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Pretty Bi for an Ally: A Critical Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

Bisexual people experience negative messaging about their identity from broader society, as well as from within the LGBTIQ+ community. The period of adolescence can be particularly tumultuous for those navigating their identity amongst this messaging. Drawing on Ozalas's (2020) and Suarez's (2022) studies, this study utilizes a critical autoethnographic approach and aims to explore cis-normative and heteronormative perspectives that were dominant within Australian society between the years of 2004 and 2016 from my bisexual lens. Employing McInnis's (2022) notion of belonging and Warren's (2023) use of allyship, this study describes the journey of discovering my bisexual identity and belonging during adolescence and understanding trans allyship through sibship. It also explores how certain social and environmental events can contribute to a sense of belonging or exclusion. The study documents how bisexuality evolves from the unknown, to the hidden, to the visible in a parallel process to supporting a trans sibling's identity.

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography; bisexuality; trans; allyship; belonging

Prologue: contextualizing non-heterosexuality

Upon reflection, there were many times throughout my¹ life that clearly signaled attraction to multiple genders, yet it took many years to develop confidence and comfort to be able to claim this part of my identity. I believe this is related to the stigma and discrimination that bisexual people experience both from the queer and straight communities (Horwitz et al.,2020; Miller et al.,2021) that I had unconsciously internalized and

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just focused on being straight-passing to avoid any anticipated undesirable comments (DeJordy, 2008).

I recall being as young as four, seeing lingerie advertisements and admiring the models and from about nine or ten experiencing a funny feeling when I saw a particularly busty family friend step out of the bathroom still in a towel. I had exposure to and normalized gay and lesbian relationships during my early childhood, however, confusion came when I experienced feelings of attraction to boys and men as well. Bisexuality can seem invisible (Popova, 2017) and is often erased in both heterosexual and homosexual communities leading to a sense of confusion of where bisexual people, like myself, belong (McInnis et al., 2022). Growing up in a heterocentric and heteronormative culture where same sex marriage was not legalized until my early twenties, it felt safer to admit a crush on Aragon (male) from *Lord of the Rings* than to admit to liking his partner Arwen (female) or more shocking still, liking them both.

I can recall numerous microaggressions—subtle and brief everyday interactions that send negative or exclusionary messages based on a group membership (Sue, 2010) throughout my life related to bisexuality. These include messages of bisexuals being viewed as attention seeking, ‘home-wreckers’, and incapable of making up their minds. Microaggressions are described as interactions between individuals that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward members of stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups (Flanders et al., 2019). These comments are often minimized or dismissed as ‘not a big deal’ and feel more concealed than more overt forms of bigotry. Nonetheless, these comments can feel like pins pricking at the skin leaving no obvious mark but still feeling highly uncomfortable and can accumulate into chronic pain with physical and psychological implications over a prolonged period. Other similar comments made to me include:

“But you’re with a guy,” I have been told.

“Are you sure you’re not just scared to fully commit?”

“You’re just an ally; you do not really get it.”

And maybe they were right, I thought. Could I really consider myself bisexual if I was in an opposite sex relationship? In this regard, bisexual people are often viewed in the same way as the Schrödinger’s cat of sexuality: Simultaneously gay and straight until partnered. This view is inherently monosexist and invalidating, the assumption that attraction to one gender is the norm and that bisexuality is a ‘phase’ (McInnis et al., 2022). The unfortunate consequence of this messaging is that for many people it can result in pervasive negative impacts on self-worth

and feelings of belonging, including internalized biphobia (Flanders et al., 2019).

Theoretical framework: importance of belonging to wellbeing

The concept of belonging and the theoretical understandings of this construct have a long history within the psychological and sociological sciences and in social identity theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hughes et al., 2015; Maslow, 1968; Putnam, 2000; Tajfel, 1973). Constructions of belonging are narratives of who we are and can show our emotional yearning and desire for attachments (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging to a group or community is considered one of the fundamental motivators for human behavior and a need we all seek to meet (Maslow, 1968). This was a key motivator during my adolescence.

However, it is not merely enough to be in proximity to a group, but also relationally about how one is perceived by others (Allen & Kern, 2017). This can be challenging when navigating the space of belonging between heterosexuality and homosexuality within the bisexual community (McInnis et al., 2022). At times I felt lost between binaries of gay and straight, not neatly falling into either. This can be particularly problematic when bisexual people feel excluded by both the queer and straight communities (Horwitz et al., 2020) which can contribute to feeling 'othered.'

