anymore." Here, sexual fluidity was subsumed to monogamous relationships.

Focussing on the change over time, Alexa, an MS aged 31 and White, said there is "a chance her sexuality could shift more toward bisexual." Erin, an MS aged 46 and White, said, "I wouldn't want to predict the future, you know?" Laura, an MS aged 39 and White, summarised this view of sexuality as fluid, saying:

My sexuality had already moved along the spectrum and it wouldn't be something that would surprise me if it changed again, over the course of a life I suppose. I think you change and go with what happens in your life and I wouldn't be.... I wouldn't feel entrenched one way or the other.

Fluidity was experienced by both MS and ML women, with some women placing more emphasis on the contextual shifts compared with temporal shifts.

Valuing "mostly" and eschewing identity labels

Participants for this study were recruited through adverts which advertised for women with non-exclusive sexualities, and then provided more information about what that meant using the terms mostly straight and mostly lesbian. For most participants, this was the first time they had engaged with the mostly label. In discussions, the mostly label was praised as providing an accurate way of reflecting their sexuality. For example, Jay, an MS aged 19 and White, said, "I've never heard the term "mostly straight", but now you've said it, it makes sense, because nine times out of ten, it's men I'm attracted too." Similarly, Rachel, an ML aged 22 and White, had not used the term to describe her sexuality before, but said ML was "an accurate identifier of [her] sexuality." Adding mostly to the sexual identity labels already commonly understood (i.e. straight/lesbian) provided enough information for others to comprehend.

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However, half of participants preferred not to use sexual identity labels or expressed frustration at the predominant sexuality identity labels (straight; bisexual; lesbian). Here, sexuality was viewed as fluid and not defined by labels; yet, there was some recognition that the term MS/ML is a helpful category to explain non-exclusive sexual orientation. For example, Sarah an ML aged 22 and White, said, "I don't see mostly lesbian as a label, it's just a description, because you're not tied down... But it always just comes down to labels, and I just don't want to be one." Gail, an MS aged 37 and White, said:

I'm probably quite open. I've never really categorised myself as one or the other. I've never really thought I'm straight now, but I don't actually like the terms, if that makes sense... It's quite like, you're not quite bi... It's like, why do I have to have labels? Can't I just be accepted as this?

Similarly, Jay an MS aged 19 and White, said, "I don't really give myself a sexual identity label; it's whoever it happens to be at the time really." Sarah, an ML aged 22, when asked why she identified as sexually non-exclusive, said:

I don't want to label myself, because there's a fluidity. I don't want to be straight and I don't want to be lesbian... I don't think it's fair to say either bisexual or pansexual. I just am. I'm [Participant name], I'm me, rather than a label.

Highlighting a trend in youth cultures, Rachel, an ML aged 22 and White, said, "When I came to university, nobody cared about my sexuality, and I was quite open about it. You never really have to define or put a label on anything."

Recognising the practicality of labels, Eleanor, an ML aged 21 and White, said, "It's all hard to distinguish, bisexual or lesbian as terms don't seem right for me. I say that I'm lesbian but even though the word doesn't totally fit, it feels more practical sometimes." Erin, an MS aged 46 and White, said, "I did sort of toy with the bisexual identification, sort of

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about 20 years ago, because it seemed to be the way one had to talk." However, Erin became frustrated with labels eventually, saying, "I became much more comfortable with the idea of, "actually, it's probably more a spectrum" and labels didn't actually matter."

When participants were able to find labels or descriptions that allowed them to explain their sexuality to others, problems were still encountered related to how other people framed their sexuality. For example, Jay, an MS aged 19 and White, said, "I say I'm straight, but I like women too. [Others] then say, oh, you're just bisexual." Similarly, Eleanor, an ML aged 21 and White, said how because of previous relationships "people will assume that I'm bisexual." Participants' non-exclusive sexuality was subsumed within a bisexual label and its associated meanings. For example, when Sarah, an ML aged 22 and White, came out as non-exclusive to others, she stated how, "there were quite negative connotations with it and people assumed you'd just be up for threesomes and stuff like that... because you're bisexual, you're sort of an alien." The assumption of sexual promiscuity related to a non-exclusive sexuality was also highlighted by other participants, with Abby, an MS aged 20 and White, saying that there was an "automatic" assumption of threesomes when she came out to her partner, while Gail, an MS aged 37 and White, said when her partners first reaction when she disclosed was how "he went on about threesomes."

Discussion

The current study has explored the rationales and perspectives of women who identify as either mostly straight or mostly lesbian. Participants described "mostly" as a unique non-exclusive sexual identity differing from heterosexual/lesbian and bisexual. Participants' reasons for a mostly identity were grouped into sexual, emotional and temporal factors. Importantly, participants highlighted the need for recognition of their non-exclusive sexuality, highlighting the utility of mostly as means of achieving this goal. Problematically,

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some participants did this while implicitly re-inscribing a gender binary, referring to the "opposite" sex or gender in their answers (see Galupo et al., 2016). Finally, a broader frustration of using sexual identity labels was highlighted. This frustration can be interpreted as problematic in a context where bisexuality is often stigmatized and not seen as a legitimate sexual identity (Dyar, Lytle, London & Levy, 2017; Jen, 2019), yet this recognition needs to be balanced alongside the evidence that women with non-exclusive sexualities do not find the label "bisexual" accurately describes their sexual and emotional desires (Galupo et al., 2017).

