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Community Involvement among Behaviourally Bisexual Men in the Midwestern USA: Experiences and Perceptions across Communities

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Abstract

Limited research exists regarding community involvement and social support among behaviourally bisexual men. Previous studies suggest that bisexual men experience high levels of social stigma in both heterosexual and homosexual community settings. Research focusing on social support has demonstrated that individuals with limited access to similar individuals experience greater risk for negative health outcomes. Using a community-based research design, participants were recruited using multiple methods in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. Researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 75 men who reported having engaged in bisexual behaviour within the past six months. Interviews elucidated the experiences of behaviourally bisexual men in heterosexual and homosexual settings, as well as their perceptions of the existence of a bisexual community or bisexual spaces. All participants perceived a lack of a visible bisexual community and expressed difficulty with being comfortable, or feeling belonging, within a variety of heterosexual and homosexual community spaces. Findings suggest the need for interventions focused on community building among, as well as creating spaces specifically designed for, bisexual men in order to increase perceived social support and decrease isolation and possible negative health outcomes.

Keywords

Bisexual; Men; Community; Social Support; Stigma

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Introduction

Studies concerning community involvement and social support among behaviourally and self-identified bisexual men in the USA are rare in previous research (Dodge, Reece, and Gebhard, 2008). Researchers who have explored social stress theory, specifically the concept of minority stress, suggest that "sexual minority individuals" are challenged by stigma, prejudice, and discrimination and often experience limited social support within larger society as a result (Meyer, 1995; Zamboni and Crawford, 2007; Kelleher, 2009). However, in these studies, bisexual individuals are most often collapsed together under the label of "gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB)." Most previous research on focusing on community-related issues among sexual minorities "GLB," "gay and bisexual," and "same-sex attracted" samples has not distinguished bisexual men from gay men. The personal and social circumstances of bisexual men may be markedly different from gay men, including perceived social support and community participation (Rust, 2002; Jeffries and Dodge, 2007; Balsam and Mohr, 2007; Muñoz-Laboy, et al., 2009).

As demonstrated with gay men, it is reasonable to suggest that factors associated with minority stress may create particularly challenging life situations for bisexual men that relate to a number of negative health outcomes. Age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and other demographic considerations all interact with men's experience and expression of their sexualities (Lewis, 2004; Saewyc, et al., 2009; Jeffries, 2009). In addition to these sociodemographic factors, bisexual men in numerous contexts may face unique concerns specifically related to bisexual behaviour, orientation, and/or identity. Previous studies have shown that bisexual men experience stigma from both heterosexual and homosexual individuals on the basis of their bisexual orientation and/or identity (Angelides, 2001; Rust, 2002; McLean, 2008; Welzer-Lang, 2008). In a random digit dial sample in the USA, heterosexual individuals expressed more negative feelings toward bisexual men than all other religious, racial, ethnic, political, and sexual minority groups (including gay men) except injecting-drug users (Herek, 2002). As with other minority groups, stigma toward bisexual men in both heterosexual and homosexual settings may be a contributing factor for isolation, lack of perceived social support and related health concerns (Pescosolido, Martin, Lang, and Olafsdottir, 2008).

Given that individuals of all sexual orientations operate within a social context, social network theorists have emphasised the importance of the social context in which the individuals "are embedded in a network of family, friends, co-workers and community" (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels, 2000, p. 29). A considerable amount of social science research has aimed to make distinctions between networks of socially and sexually interacting individuals and the sense of community that comes out when the individuals in such networks gradually begin to see themselves as "connected" due to their shared behaviours and/or identities. In public health research, "community" has been much more narrowly defined as a unified body of individuals who often share common characteristics while living together in a larger society (Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker, 1998). Community members may interact accordingly with each other based on their proximity, and shared norms, behaviours, values, and identities.