Bisexual people report feeling less connected to the broader LGBTIA+ community than with their gay and lesbian counterparts (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). This is true in my experience as well, as I have battled with feeling 'not-queer-enough' and minimize my own experiences as less valid due to the privilege of being perceived as 'straight-passing,' at the cost of erasing my identity. It is not surprising then that recent Australian research has found that bisexual women report lower levels of mental health symptoms when they feel a sense of belonging within the lesbian and heterosexual communities and higher levels when they do not (McLauren & Castillo, 2020). The greater the exposure to anti-bisexual comments and experiences, the more likely it is that bisexual women may experience internalized biphobia and negative core beliefs of self (McLauren & Castillo, 2020). Further, such feelings of exclusion are typically related to vulnerability, defectiveness, and worthlessness, subsequently contributing to lower overall mental wellbeing (McInnis et al., 2022). Thus, belonging is one of the key theoretical concepts that features throughout this study.

Method and analytical framework

Critical Autoethnography is an approach to research that is situated at the intersection between autobiography and ethnography, a study of the

self within the researcher's cultural context (Adams et al., 2017). Adopting this approach enables researchers to maneuver “between contextualized communicative practices and conceptualizing ways of being, acting, and relating” to draw understandings about social life (Witteborn et al., 2013, p. 188). Boylorn and Orbe (2016) described critical autoethnography “to understand the lived experiences of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination” (p. 20). Adolescence is often considered a critical time for social identity formation and cognitive and emotional development (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008) and is the period which this study explores.

This article uses a data set from critical autoethnographic experiences of the first author's adolescence between age 12 in 2004 in regional New South Wales to age 24 in 2016 based in metropolitan Queensland, Australia. Specifically, it explores how these experiences relate to concepts of belonging, sexuality, mental health, and allyship. Several studies have raised the limited representation of LGBTIQ+ voices within literature regarding this population (Carman et al., 2012; Chang et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2021). Historically, academic information about people who were not cisgender and/or heterosexual were written from the perspective of those who were (Strauss et al., 2017). The authors were inspired by a number of other autoethnographic studies with regards to structure and style guides, specifically the works of Ozalas (2020), Popova (2017), and Suárez (2022) respectively.

Parallel to this, the coauthors of the research team, from their various interdisciplinary backgrounds (e.g., gender studies, trans studies, cultural studies, psychology, counselling) and areas of research expertise (e.g., gender/sexuality, bodies, mental health, resiliency, belonging, health equity), actively guided the first author in the framing, contextualizing, theorizing and formatting of this autoethnographic piece. This was achieved *via* active, ongoing and iterative feedback and reflective discussions to draw out, shape and refine the first author's narrative in order to facilitate reflexivity and deeper connections regarding lived experience, theory and practice (see Koopman et al., 2020) and to support the intellectual and affective experiences in the autoethnography, which has been described as a “potentially messy, fluid, and highly contextual approach to exploring and understanding self-experience in context” (Edwards, 2021, p. 3). This purposeful, layered and supportive approach is consistent with recent autoethnographic published work (e.g., Farrell et al., 2017) and aligns with contemporary autoethnographic approaches to supporting the ‘storyteller’ when navigating how to describe personal experiences that may involve distressing encounters (Adams &

Herrmann, 2023), including guiding autobiographical depictions in an authentic, yet balanced manner to temper potentially excessive introspection (see Chang, 2008). The first author interacted with members of the research team throughout the development of the study focus, design, ethics approval, data collation, analysis and writing of this manuscript in a deliberate and collaborative manner, enabling more nuanced depictions and understandings of cultural beliefs, practice, and expectations in relation to this autoethnographic account (Adams & Hermann, 2023; Farrell et al., 2017).

Researcher positionality

As first author, I am the sole participant of the group I am researching as an insider researcher from a critical autoethnographic approach, and thus hold the dual role of researcher and subject of research (Voloder, 2008). It is therefore important to contextualize how I am positioned within the context of this autoethnography. I am a white Australian woman, born in Bathurst New South Wales which is located within Wirajuduri Country as known by the original custodians of the land. My parents separated before I was born, and my mother raised me as a single parent, primarily funded through social welfare throughout my childhood and youth. She met my sister's father when I was six years old, separated when I was fourteen, then met her now husband when I was seventeen.

