‘Coming out, again’: exploring the lives of women who have changed a lesbian or bisexual identity

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Abstract:
It is assumed that once an individual ‘comes out’ as gay, lesbian or bisexual, this identity is permanent. Researchers, however, have challenged understandings of sexualities as fixed and stable as well as the linear models of sexual identity development that underpin this assumption, arguing instead that for some people sexual identity is more fluid and subject to change. While there is some concern that discussions about identity change lend support to claims that homosexuality can be ‘cured’, there is nonetheless evidence that a small number of people do change their sexuality after adopting a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity, either relinquishing their non-heterosexual identity altogether or switching between gay/lesbian and bisexual identities. Using Rust’s theory of identity change as a shift in location or self-description in relation to the sexual landscape (1996), and drawing on interviews with eleven Australian women who once identified as lesbian or bisexual but who have subsequently changed this sexual identity, this paper examines the events that led to this change and how participants articulated these changes in the context of their existing lesbian or bisexual identities.

Introduction
Little is known about the phenomenon Stein calls ‘coming out, again’ (1997: 170) – the practice of relinquishing or changing a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity and having to subsequently ‘come out’ with another sexual identity. This is because it is assumed that once an individual adopts a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity, this identity is permanent. Furthermore, there are concerns that discussions about changes in sexual identity lend support to claims from some groups that homosexuality can be ‘cured’. Nonetheless there is some evidence that a small proportion of those who adopt a gay,
lesbian or bisexual identity do change their sexual identity during the lifespan. Yet few studies have qualitatively explored the lives of those who have had to ‘come out, again’.

The view that gay, lesbian and bisexual identities are permanent originates in understandings of sexual desires and behaviours as natural, stable and resistant to change (Diamond 2005: 120; Kinnish et al. 2005: 173), as well as models of homosexual identity development that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. These models (see for example Cass 1979, 1984; Plummer 1975; and Troiden 1988) constructed the development of a homosexual identity as a linear process, moving from initial internal stages of confusion to later external stages of identity assumption that involve a permanent commitment to the homosexual identity. Therefore, once an individual has ‘come out’ as gay, lesbian or bisexual, it is understood that they will retain this identity for life (Diamond, 2003: 352). However some researchers have challenged the idea of the permanency of sexual identity, claiming that sexual attractions, behaviours and identities are in fact fluid and flexible. Critics of linear models of sexual identity development, furthermore, argue that identity development is rarely predictable or orderly, and that many people skip stages in the process, return to previous stages, or abandon the process entirely and return to identifying as heterosexual (Rust, 1993: 52-53). Others argue that identity development models do not take into account changes in identity such as moving from a homosexual identity to a bisexual identity (Esterberg 1997: 17).

Non-linear models of identity development, however, allow for an acknowledgement of sexual identity fluidity. Paula Rust, in a model that encompasses both identity development and identity change, conceptualises changes in sexual identity as a process of modifying one’s self-description in response to changes in either the location of the self or the socially constructed landscape on which one is located (1996: 66).

Rust describes six different changes in her model, changes that can occur linearly, simultaneously, or sporadically. However, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on two internal motivations for change within this model. The first is a change in location on the sexual landscape, by which changes occur through recognition of new attractions, or new sexual experiences and relationships. The second is in the
accuracy of self-description, such as deciding that a lesbian identity is a more accurate identity after some time identifying as bisexual (Rust, 1996: 68-70, 75).