Communities may also be conceptualised much more broadly. Anderson (1983, p. 6) states that communities "are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." Such "imagined" communities operate such that members may never meet in person but yet may, regardless of geographic distance, interact and feel a sense of belongingness based on shared characteristics. The formation of communities where members may not physically interact but still feel part of a "community" has been greatly advanced by technological innovations in communication. The internet, in particular,

and online "social networks" have helped people meet and connect globally with others while providing the possibility of creating communities while at the same time circumventing stigma and discrimination by maintaining relative anonymity (Greenblatt, 2005). Such "imagined" communities are particularly salient for behaviourally bisexual men, who have reported a lack of specifically bisexual spaces separate from other sexual minority communities and a lack of support and responsiveness from community-based organisations. However, these communities may be accessible only to individuals who have the technology, as well as social capital, in order to access and participate in them.

Given the scarcity of information specific to behaviourally bisexual men's experiences of community, more in-depth data are needed in order to define their concerns and needs, particularly common themes across different cultural contexts within specific areas in need of intervention. The level of community involvement across a range of traditional and "imagined" communities, as well as perceived social support, may impact the health of behaviourally bisexual men. The purpose of this study was to examine a wide range of issues related to communities, including belongingness and involvement, among a diverse sample of behaviourally bisexual men in the Midwestern USA.

Method

In order to be eligible, participants had to be men, living in the metropolitan area of Indianapolis, and had to have engaged in sexual behaviour (vaginal, oral, or anal) with at least one man and one woman during the previous six months to be eligible to participate in the study. Behaviourally bisexual men were selected as the priority population because of the HIV/STI risk relevance associated with this group, as well as previous research evidence that bisexual identity is less predictive of risk for HIV and other STI compared to bisexual behaviour (Dodge, Jeffries, and Sandfort, 2008; Malebranche, 2008; Munoz-Laboy and Dodge, 2007). The time period of six months was selected to ensure that participants were currently, or recently, having sex with both male and female partners.

The study relied on a community-based approach as a way to gain insight into the lives of bisexual men within the study area (for a detailed description of this approach, see Martinez et al., 2011). One component involved the formation of a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) that was comprised of behaviourally bisexual men, as well as individuals who work directly with these men, and members of our study team. Based upon the recommendations of the CAC, a multi-method sampling design was utilised in order to reach a diverse sample of men, both behaviourally and demographically, in an array of physical and virtual settings. Recruitment materials were intentionally vague, never using the word "bisexual," and instructed potential participants on how to contact the researchers (for a detailed description of the recruitment, see Martinez, et al., 2011). All protocols for the study were approved by the institutional review boards of Indiana University–Bloomington.

Procedures

Data were collected using a face-to-face in-depth interview guide. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were conducted by a bilingual interviewer in a private location of participant's choosing. The interview guide was developed in English and Spanish. Sample questions from the interview that relate to issues addressed in this paper may be found in Table 2. All audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Those conducted in Spanish were translated into English (n = 15/25) by a certified bilingual translator.

After interviews were transcribed, text data were analysed using an inductive approach (Saldana, 2009; Charmaz, 2006) allowing meaning to emerge from the data. To aid in the

coding process, transcribed data were grouped together according to each question. Nvivo software (QSR International, Version 9, 2010) was used to both organise and analyse data. Codes were created through a process of sectioning out data to a single line, or series of lines, from which concrete codes were developed, striving to remain as close to actual meaning used by participants. Once initial codes were developed they were organised into abstract codes, or subthemes, to later extract theoretical meaning and construct broader themes in the data (Charmaz, 2006). For example, concrete codes relating to "comfort" and "acceptance" were given a broader code of "comfort within community spaces." In the final stage of coding, investigators took these broader abstract codes and constructed meaningful connections between them as a way to generate a theoretical analysis of the subjective experiences of this group as they relate to community belongingness and related factors (Saldana, 2009; Carspecken, 1994). For example, analysis of the code "comfort level in heterosexual spaces" and "comfort level in homosexual spaces" were analysed together to better understand implications of community spaces and feelings of comfort.

A team coding process was employed to ensure the validity of codes. The initial codebook was constructed by having three members of the research team separately code five of the initial interviews and compare both concrete and abstract codes to establish similarity. Discordant codes were discussed at length until all three researchers reached an agreement about validity of the code as it related to the actually dialogue of a participant. Periodically, validity checks were completed regarding application of codes, through the same process as described above by selecting three to five interviews at a time to ensure the appropriateness of emerging codes as they were added to the codebook. (For a more detailed description of the qualitative research process, see Martinez et al., 2011).