I was diagnosed by a clinical psychologist in my late teens with Social Anxiety and Depressive Disorder and was diagnosed with a Functional Neurological Disorder by a Neuropsychologist in my late twenties. I also experienced symptomology post traumatic events throughout my late teens and early twenties, though was not diagnosed with a formal disorder related to this. I was the first within three generations on both maternal and paternal sides of the family to graduate from University and I am employed within Queensland Health as a mental health clinician for children and adolescents. I am passionate about supporting the LGBTIQ+ community based on my lived experience as a bisexual woman and sister to a trans person.

Regarding the positionality of the coauthors of this piece, we have been engaged in the LGBTQIA+ health promotion research space for 5 to 22 years; collectively, our coauthorship team has more than 85 years of LGBTQIA+ health promotion and social justice research, and mental health advocacy experience. We include scholars of agender, dissident and cisgender experiences spanning sexual orientations (e.g., pansexual, un-definable, heterosexual), partnered relationship representations (e.g., polyamorous and monogamous), class backgrounds (e.g., working class,

middle- and upper-middle class), immigration statuses (i.e., immigrant, first generation, native-born), and language statuses (i.e., English as an additional language; English as a first language). Racial and ethnic identities of our team include North African, White European descent, White Australian and White American. Importantly, our whole authorship team includes both gender diverse, bisexual, pansexual and undefinable people with mental health and polyamorous experiences.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of Southern Queensland (USQ HREC - H22REA267). Other individuals are mentioned throughout the first author's recollections and subjective experiences. All non-identifiable individuals are referred to using a pseudonym, and those with a close personal relationship to the first author were consulted and offered a pseudonym and opportunity to review and provide input on this piece. Identifiable participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and voluntarily signed a consent form detailing the parameters of the study, including offered the opportunity to review and provide feedback prior to publication.

Chapter one: (2005): the 'boy crazy' days

Gender is one of the social concepts children develop to classify people within categories most consistently in an essentialist binary way, that boys are still boys even if they look like girls or vice versa (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). For many children, these categories make sense, however, for trans children, the edges between these gender categories can feel blurred and like their lived experience is contrary to tenants of gender (Gelman, 2023). During my first year of high school, my sister was three and she was still assigned male at this time. She was always larger than life, the moment she could walk and talk she began stealing mum's heels and feather boa. She would wander around the house singing 'Voodoo Child' by the Rogue Traders at the top of her lungs. It is during this preschool stage of development (between ages three and five) that children become aware of gender, and this motivates their engagement in activities, clothing, and peer connections (Eaton et al., 1981; Halim et al., 2014; Shutts et al., 2013; Signorella et al., 1993).

I remember I had drawn a prediction image the year before of what she might look like when she was my age—short curly red hair, freckles, and very masculine presenting 'cool boy' clothes. I started to suspect that I was way off in that prediction. The adults around me reassured

that ‘this is a phase many little boys go through.’ Although she was not socially transitioned at the time, many preschool aged trans children show preferences for, and understanding of, gender similar to their gender-matched cisgender peers (Fast & Olsen 2019), just as my sister was starting to do.

At school, everyone was abuzz about crushes, dating, and who liked who. I followed what I thought were the trends of becoming fixated on a certain boy before changing my focus to another one within a week or two. Some of my peers were the same, but I remember being coldly ‘kicked out’ from sitting with a group of girls because I was seen as ‘too boy crazy.’ Many of the girls were showing signs of puberty at the time. It was seen as really grown up to have your period and girls seemed to compare what bra sizes they could fit into. I felt behind, though in reality I was perfectly within the typical range.

“Double A is a battery, not a bra size. Stop pretending you’ve got something when you’re flat,” Mikayla cruelly taunted another girl who had her arms folded across her chest. Later that same year in a ‘girl’s camp’ self-esteem building activity the school ran for girls, a teacher asked what we all enjoy about being a girl and Mikayla said, “having boobs,” smugly, knowing myself and the other girl who had yet to develop were both in the room.

This was almost as uncomfortable as Sex Education class which, looking back, took the assumption of sex occurring between cisgender heterosexual people. Anyone queer had to work it out on their own, I guess. This was before the Safe Schools Coalition influenced schools within New South Wales (Ward, 2017), not that it would have mattered as my high school never signed up to be one of the Safe Schools. The videos they showed were from the eighties and there was a strong assumption about boys with penises and girls with vaginas, and sex happens with only one of each set of parts.