Although non-linear models of sexual identity development exist and there is some recognition that identity change can happen, there is little research examining the lived experiences of those who have come out again, especially in Australia. The previous research available is mostly longitudinal, quantitative research that maps changes to sexual identity labels over time. In her extensive research on over 400 lesbian and bisexual women, Rust found that 76% of bisexual participants had once identified themselves as lesbian, and 41% of lesbian participants had once identified themselves as bisexual (Rust 1993: 60-61). She also found that many switched back and forth between lesbian and bisexual identities, often several times (Rust 1993: 56). Diamond, who mapped the sexual histories of 80 lesbian and bisexual women aged 18 to 25 over a five year period, found that 48% of the sample had changed their sexual identity between the first and last phase of the research (Diamond 2003: 355). Within the qualitative research, Esterberg recites the stories of several women who have relinquished or changed a lesbian or bisexuality and points to several factors that precipitated that change (1997: 59-68). Stein also devotes some time to discussing the difficulties faced by ‘ex-lesbians’ and concluded that an interaction of factors (internal and external, personal and cultural) contribute to sexual identity change (1997: 180).

Despite the lack of existing research into this area, what is clear is that sexual identities are not necessarily fixed once an individual comes out as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and that linear models of sexual identity formation that posit a ‘static end point’ (Golden, 1997: 161) to the process do not adequately reflect the reality of some women’s lives and sexual histories. In this paper examining the lives of women who have relinquished or changed a lesbian or bisexual identity, I use Rust’s theory of identity change as a shift in location or self-description in relation to the sexual landscape (1996) and demonstrate that despite our understanding that coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual is permanent, some people do and will ‘come out, again’.

The Research

The data presented in this paper are drawn from in-depth interviews with eleven Australian women who had once identified as lesbian or bisexual and who were now living with a different sexual identity. They were recruited through advertisements on
gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender web sites and mailing lists as well as via an article about sexual fluidity published in *The Age* newspaper in July 2005 for which I was interviewed. The interviews were between one and one-and-a-half hours long and explored participants’ previous sexual identity/identities, their current sexual identity, and the challenges they faced during the process of transitioning from one identity to the other.

The participants ranged in age from 28 to 46 and all had gone through at least two significant ‘comings out’ in their lives. Three women had changed their sexual identity from bisexual to lesbian; three had done the opposite and changed from lesbian to bisexual. Two participants changed their sexual identity from lesbian to heterosexual and two changed from bisexual or lesbian to ‘unlabelled’ or ‘fluid’ identities. One participant had multiple changes in her sexual history, going from bisexual to lesbian to living as heterosexual. While it is acknowledged that the research sample for this project is very small, the participants’ stories provide an excellent exploratory foundation from which to examine sexual identity change and its impact on individuals’ lives.

**Movement towards change and ‘coming out, again’**

Rust identifies a change in *location* on the sexual landscape, prompted by particular feelings and interpersonal experiences, as the most common factor leading to sexual identity change (1996: 68). Indeed, in my research, changes in location were the most prevalent reason why participants had changed their sexual identity. Falling in love was one such change in location. Fiona and Sarah, describing a change in identity from bisexual to lesbian, said:

> I became lovers with a woman I was staying with. Before that I’d had a male partner and I still saw him occasionally for coffee, but as soon as I moved in with her he could see I’d lost interest in him. I didn’t want to say that I was gay. But I was actually in love with this woman, you know? My ex-partner said to me, ‘Oh my god you’re in love’ but I was saying, ‘No I’m not.’ But I knew that I was. (Fiona)

> I fell in love with a beautiful woman. I’d been with James for two and a half years, and I just lost interest in sex completely with him and with men. I was just not very attracted to men any more... it just felt like nothing, you know? And it felt weird because it was him who pointed it out to me. He said to me, ‘You’re pretty much 100 percent lesbian now.’ I think
because he knew me really well he noticed there was a change. When she came along it, you know, kind of just confirmed everything. (Sarah)

For these two participants falling in love with a woman, as well as falling out of love with a man, confirmed their change in location. Catherine, who had changed her identity from lesbian to bisexual, described a similar experience of falling in love, this time with a man:

Well while I’d maintained lesbian identity I had still felt attracted to men. So I knew that I hadn’t stopped feeling attraction. But I didn’t expect to act on it because I looked back over how my sexual relationships with men had gone and drew the conclusion that I really wasn’t particularly comfortable about sex with men. So I did think I wouldn’t go there again, but I also thought, it’s a problem that I’m having, that I feel I this way. Human bodies are all good and any feeling that I’ve got that they’re not indicates that I could clean up something. So I decided that I didn’t want to keep having squeamishness about that and so I did some work on it and made some progress and felt like I’d moved on that. At some point I’d been working at a volunteer organization, which is where I met my partner, we were together for seven years. At some point I realised I was attracted to him, it was very intense and he was also attracted to me. Eventually over a period of time we became lovers. That was pretty big. So there I was, I had to consider pretty seriously, ‘Do I want to really do this?’ I thought over my previous judgements about whether I would ever have a relationship with a man and decided they no longer applied. I couldn’t think of any really pressing reason that I shouldn’t have a relationship with this man that I felt so strongly toward and for whom I had so much respect, other than ‘Gee a lot of people I know are not going to like it.’

For these three participants, falling in love resulted in a re-examination of their sexual identity, which concurs with Rust’s findings that a change in location is sometimes prompted by specific feelings towards a particular person, often unexpectedly (1996: 68). However it was not always falling in love that prompted a change in sexual identity. For two participants who had changed their sexual identity from lesbian to bisexual, their change in location came about as a result of growing, and often unexpected, sexual attractions to men:

I noticed that with a couple of close gay male friends there was some sort of sexual tension between us at times. And occasionally I would see a man that I was sort of attracted to
and I’d think, ‘How can I? What’s going on?’ And I remember when I’d be having sex with one of my girlfriends and I’d just be thinking, ‘It’d be nice to be having sex with a man as well.’ You know, just thoughts and feelings like that would come out. It just forced me to think about it, I suppose. (Melinda)

I started to realise that I was connecting to men a lot more. I found a lot of men, you know, attractive …I guess the penny dropped. I thought: ‘Hey not all guys are arseholes, it’s just about the person.’ And that’s when I realised, ‘Yeah I don’t think I am lesbian. I might not be totally straight but I’m definitely not lesbian.’ And I think I started to understand more about sexuality being a continuum. So that’s where I am today, I mean I don’t believe in the concept of ‘black or white.’ Whereas I think in that early stage… I mean, I was quite a radical lesbian for a while I mean, I was definitely verging on being separatist, I wanted no contact with men. (Dee)

Changes in location as a result of attractions to men were also experienced by two participants who had made the transition from a lesbian to a heterosexual identity. Both women had identified as lesbian for a long period of time and both had experienced significant long term lesbian relationships. Claire described her identity transition as a result of many changes, including her realisation that she was attracted to men for the first time in her life. Emma’s change of identity came when she learned to accept that she was still attracted to men and was then able to have sexual fantasies about them:

In my second long term lesbian relationship the woman that I was with had issues with drinking and went through rehab, and this probably sounds a bit blasé, but that really put me off. I’m not stupid enough to think that just because I had one relationship with one woman who was a bit screwed up means that all lesbian relationships are going to be horrible, but that was kind of a trigger for me to think that maybe relationships with women aren’t the utopia that I thought they would be. After I ended the relationship with her I decided to try out some fantasies with men and see how I went with that, and that was increasingly feeling pretty OK before I eventually translated that into real life. That was something that took a while for me to feel comfortable with because I’d obviously had no inclination towards men for quite a long time and any that I did I’d be like ‘Denial, denial, it doesn’t exist’ in terms of my identity.

For many people new attractions or sexual experiences may do little to challenge their existing sexual identity; for example, many lesbians do not view occasional sexual
encounters or having attractions to men as necessary problematic to the lesbian identity (Stein, 1997: 159-160, Diamond, 2000: 348). Melinda, Dee and Emma, however, recognised that maintaining a lesbian identity would be difficult given the sanctions within the lesbian community against more than fleeting involvement with men (Stein, 1997: 160), and believed their attractions to men were too strong to deny or to simply articulate within their existing lesbian identity.