Results

Participant Characteristics

A total of 75 men participated in the study. Table 1 provides information on the demographic characteristics of this sample.

Community Belonging

None of the participants indicated belonging to a "bisexual community," most likely an outcome of the perceived, and actual, lack of such a community in the study setting. Overall, participants expressed moving through two separate communities, heterosexual and homosexual, in accordance with their current place in life, the individuals they are with, or the extent to which they adapt themselves to "fit in" and feel comfortable.

Not belonging to any community—Often men expressed feelings of not belonging in or connected to either homosexual or heterosexual communities. Camilo (33 years old, Latino) indicates, "*No, at this time I do not belong to any community.*" Similarly, Britt (22 years old, White) expresses:

> I mean sometimes I don't think I fit in like with socially, with gay, gay social life … Sometimes I don't belong to them and when I go to the straight area, I feel both. I don't belong to them sometimes.

Participants often explained they did not feel part of heterosexual or homosexual communities because they did not "fit in," but also because they simply did not see themselves as heterosexual or homosexual, *"I guess I don't consider myself gay or not really, just kind of curious, that's why I don't feel I belong to the gay community"* (Isaiah, 29 years old, White). Isaiah continues:

> I don't feel like I belong in the heterosexual community either. I mean I'm always in it, but because I'm kind of into guys, I don't think I can really be part of that community.

Other participants described not feeling a sense of belonging in either heterosexual or homosexual spaces in similar ways, in that their perception of the requirements of community membership were not something they could fulfil because of their bisexuality and, overall, the inability to share this aspect of their lives with others.

Belonging anywhere—Other men explained they felt a sense of belongingness in any community. Stevie (46 years old, Black), expressed he belongs everywhere:

> I feel like I belong to the universe. I belong. I just belong because I'm a spirit. I get in where I fit in. I just belong. (Stevie, 46 years old, Black)

While on the surface this participant appears to report belonging anywhere he also implicitly conveys that there is not a specific community to which he belongs. Further, he suggests that his sense of belonging to any community is predicated on his ability to "fit in."

Similarly, Derrick explained:

> I mean I don't plan on living anywhere but to myself but I can interact in any environment. I can fit in. I can mostly, I'm like a chameleon with this society. (Derrick, 25 years old, Black)

Additionally, some individuals who expressed feeling belonging in any community explained that it was related to who they were with, or where they were in their lives.

> Again, I can or can't belong to the straight community. Everything is dependent on where in my life I'm in. I mean if I'm in a relationship with a woman, yeah, I can consider that I'm part of the community (Roberto, 28 Years Old, Latino).

It seems that this aspect of community belongingness is unique for behaviourally bisexual men, specifically that it is often dependent on the gender of current relationship partner.

Comfort within Heterosexual and Homosexual Spaces

Participants described their capacity for feeling comfortable within spaces designated as heterosexual or homosexual in larger society (for example, bars, clubs, etc.). Most instances centred on perceptions and expectations of others within these spaces. Overall, comfort within specific spaces was influenced by the (1) level of perceived acceptance, (2) feelings of fitting in, but not belonging, (3) gendered expectations and behaviours of others within given spaces, and (4) fear of their bisexuality being disclosed.

Perceived acceptance of bisexuality—Some participants described being more able "to be themselves" in gay spaces in comparison to heterosexual spaces because individuals in these spaces were often perceived as "more accepting." Edwin (20 years old, Black) indicated he feels more comfortable in gay spaces.

> Because [in gay bars] it's like it's a crowd of people who are just like me, so it's like I don't have to go to a straight bar, and I'll be bisexual right there, as opposed to me going there. It has got gays, bisexuals, lesbians, everything.