I remember some boy asking the teacher about how girls scissor, and it being immediately shut down by the teacher. He was told to ‘stop being immature.’ Admittedly, the boy was being obnoxious about it, but it sent the message that gay and lesbian sex was not something we were going to talk about. It is noted that schools that have LGBTI-specific protective policies in place increase the felt safety of students who are more likely to feel good about their sexuality (Kull et al., 2016; Jones & Hillier, 2012, Mann et al., 2023). There certainly was not any mention of transgender people in sexual and relationship education during my schooling, which Riggs et al. (2022) describe as institutional erasure within Australian schools.

Chapter two: (2006): the shift

In 2006 I developed my first female crush, though in classic sapphic fashion, I did not recognize it until she told me she liked me several years later. Jasmine was the same age as me but seemed to have a better understanding of her own thoughts, feelings, and desires than I did at the time. She often chose to wear the white button up shirts rather than polos and had her sandy brown hair cut short just above her shoulders and had the most mesmerizing green eyes. I recall a lot of the more popular girls used to be snide and call her ‘weird’ behind her back as she had a quirky nature and would point out things like the ‘Woollybutt grass’ in the biology book.

She lived on a property a bit out of town, and I enjoyed swimming together and feeding her ducks and chickens. During sleep overs we shared a bed—one of the benefits of societal heteronormativity is not being suspected of anything inappropriate, though that did not come until later anyway. Jasmine was the first person I met who openly described herself as bisexual. Liking guys and girls did not really seem like an option until I learned there was a label for it. I do not recall ever seeing a bisexual character on the TV or any movies at the time. This was consistent with Monogan’s (2020) analysis which identified that LGB characters generally had very brief story lines, often portrayed as villainous. Bisexual people only featuring in six of the 32 identified television shows (Monogan 2020). There were several labels and spectra that I did not learn about until much later in life. I had not yet embraced bisexuality as part of my identity, but I had more awareness of possibilities and ways to describe falling outside of the heteronormative lens.

The most instrumental shift for me during this time is when my mum decided to make a big move to northern New South Wales. My grandfather, who we had little contact with, lived in this small coastal town in Bunjalung country and my mum wanted to reconnect with him. I had already undergone social rejection and settled into a social group, so I was not particularly happy about having to start all over again. I also did not really grasp the magnitude of the urge to belong as a family that my mum was experiencing. Her upbringing was seasoned with rejections and separations and so when the opportunity arose later in her life to have a relationship with her father, it trumped all previous connections to the people and places we had known.

Although the environment was lovely with the many beaches and subtropical rainforest tracks, the community seemed to be less welcoming of queer people, so I did not out myself as bisexual. I am not even sure I had the label for myself at this point, but I recall a lack of representation in the relationships around me both at school and the adults in the

community. Pacey et al. (2019) studied community population size and attitudes toward sexual and gender diverse people and concluded that small communities, such as the one I lived in, need more LGBTIQ+ resources to promote health and wellbeing and the visibility of the sexual and gender diverse identities to help LGBTIQ+ youth feel validated and seen.

The only gay person who I recall during my first year on the coast was one of my coworkers at my first job in a fish and chips shop and he was adamantly closeted until many years later. Charles paid particular attention to his appearance and had a giveaway intonation combined with many sighs and animated hands and I made assumptions regarding his sexuality due to these features, which many gay men can struggle with (Provence et al., 2014). Whilst I knew him as the only gay person in town, he seemed determined against holding that mantle, and would often try to engage in the seedy banter about women that the young men his age often did. Many gay men in Australia still experience the tensions of trying to present as masculine as possible in a way that is not authentic (Thepsourinthone et al., 2021). But there was something about the way he spoke that felt unnatural and baffling, like watching a five-year-old trying to recite facts from a physics textbook. One got the sense that he never honestly believed or grasped the concepts he spoke about. I remember snorting with laughter when Charles said he “loved vagina” only to realize he was not trying to joke.

“No one says it like that, Charles!” another girl on shift said through laughter.

“Well, I do,” he said nonchalantly before singing “vagina, vagina, vagina!” until the next customer came in, us trying to stifle our laughter and appear somewhat professional.

I could understand why Charles tried to fit in, even though the other guys spoke about girls in grossly sexualized ways. Ueno (2005) argued that sexual minority adolescents experience higher levels of interpersonal stressors and may conceal or do not disclose their sexuality for fear of rejection. Gay people were always the butt of jokes (Thepsourinthone et al., 2021), and whilst the prejudices were not hostile enough in our community that one could imagine bashings and assaults, interpersonal jabs were rampant. It just seemed safer to ‘play it straight’. I was doing the same thing; I just did not know it at the time. Though not everyone was happy to ‘play it straight’ and it was the last person I expected who flipped my views of ‘normal’—it was my sister as we learned about ourselves.