Participant narratives are similar to those described in McCormack and Savin-Williams (2018) study of non-exclusive men. They documented four rationales for identification with a non-exclusive sexuality for men: sexual, romantic, intellectual and internalised homophobia. The current study supports sexual and romantic rationales. There are also clear links between the temporal rationale described by participants and the intellectual rationale described by McCormack and Savin-Williams – both samples discussed previous relationships as justifications for their sexual identity and highlighted potential future changes. Yet the intensity of the women's narratives around past relationships highlighted how central emotionality and affectional components of sexuality were for them—mirroring research on the importance of emotion to women's sexuality (Diamond, 2008b); this contrasts with McCormack and Savin-Williams' participants who focussed more on not limiting themselves intellectually to one sex, particularly after reading queer/feminist scholarship at university. Narratives of internalized homophobia were not present in our sample, and this can partly be explained by levels of homophobia experienced by different sexes (Herek, 1988) and the different geographical contexts.

Participants in this study described their sexuality falling on a spectrum or fluid, mirroring previous research (Diamond, 2008b; Galupo, Davis, Grynkievich & Mitchell,

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2014; Savin-Williams, 2017). Interestingly, the language used by participants to describe their sexuality – of ratios and percentages – uses heuristics that frame sexuality as a continuum, not as categorical. Implicit within participant narratives is a perception of sexuality as a continuum that one can move along, or a scale that is dependent not just on sexual desires but on emotional attractions and personal histories. By focussing on women's sexual fluidity in terms of non-exclusivity, rather than change over time, the potential value of the mostly label was recognized and the literatures on female non-exclusivity and research on mostly sexualities were brought into productive discussion.

Reflective of a broader movement, particularly in youth cultures (McInroy & Craig, 2018; White, Moeller, Ivcevic & Brackett, 2018), some participants expressed frustration in using traditional identity labels. A mostly identity label could provide participants with a more accurate way of representing their desires, yet they still often had to provide an explanation about their sexual identity label, such as differentiating between emotion and sexual attraction. Participants' frustrations and need to provide a description about their sexual identity is reflective of previous research on individuals who identify as sexually non-exclusive (Galupo et al., 2014) and younger generations of bisexuals (McCormack, Wignall and Anderson, 2015). However, eschewing sexual identity labels is an uneven process within society, with some individuals finding power or comfort in a sexual identity label (Hammack et al., 2019); indeed, Budnick (2016) argues that rejecting the queering of identity categories is often done from a position of privilege, connecting with the concern that such positioning can further marginalize bisexuality (see Dyar et al, 2017).

These shifting identifications with identity categories, and the desire to use labels beyond the traditional tripartite model can also be understood through identity process theory (Breakwell, 1986). An integrative framework by which to consider how identity connects

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with social change and social action. One key concept is the assimilation-accommodation process, which refers to "the absorption of new information in the identity structure...and the adjustment which takes place in order for it to become part of the structure" (Jaspal 2014, p. 4). Participants' negotiation of non-exclusive sexualities can be understood as part of this process, with the frustration expressed being part of a coping strategy to deal with the perceived threat of differing from both the heterosexual norm and the tri-partite model of sexuality.

This study provides further support for the need to move beyond a tripartite model of sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2014) which does not account for the complexity of the intersections of sexual and emotional desire which can change over time (Diamond, 2008b). The use of the mostly label (and other similar terms) can be seen as a challenge to the tripartite model of sexuality because it indicates that these categories do not account for participants' experiences of sexual and romantic desire. Given the importance of narratives and story-telling to make sense of sexuality (Plummer, 2002), the mostly labels can be seen as narrative labels by which participants with non-exclusive sexualities make sense of their fluid desires and relationships in a context where the tripartite model of sexuality holds resonance for participants but does not accurately capture their sexualities. By contesting these identity categories and pushing at the boundaries with the "mostly" label, participants are practicing what Cohler and Hammack (2009, p. 453) describe as "narrative engagement" and challenging the master narrative around sexual identity.

The current study is not without its limitations. Given the lack of research into mostly lesbians, this study is exploratory in scope; further research needs to recruit more mostly lesbian women to better understand their experiences, from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Our sample is predominantly White British – more research is needed into the

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experiences of sexually non-exclusive women from a range of ethnic and geographical backgrounds to understand the impact of intersectionality. Our sample had a varied age range; while this can be viewed as a strength, it should also be acknowledged as a limitation given that different age cohorts can experience societal changes differently (see McCormack et al., 2015).

The current study provides the first qualitative insight into the experiences of non-exclusive women who can be classified as mostly lesbian and provides a greater insight into the experiences of non-exclusive women who can be classified as mostly straight. The study identifies motivations for a non-exclusive sexuality label and provides distinctions between bisexuality and a mostly label, emphasising the need to not to amalgamate "mostly" women into either the bisexual category or an exclusive category.

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