Participants' reports of feeling comfortable often involved how accepting they perceived the setting to be. Some men expressed not finding acceptance in gay spaces because of being seen as "not gay":

> You do and you don't. I mean, me personally, I thought I can go in, and you know, talk to them, or talk to anybody in there and be fine, but at the same time you can kind of tell some of the gay people are like, "What is this straight man doing in my bar?" So, I feel comfortable going in there, but some people don't feel comfortable with me being in there, I guess I would say. (Britt, 22 years old, White)

While this participant indicated he feels comfortable, he is acutely aware that others do not see him as belonging in gay spaces, similar to the experiences of other participants in heterosexual spaces.

"Fit in," but do not belong—Often physical places are spaces for members of a community to meet with one another and feel connected or belonging to similar others and to a broader, more abstract community. Participants often described "fitting in" in spaces, or being comfortable in them in similar ways to belonging to communities, but not feeling as though they "belonged" in them. For example, Felipe (22 years old, Latino) said:

> I feel comfortable but I do not feel like I belong there. I can go to those places but I do not necessarily feel like I belong to gay places.

Participants often expressed they were comfortable within a variety of spaces in both heterosexual and homosexual communities, but they did not have feelings of belonging in them. Participants consistently expressed feeling like Felipe, that they could "fit in" anywhere, but they did not belong, as was the case with Amador (19 years old, Latino).

> I feel fine no matter where I am at, gay bar, straight bar, whatever bar. I wouldn't say I belong to them. I mean I am comfortable, feel like I can get by, but it's not like something I feel belong to, it's not like part of me.

The degree to which participants felt belonging in a given space may be an outcome of how comfortable they feel within a given space. Some men perceived spaces they were in as unwelcoming and it was difficult to feel a sense of comfort within a given space, often directly influencing the degree to which they felt belonging in those spaces and the ability to socialise there.

> No, I don't. I feel like–I just don't–no, I'm not really comfortable in [heterosexual] places. I can go there, and it's okay, or whatever, but I don't go there to socialise and hang out (Raphael, 27 years old, White).

Whether participants indicated they felt comfort in any space, heterosexual or homosexual, or that they did not feel comfort in a specific space (e.g., gay bar), most did not report feeling like they belonged in these places.

Gendered expectations of others and comfort—Some participants expressed feeling uncomfortable in gay spaces, in particular, because of the gender transgressions of others or because of the requirement to maintain gendered expectations. For example, Boyce explains:

> I don't know. It just with all the drama and stuff that goes on in there gay bars, and all the feminine men, and I'm scared of drag queens and stuff like that. (20 years old, Black)

What scares Boyce about drag queens is not clear, but taken in conjunction with his previous statements this is most likely a fear of being around drag queens, because of how others may perceive him and his sexual orientation. Carl (30 years old, Black) continues:

> 'Cause sometimes I'm not one is 'cause I'm not really a club person, so it really doesn't matter that it's a gay club. I'm not a big club person so that's one reason.

> The other reason is sometimes I just can't be around a lot flamboyant gay people. They bother me.

Participants often expressed their dislike of effeminate acting men as reasons for avoiding gay spaces. However, taken in a larger context, it may be the fear of what others would think about them if they were seen with effeminate men or frequenting establishments stereotyped as being for effeminate men. Not only did participants feel uncomfortable in homosexual spaces because of gender transgressions, but also in heterosexual spaces where they felt they had to behave in ways associated with traditional manhood, often including their desire to avoid disclosing their bisexuality.

> Because how can I explain, because I cannot tell somebody about what I feel or what I'm doing because they are just like looking for girls and I mean I like girls but sometimes I would like to tell them I like to have sex with men (Renato, 21 years old, Latino)

Fear of bisexuality being disclosed—For many participants, fear of their bisexuality being disclosed limited what spaces they would go to. For some participants, the possibility of someone discovering their participation in gay venues became a source of fear of being labelled as gay or bisexual in their "heterosexual" lives:

> No, no, because I'm, again, have to be extremely discreet because if it got out, I would lose, I literally would lose everything, my job, my wife, my kids, my home, everything (Clemente, 36 years old, White)

This theme not only involved participants expressing fear of "being found out" for being bisexual and it affecting other aspects of their lives, but participants also indicated that in heterosexual spaces they felt comfortable as long as others around them were unaware of their bisexuality.