Chapter three: (2006) trans what?

For the beginning of my adolescence, I had few reference points for ‘trans,’ ‘transgender’ or ‘gender diversity’ at the time; all that I knew is that I loved my sibling who wanted to be a girl. When my dad would come to visit, he was encouraging of my sibling’s feminine expression and made references to people he knew that were “just like she was when they were young.” Most other sources were not so normalized. School peers as young as twelve joked about ‘trannies’ and ‘she-males’ as though they were some kind of ‘boogey-monsters.’ Movies such as ‘Silence of the Lambs’ and crime shows displayed trans people as mentally unstable, deviant, and frightening.

I remember watching the film with disgust and asking, ‘Why does Buffalo Bill keep hunting these women?’ and was told ‘It’s because he wants to be a girl,’ as if that were some kind of justification, or that only really sick and twisted people could think like that. Often these characters were feared for their perceived difference and there was a perception that they were threatening and unsafe to be around. I could not believe someone would want to be a girl that badly that they made a human vest for it. Indeed, this idea that transgender women are deviant and abusive was a very hurtful representation. In reality, trans and gender diverse people are far more likely to be the victims of assault than are other members of the general population (Hughto et al., 2022; Strauss et al., 2017).

This was alarming as an adolescent, to hear that my younger sister might receive bullying and harassment because of who she was. In fact, statistically, she was at a higher risk of depression, anxiety, suicide, and violence due to the discrimination trans people face (Strauss et al., 2017) compared with cisgender people her age (Lawrence et al., 2015). I took the role of ally and protective big sister very seriously, but I was not the one that introduced Violet to the trans word. That honor belongs to some daytime television program playing one day when we were both at home. I only have a vague recollection of the episode as I was texting friends at the time, but I remember my sister was glued to the screen, unnaturally so for one of those boring daytime television shows. The episode featured a young person assigned male who had felt for a very long time that she was a girl. They talked about how she found out she was trans and eventually sought hormone treatment through puberty blockers.

At the time in Australia, gender affirming hormones were only available *via* the Family Law Court which authorized this under ‘special medical procedure’ in adolescents that had been diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria (Kelly, 2004); this episode was encouraging this to be changed. Following the television program, we talked together about these ‘blocker things’ and how it might stop things like voice getting deeper and facial hair for

a bit. The show opened the idea that there were other people out there like my sister, normal, average kids that just so happened to be trans.

Many parents of trans people within Australia report initial low levels of acceptance and working to overcome this to support their children (Strauss et al., 2017) and our mother was no different in this regard. This was particularly true in relation to the notion of gender affirming hormone treatments, of which limited knowledge was available to the public.

“Absolutely not,” Mum said, when my sister mentioned hormone blockers.

“But there was a little boy like me who wanted to be a girl and he went through this stuff to help him be a girl,” Violet explained, after taking a few days to think about how to approach our mum.

“Where did you hear about this? Amber, what have you been putting into your little brother’s head?”

“Nothing, geez, why do you think I had something to do with this?” I said, defensively.

“Well, where else would he have heard about this medical stuff?” she asked pointedly.

“There was something about it on TV the other day, they showed the little girl going through the whole thing. Do not have a go at me,” I grumbled and went back to texting friends on my phone. Mum sighed and turned back to Violet.

“I’m sorry, no. It’s one thing to wear dresses and play with your sister’s makeup and old barbies, but it’s a completely different thing to start making big medical changes to your body.”

“But the other girl-” Violet started to retort but was interrupted.

“I said ‘No!’ I won’t hear any more about this!” Mum said firmly, before stomping off into her room, leaving us together in the lounge room.

What I did not know at the time was my mum was getting a lot of mixed messaging regarding gender care. The internet was less accessible than it is today, and the evidence base for gender affirming treatments in adolescence was in its infancy. One of the only other people who had encouraged accessing a clinic was my father, whose perspectives strongly differed from Violet’s ex-military father.

Violet looked at her feet, defeated and remained silent. Siblings of transgender people may be supportive by “being sensitive to their siblings needs and moods, so they offered opportunities to talk...and engaged them in a shared activity by way of distraction to lift their siblings’ moods” (Wheeler et al., 2019, p. 269). I found myself doing this often throughout my adolescence, as a ‘big sister.’