While changes in location prompted by attractions, experiences or relationships were the most popular motivation for changing a sexual identity, for two other participants, their change in identity reflected changes in the accuracy of their self-description (Rust, 1996: 75). For Morgan, the catalyst to this change was realising she was no longer attracted to men. Morgan had experienced her previous bisexual identity as a private identity and came to see it as a kind of stepping-stone to her eventual decision to identify as lesbian:

I felt like I was hiding who I really was. And I even thought ‘There are people out there that are homophobic and, yep I’m probably going to have some adverse reactions from other people’ but I felt like it was going to be more acceptable than saying to people, ‘Look I’m bisexual.’ I’d also made an executive decision that I was never going to have sexual relationships with men ever again. And I think in the end, one of the last times I slept with a man I thought, ‘Oh my god! This is so terrible, why am I doing this?’ I just got to the point, and I’m not a man hater, but there are a lot of men I just think: ‘Oh my god!’ And it’s not just the sex thing; it’s a lot of other stuff as well.

Morgan’s recognition that her sexual identity was better reflected by the label lesbian than bisexual indicates the importance of changing her self-description to match her current desires and experiences, and also demonstrates how a change in the accuracy of self-description is also often a change in the level of honesty about one’s location on the sexual landscape (Rust, 1996: 75).

Another participant, Genevieve, experienced a change in the accuracy of self-description when she began to meet other people who considered themselves ‘fluid’ with their sexuality. This in turn led her to re-evaluate the label she was using for her own already fluid sexuality:

My housemate said to me, ‘You’ve been with more men than I have in my whole life. How can you call yourself a lesbian?’
And I thought, ‘Oh maybe I should let people know.’ And at the same time I met some other people that were, well for want of a better word, bisexual. Some of them called themselves ‘pansexual’. So I called myself ‘pansexual’ for about 6 weeks. But then it just got really dumb trying to explain to everybody what that was. So I thought, ‘Why should I? Why should I be explaining all of this anyway?’ I just sort of realised that it was because of other people that I had to keep coming up with these labels and then decided that if I stopped doing this, then I wouldn’t have to explain myself to anyone.

Genevieve’s change in identity was articulated as a recognition that her previous lesbian identity was no longer an accurate marker of her current attractions to both men and women. This change allowed her to be open about the relationships with men she has been having for a long time, despite identifying as lesbian. She now identifies her sexuality as fluid or unlabelled.

As the voices of the participants in my research demonstrate, two primary types of change were important in their process of sexual identity transition. A change in location on the sexual landscape, motivated by falling in love unexpectedly or acknowledging particular sexual attractions (or lack of them), or a change in the accuracy of self-description, were important markers that began the process of questioning or challenging their existing sexual identities (Rust, 1996: 68, 75). These events, in turn, allowed these women to redefine their sexual identity to better reflect their current sexual desires, attractions, behaviour and relationships.

**Conclusion**

Much of the existing research on fluid sexuality and identity change maps specific changes in sexual identity, but there is little research that qualitatively examines the processes of change and transition for those women who have changed their sexual identity from lesbian or bisexual to something else. This paper attempts to fill this gap. What the findings presented here reveal is that coming out cannot be simply understood as a matter of simply ‘coming out’ and then ‘remaining out’ for life. To assume that sexual identity is always permanent overlooks the fluid nature of sexuality that for some translates into a change of identity after some period identifying as bisexual or lesbian. For the majority of participants, this change was either motivated by new attractions, experiences or relationships or by a realisation that their existing identity no longer adequately reflected their sense of self. It is clear
from this research that for a small number of women, adopting a lesbian or bisexual identity is not the end of the process of identity development, and that for some people, coming out is a far more complex process than a simple linear explanation can provide.

Footnotes

1. There is a small body of research dedicated to issues around reparative therapy that attempts to convert homosexual men and women to heterosexuality. I do not wish to advocate this therapy; instead I acknowledge that some people do voluntarily change a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity for reasons other than simply wanting to be heterosexual. Therefore I do not discuss this literature in this paper.

References