> Yeah. So, we know, we just hang out as a–you know, if they don't know that I'm bisexual so it's the–you know, I'm just hangin' out with my friends, and I don't feel really out–an outsider or something like that. [I] feel fine (Jamison, 35 years old, Black).

In both instances, the concern of having their bisexuality disclosed influences feelings of comfort within a given setting. Some men also expressed fear of physical violence in heterosexual spaces should their bisexuality be disclosed. Hassan (59 years old, White) indicated there may be a danger for behaviourally bisexual men moving between communities if their bisexuality should be disclosed:

> There's also–I think that there's risk of gay bashing violence, or whatever. If there's a guy who's dabbling, who's running with straight people, and he's going back and forth, and all that, I mean, it's–yeah, I think that's dangerous behaviour to an extent, I do.

Perceptions of a Bisexual Community and Related Spaces

Unaware of a bisexual community or related spaces

Participants expressed were unaware of the existence of any bisexual community. While they believed there were others like them, the idea of a visible community sharing similar experiences was unknown:

> I'm sure there's other people out there like me because people get frustrated in their situation but is it a formal community? I don't know. I think there's probably an unspoken community. But I can't find it." (Luciano, 57 years old, White)

Additionally, Darren (24 years old, White) stated that he does not belong to a bisexual community and does not seek out other behaviourally bisexual men:

> I mean not necessarily. I don't go out and find other people, other bisexuals and talk about our experiences or things like that so to say that I belong to that community would be wrong.

The description of an "unspoken community" portrays the lack of visibility and cohesiveness described by many bisexual men in our study. This idea was further illustrated by several others, such as Jamison (23 years old, White):

> What kind of people, you mean? Bi people … but I don't think there's like a community well, I don't know.

This same participant goes a step further suggesting a bisexual community may not exist at all or if it does he is unaware. All 75 participants indicated the absence of a bisexual community in the study area:

> I don't' know any bisexual community in Indianapolis like I told you so I don't know if there is any bisexual community. (Zack, 34 years old, Latino)

Participants reported not only a lack of community, but also being unsure of the existence of specifically designated bisexual spaces. Raul indicates:

> Bisexual bar? I mean I feel like I go to gay bars and to some straight bars too, but bisexual, I cannot think of any bisexual bar that I go to." (Raul, 25 years old, White)

Other participants reported having gone to spaces where there were known bisexual individuals, but that such venues were located in another area of the country and not within the study area.

> I'm not sure if there are bisexual places in Indianapolis. I have no idea. I know there was in Arizona. Phoenix. There was a specific bar that you could go to, and there was (sic) gay couples. There was (sic) bisexual couples. There was (sic) straight couples. They were all in there, mingling (Zachery, 42 years old, White).

All spaces are bisexual spaces

While most participants stated that they were unsure of the existence of specifically bisexual locations, some indicated they experienced, or believed, that other spaces had bisexual men in them:

> I think those gay that they label gay bars, I think they are bisexual places because there's a lot of people that aren't just gay. There's some people in there that's straight. I mean they've never had a homosexual experience. They're just in there with friends and they just happen to be keeping company with people so I believe that those places like that just happen to be catering towards people with other sexual preferences. I don't that it's just a straight gay bar. At least, I haven't been to one like that. (Ray, 37 years old, Black)

Not only did some participants believe that bisexual men were present in gay spaces, but they could also be found in heterosexual spaces:

> Ha, not exactly but the majority of places I have gone, where it says it is straight, there are also a lot of bisexuals (Felipe, 22 years old, Latino).

Overall, these statements point to the lack of a visible bisexual community and spaces specifically designated for bisexual individuals.