"I'm sorry, bubba, come here," I said, coaxing her over for a hug. Her tiny frame shuffled over, and her forehead rested on my shoulder.

"How about I get you a wig or something, next time I'm in town?" Violet's head lifted and her eyes lit up.

"It won't be a fancy one because I do not have much money, but I swear I saw some at the cheap shop."

The quality did not matter. My sister wore that scratchy blonde wig until it got too knotty to untangle.

Chapter four: (2007) three is a crowd

In the year of my 15th birthday, a friend moved in to help cover costs of living in my single parent family. Sam was short and blonde and had a textbook butch lesbian vibe with her mohawk and eyebrow piercing and rough demeanor. She was wild, funny, and I found her interesting. She did not stay with us long, just until she got back on her feet after a particularly rough break up.

"I tell ya what, you can't bloody trust bisexual chicks," Sam said to me once between puffs of a cigarette on the veranda.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I remember feeling tense and my heart rate surging, with internal alarm systems firing.

"My ex, she was fucking bi. She ended up cheating on me with some bloke. I'm never dating a bi chick again." She spoke with venom, like the words needed to be spat out before they became too toxic.

This was the first time I had ever heard explicit biphobia and it was very confusing to me. Why did the gender of the person her ex left her for matter more than the betrayal? As such, it is unsurprising that higher levels of biphobia, having a less supportive partner, and being in a heterosexual relationship had statistically significant higher levels of psychological distress for bisexual people (Taylor et al., 2019). Whilst I cannot speak for how Sammy's partner felt, this interaction contributed to my own internalized biphobia and concerns about my identity being erased if I were dating a man.

"Man, that sucks, Sammy. She shouldn't have been using you for some experimental fun like that," my mum added.

"Too right," Sam said whilst coughing a little from the smoke. "Only true lesbians for me."

I frowned to myself and wandered off whilst they kept talking. What did she mean by 'true lesbian'? If lesbians would only date other lesbians, what did that mean for me? Bisexual people often encounter openly

expressed sentiments that bisexuals are less desirable from lesbians, as well as from straight people, which can add to a sense of not belonging with either group (McInnis et al., 2022).

Around this time, I remained in contact with my friend Jasmine—my first sapphic crush, despite now living over 700km away. Smart phones did not exist, and it was before MySpace and Facebook started kicking off. MSN Messenger was what all the kids my age were on. It was a predecessor to Skype and the ‘cool kids’ made screen names with unusual symbols and emojis. From memory, I went by ‘.: Fr3aky Gr33n Ey3z:.’ or something equally cringeworthy. One day Jasmine introduced me to her new boyfriend online. I had not met Brian when I lived in the same town. He was in the year above us and became acquainted with Jasmine shortly after I had left. The three of us spent countless hours messaging each other, sharing details of our days, talking about TV shows and other general topics. One day, Brian dropped me a private message.

“Hey, do you know what polyamory is?”

“Um no, lol. What’s that?”

“It’s where people might feel attracted to multiple people.”

“Oh, okay. Sounds a bit weird,”

“Well, it’s not. It’s like people agree to be together but instead of a couple, it might be like three or more people together.”

“Oh, I see,” I typed. “Do you know anyone like that?”

“Well yeah,” Brian replied “Me.” I remember staring at the screen for a moment, trying to think of what to say next. He better not hurt my friend, I thought.

“Uhhh, does Jasmine know about this?”

“Oh yeah! I told her before I reached out to you.”

“Right, because she’s like my best friend, you know?”

“That’s exactly why I’m telling you. Because you care about her.”

I was not quite picking up what he was putting down for me, so I just continued chatting, as if this was some random fact that he felt like sharing about himself.

“Oh okay, well if it’s something you both have talked about that seems fine.”

“What do you think about me?” He then asked me. It felt sudden, but I responded honestly.

“You seem nice, quite smart, and funny. Jasmine likes you a lot.”

“But what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do YOU like me?”

It like I was bonked over the head with this statement. It finally hit me why Brian was talking about polyamory. Sheff (2015) described the moment of becoming aware of the option of to have open, non-monogamous relationships as the ‘polyamory possibility’, which, for some people like myself, can be mind-blowing.

“Oh!” I replied.

“Yeah”

“I’m very slow!”

“A little,” he added with a laughing emoji “but you’re also very cute” he added with winking emoji.