Discussion

It is well established that behaviourally bisexual men differ from their exclusively homosexual and heterosexual counterparts in terms of their sexual behaviours and experiences (Dodge et al., in press). The findings from this paper suggest, in addition, that these men also experience their sense of community involvement in similarly divergent ways. The expressions of community reported by our participants are quite different from what has been conceptualised in the existing literature on sexual communities. Additionally, participants were not uniform in terms of what the concept of community meant to them. Most participants expressed they did not feel belonging to specific heterosexual and homosexual communities. For many, feelings of belonging were related to how similar, or dissimilar, they felt to others within specific communities. Other participants described themselves as mutable and able to conform to the social norms of a specific community, expressing the ability to "fit in" anywhere. Findings concerning community belonging suggest that navigating between heterosexual and homosexual communities was difficult for the behaviourally bisexual men in our study, often resulting in them feeling they did not belong to any community or had to change themselves in order to feel that they belonged.

Similar results were found regarding physical spaces. Overall, belonging in a space was impacted by comfort level which influenced the degree to which participants used these spaces for meeting similar others. Their comfort level was impacted by perceived acceptance of bisexuality, "fitting in" but not belonging, gendered expectations of others, and fear of disclosure of bisexuality. These four subthemes directly impacted how comfortable men felt within a given space, and also indirectly influenced their sense of belonging to the communities associated with these specific spaces (e.g. feeling comfortable in a gay bar and belonging to the gay community).

Previous literature suggests that perceived lack of social support, or connection to similar others, especially among minority groups, can lead to negative health outcomes (Balsam and Mohr, 2007). While some men expressed they could find belonging in either homosexual or heterosexual settings, their ability to interact or be comfortable within related community spaces was limited. Specifically, participants perceived an inability to be themselves or to find acceptance within either community. Often their perceptions were based upon interactions with others. Participants expressed that they would always be marked as the "other" within either environment (i.e., heterosexually or homosexually identified spaces). For example, they expressed being branded as "gay" in heterosexual spaces and as "heterosexual" in homosexual spaces, never able to find complete acceptance within either space in terms of their bisexuality.

Participants often expressed "fitting in", but not really belonging within heterosexual or homosexual spaces. This suggests that participants not only found fitting into symbolic communities difficult but that their feelings of belonging within physical settings are limited as well. Sexual minorities have historically used social gathering spaces to find similar others, construct a unified community, and as a way to feel belonging and connection to those communities (D'emilio, 1998). Due to the binary system of social sexual identities within the USA, spaces have been constructed around heterosexual and non-heterosexual identities, lumping together all non-heterosexual individuals into combined community spaces. Our findings suggest this system leaves behaviourally bisexual men on the periphery of communities and related spaces, but having little or no sense of belonging to them.

In short, building a sense of community among a population which participants described as "invisible" or "unspoken" presents many challenges. Defining what a "bisexual community" would look like, as well as conceptualising building and evaluating community capacity is

particularly problematic with these men. Traditionally, communities have been defined by geographical proximity; however cotemporary communities are constructed around demographic characteristics and similarities to others. Because behaviourally bisexual men exist outside of a contained geographic region and are representative of a variety of social and personal characteristics, pervious conceptualisations of community need to be explored to better address how to establish a bisexual community.

First steps in creating communities will require a change in our cultural understanding of sexual behaviours and identities through increasing the visibility of bisexual people in such areas as media and other cultural material. Similar to challenges faced by gay men and lesbians, establishing the existence of bisexuality as a valid and acceptable sexual orientation and making bisexual individuals visible to a larger society is required as a precursor to creating uniquely bisexual communities separate from their heterosexual and homosexual counterparts (Armstrong 2002). Although our study focused on behaviourally bisexual men, constructing a bisexual community that is encompassing of all forms of bisexual expression (including bisexual women and transgender individuals) would be most beneficial in light of previous community building effort by other sexual minorities (Armstrong, 2002; D'Emilio, 1998). As with the "gay and lesbian community," such an approach could allow for integration of multiple genders, bisexual categories and communities.