I felt myself blush. I did not consider it before, but he had a wicked grin and a charming quality to the way we chatted. I immediately opened another chat to Jasmine.

“So, Brian just messaged me. He’s talking about polyamory.”

“Yeah, so what do you think?” she replied.

“I do not know. I had not really thought about it before.”

“Well, I like him, and I also like you, so why not have both?” I was stunned.

“Wait, you like me??”

“Yes! I loved having you over for a swim for more than just cooling off,” she replied with a winky emoji.

“OMG why did you not tell me before I left?!”

“Well, you left pretty suddenly. It’s not like we knew you were going long before you moved.”

She was right. The big shift up the coast had come unexpectedly for me. We even stayed in temporary hotel-type accommodation and with my grandparents before my mum secured a rental.

“That’s true,” I replied, whilst cursing my relocation. “It’s just a shame I’m so far away.”

“But we can chat, have phone calls and visit now and then, so what do you think?” At the same time, my other conversation with Brian was flashing as well. I replied to them both:

“So, I guess I’m your girlfriend now?” I received grinning and kissy emojis in reply.

Suddenly I was in a triad with my best friend and her boyfriend. It felt extremely exciting and exclusive, which is a common strong reaction to learning of polyamory (Sheff, 2019). I did not know anyone else in a romantic arrangement like this, so it also felt like our special little secret since other people would not understand. Simultaneously, it also felt abnormal, wrong, and that if people knew, I would be judged as being promiscuous, another strong reaction typical to people learning about the ‘polyamory possibility’ (Sheff, 2015, 2019).

The relationship was exclusively long distance and for the duration we were together I only recall meeting in person twice with Brian, twice with Jasmine and only once with the three of us together simultaneously. One time Brian came to watch a choir performance that I had traveled to Sydney to deliver. I thought it was so sweet he wanted to travel to meet me, and we caught up in between my shows. I stayed with my dad during the trip, and I did not want dad knowing Brian was my boyfriend, so I said he was my best friend’s boyfriend, which also happened to be true. Neither of my parents really knew my situation, and I was too fearful of anticipated judgment if they found out, despite not having evidence that they would.

The only time I spent together with both my boyfriend and girlfriend was during a visit I made back to their hometown. I remember making extra effort into my appearance and wore make up, a rarity to this day. We met at the local shopping complex and excitedly group hugged when I arrived. It felt electric, like energy buzzing through my whole body. We walked down the street with Brian holding each of our hands and Jasmine and I both giggled as we headed to a secluded area in a park. Jasmine admitted she had a respiratory illness, so she did not want to kiss.

“But do not let that stop you two!” she added with a grin.

“Are you sure this doesn’t bother you,” I asked her in between kisses from Brian.

“No! Why would it bother me watching my two favorite hot people make out in front of me?”

We both made sure to run our hands through her hair and up her thigh since she could not kiss back. When I stayed at her place that night, her mum offered me the older brother’s bed since he was away at university.

“No, that’s okay! Jasmine and I like reading together before we sleep, like old times.”

We shared glances and I tried to keep my excitement contained. I do not think I fooled her mother that I was purely innocent in this situation, but nonetheless, she did not protest.

In hindsight, I do wish we had more opportunities to be together in person, as text-based conversations can be misinterpreted. My emotional maturity was also not yet at the level required to navigate a triad respectfully whilst also trying to understand my own emotions and thoughts. It ended almost as abruptly as it began, with Jasmine frustrated that I was trying to steal her boyfriend and Brian deciding to end things with me to try and salvage his relationship with the girlfriend he saw most days, rather than support the girlfriend he saw a few times a year.

The breakup with my first girlfriend and the first boyfriend I had been intimate with hit me particularly hard because it felt so isolating. It was not the mutual parting ways from all parties, but rather a relationship I was invited into then thrown out from, losing my closest friend in the process. I had no one to speak to about this, because I had not told anyone else about my situation, contributing to a sense of isolation, low mood, and hopelessness.

Chapter five: (2008) so this is all normal?

When I moved to Sydney, I kept my sexuality private, though this school was the first one I had been to with openly gay and lesbian relationships amongst peers. It was the year that Katy Perry's song "I Kissed a Girl" came out, and I remember discussing this with my step-mum Simone at the time.

"I really do not like some of the lyrics," Simone said "something about experimental game, it's just a bit ridiculous. Though one thing it does get right it is no big deal."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, who here has ever kissed a girl or thought about kissing a girl?" she asked and raised her hand. My brother and father did too. I sheepishly raised mine as well.