Another strategy for building a sense of community among behaviourally bisexual men requires a movement away from traditional and contemporary notions of community. Participants explained a variety of reasons for not wanting to be associated with homosexual or heterosexual spaces. Often this distancing from homosexual spaces was the outcome of not being comfortable because of fear of their bisexuality being disclosed or because of the perceptions of others in these spaces. At the same time other participants expressed feeling they were not accepted in heterosexual spaces and sometimes feared physical violence. Constructing a physical space that was known to be "bisexual" would most likely not alleviate these concerns. However, because community spaces are a cornerstone of community and provide places for community members to congregate, it is imperative that spaces are created where bisexual men can feel a sense of belonging and comfort. To address issues described by participants, spaces that are anonymous and confidential could subdue fears of disclosure, violence, and stigma while providing a space for these individuals to connect with similar others, as well as provide opportunities for delivering appropriate and relevant health-related services (Dodge, et al., 2012).

Wellman and Gulia (1999) propose that virtual communities operate in much the same way as real communities and provide similar benefits, specifically social support and feelings of connectedness. In fact, Wellman and Gulia (1999) suggest that virtual communities allow for greater feelings of intimacy and connection because these communities are created on the basis of shared interests, needs, and demographic characteristics, rather than demographic characteristics alone (contemporary model of community), or geographic proximity (traditional model of community). While all our participants were asked whether or not they currently participated in online "bisexual communities," the vast majority were unaware that such entities existed. Building more visible and accessible virtual communities of behaviourally bisexual men around their shared life issues may allow men, who feel disconnected from heterosexual and homosexual communities and lack social support, to have a sense of belonging to a bisexual community. Not only would focusing on shared interests while creating virtual communities for bisexual men possibly increase their feelings of connectedness to other bisexual men, but it could also help to relinquish fears of their bisexuality being disclosed if for instance they are using a shared computer.

Constructing virtual bisexual communities does not mean these communities will necessarily remain online, but may eventually allow for behaviourally bisexual men to meet physically should they decide to do so. In this way, behaviourally bisexual men are empowered to make decisions around who they want to meet, and how they want to meet them. Rather than making requirements of them to attend community meetings or visit spaces to be part of a community, which may make them uncomfortable, behaviourally bisexual men can decide if they want to move outside of virtual community spaces and into physical ones, as well as when and how they want to be involved in such "imagined worlds" (Appadurai, 1996).

Evaluating such community building projects would differ compared to traditional methods. Traditional community building evaluations focus on nine domains. As defined by Gibbon, Labonte, and Laverack (2002), these include participation of community members, leadership, and organisational structures, as well as others. However, Preece, Abras, and Maloney-Krichmar (2004) found that while some of these measures of success could be easily applied to a virtual community such as the number of people registered in the community, or the number who participate, or the number of messages posted, replied to or read over a certain period, virtual communities also require an evaluation of usability and sociability. The authors found that measuring sociability, or whether tools for online collaboration and communication serve the user's needs, was also an important aspect of evaluating virtual communities and can be used to understand how and why users decided to maintain membership within a virtual community.

Other community building projects such as MPowerment (Kegeles, Hays and Coates, 1996), while shown to be effective for self-identified gay men, may have limited success with behaviourally bisexual men because these men may not identify as gay or (even bisexual) and are often reluctant to disclose their bisexuality. However, modifying such an intervention to take it from physical community spaces into virtual community spaces may better serve the needs of behaviourally bisexual men. Creating virtual communities for behaviourally bisexual men may simultaneously address issues related to potential negative outcomes of social isolation and perceived lack of social support found in previous studies (Meyer, 1995; Zamboni and Crawford, 2007; Kelleher, 2009) and the concerns of participants in this study regarding use of heterosexual and homosexual spaces.

As probability samples of men who have sex with men and women are difficult to obtain (Jeffries and Dodge 2007) we relied on purposeful sampling techniques in order to acquire study participants. Additionally, as with theoretical sampling used by Dowsett and colleagues (1998), representativeness was not a necessity this study; instead, we aimed to develop a diverse sample of respondents in terms of how they relate to the research questions. It is not possible to extrapolate our findings beyond the study area because of the inherent limitations of qualitative research. However, because this study sought to understand the aspects of community for behaviourally bisexual men in the Midwestern USA, these findings are particularly useful for developing interventions in this community, and possibly localities with similar social and demographic characteristics. Further, because inclusion criteria included behaviour rather than identity, the experiences described by participants may not apply to men who actively use the identity label "bisexual" or those who had a bisexual experience longer than six months ago.

Conclusions

The lack of a visible bisexual community may decrease feelings of belonging and social support experienced by behaviourally bisexual men. Additionally, the limited spaces in which behaviourally bisexual men felt comfortable expressing their sexual desires and

identities could lead to potential feelings of isolation for this group. Previous research on sexual minorities, community, and social support has shown that individuals who are disconnected from similar others are at increased risk for negative health outcomes (Balsam and Mohr, 2007). The experiences our participants described point to their limited accessibility to similar others and lack of belonging to a community to call their own. These findings provide further evidence that calls for an acknowledgement, once and for all, of the fact that behaviourally bisexual men are not simply equivocal to their exclusively homosexual (or heterosexual) counterparts.

The creation and maintenance of physical and virtual socialisation spaces for behaviourally bisexual men may be of great value for these men numerous reasons. Such spaces may provide opportunities for overcoming reported isolation by fostering a sense of social support as a result of connecting behaviourally bisexual men with similar others. Such connections could allow for opportunities to share experiences and emotions, including those related to sexual and risk behaviours with male and female partners. In response to numerous participants' reports of feeling like "the only one," providing socialisation spaces for behaviourally bisexual men may assist them in finding others like them have found ways to navigate their unique challenges, including rising above bisexuality-related social stigma and other stressors that cause many to remain relatively hidden, silent, and isolated in the first place.

Developing, implementing, and evaluating interventions aimed at providing inclusive bisexual communities as well as uniquely bisexual spaces, whether physical or virtual, may help in assisting behaviourally bisexual men with developing feelings of comfort, belonging, and empowerment similar to interventions used with young gay men. While highly successful with self-identified young gay men, interventions of this kind may have similar or differential effectiveness with behaviourally bisexual men. Future research should explore behaviourally bisexual men's participation in diverse communities centred on shared life experiences in order to determine way of increasing self-esteem and social support in this marginalised population.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1

Participant Characteristics

	n	%
Age		
19–24	24	32.0
25–29	12	16.0
30–39	13	17.3
40–49	21	28.0
50+	5	6.7
Sexual Identity		
Bisexual	46	61.3
No Label/Fluid	12	16.0
Heterosexual/Straight	8	10.7
Homosexual/Gay	7	9.3
Mostly Heterosexual/Curious	2	2.7
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	25	33.3
Latino	25	33.3
White	25	33.3
Living Situation		
Living Alone	18	24.0
Living with Someone	57	76.0
Marital Status		
Single	55	73.3
Married	13	17.3
Separated	3	4.0
Divorced	4	5.3
Children		
None	41	54.7
One	15	20.0
Two	10	13.3
Three or more	9	12.0
Highest Level of Education		
Less than High school	16	21.3
High school/GED	22	16.0
Some College/Associate Degree	16	21.3
Bachelor Degree	14	18.7
Graduate School/Master's Degree	5	6.7
Professional Degree	2	2.7
Employment		
Yes	56	74.7
No	19	25.3

	n	%
Monthly Income		
< 1,000	31	41.3
1,000–1,999	20	26.7
2,000–2,999	13	17.3
3,000–3,999	3	4.0
>4,000	8	10.7

Table 2

Sample questions by coded theme and subtheme

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Questions
Community belonging	Not belonging to any community Belonging anywhere	*Would you say you belong to any communities?* *Do you feel like there are other people like you?*
Comfort in heterosexual and homosexual spaces	Perceived acceptance of bisexuality "Fit in," but do not belong Gender expectations of others and comfort Fear of bisexuality being disclosed	*How do you feel in gay-identified locations?* *How do you feel in straight-identified locations?* *Why do you go to gay-identified locations?* *Do you feel like you belong in heterosexual locations?*
Perceptions of bisexual community and related spaces	Unaware of a bisexual community No bisexual spaces Everywhere is a bisexual space	*Would you say you belong to a bisexual community?* *Do you go to any bisexually-identified locations?*