"See," she said "Normal."

"You've kissed a girl?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah! I am bisexual. I've had relationships with women before I met your father." Simone explained.

She spent some time talking about her experiences, being the first-time bisexuality was normalized for me by an adult. It was a refreshing change to the messages I had received in the past.

"Oh, there is someone I'd like you to meet sometime," Simone said.

She was referring to one of her ex-partners and close friends. I had the opportunity to meet them a few months later. As we headed to Simone's parents' house, she took me aside and explained.

“Now, you’ll be meeting Ace. He uses He/Him pronouns. You might hear my family refer to him as Allie, but he prefers Ace.”

“Why would your family call him Allie?” I asked, confused.

“Because that’s what he was known as when we were dating previously. Just be mindful not to use She/Her even if you hear someone else doing it.”

“Why did he change his name?” I asked.

“Well, he’s a trans man, and chose a name that felt more masculine for him.”

Somehow it was not until she explained it explicitly did it start to make sense to me. Since Simone said she was bi and this was a male partner, I had not really assumed that once he was assumed to be female.

“Oh hey, Allie is coming? How has she been?” Simone’s brother asked.

“Ace, and he has been good.”

“What?” he asked, with an incredulous look.

“He, not she, and he goes by Ace now,” Simone explained, exasperated.

It was a key moment for me to witness modelling of allyship. Chen, Joel & Castro Lingl (2023) found LGBT+ people described good allies with three key themes of being non-prejudiced, taking action, and having humility. In a brief interaction, I could see the importance of these principles, particularly taking action, instead of remaining passive.

Ace arrived shortly after this interaction and introduced himself. He was short and had sandy hair slightly longer than buzz length and wore a men’s shirt and jeans. There was not anything feminine about him, so it was kind of odd to hear him being misgendered. I think what came to mind most, was just how much of an average guy Ace was. He liked golf, collecting antiques watching movies, and worked in a typical white collar office job. He had a bit of a chest, but some bigger guys did too. From my limited exposure and messaging about gender diversity, I expected the first trans person I met to be a tattoo artist or fashion designer for drag shows. It was a nice normalizing contrast to know that trans people can be, and often are, just everyday folk.

Chapter six: (Late 2009 – 2011) my light

After several eventful years, I was living independently and relied on public transport. It was during a long bus trip that I met my life partner. He smiled at me, with semi-recognition on his face.

“Hey, you’re one of Mandy’s friends, aren’t you? I’m Kevin.”

“Oh hey, yeah, I vaguely remember running into you a few years ago. I think you tried to explain trigonometry to me. It was not much help though; my brain still isn’t built for math,” I laughed “I haven’t seen you in ages!”

“Yeah,” he said scratching his head “I kind of dropped out after year 10.”

“Really? You’re so smart though”.

“Thanks,” he laughed “The anxiety got to me though. I just could not hack it. I’m doing my chef apprenticeship right now. I’m off to a shift now, actually”.

“Oh cool. I dropped out too, but I’ve enrolled to go back starting next year when I’ve got things a bit more settled. I’m off to a stupid Centrelink appointment. Feels like I’m going nearly every day these days.”

“Good on you for planning to go back,” he said with a genuine smile.

I blushed a little bit. I had felt like a failure for needing to take time off school after all of the housing and income stress over the last few months. It was nice to hear someone see the other side of it.

“Well, this is my stop, hopefully we run into each other again,” I said with a smile.

“Why do not you take my number so that we can make that happen. I’d like to go out for coffee sometime if you’re interested.”

Before long, we were dating and hanging out between his work shifts and texting regularly. My living situation abruptly changed, and I ended up living with my boyfriend within only a few months of dating him. I think anyone could have predicted this would have been disastrous, but I did not have many other options. We made sure we each had our own bedrooms, so we had some space to ourselves when we needed it.

That first year together was challenging and had its teething issues. Both of us were trying to navigate independence and our first meaningful relationship whilst I was also dealing with my own mental health challenges overcoming some of my negative past experiences. To try and better understand my epilepsy I saw a rude neurologist who, upon hearing I was seventeen and living alone with my boyfriend, ended up prescribing me folic. My GP later explained to me that folic acid is prescribed to women during pregnancy. I threw the pill bottle out and would not need them again until 8 years later, well past my adolescence. I did not receive answers regarding my pseudo-seizures until my late twenties, thus beyond the scope of this critical autoethnography. However, these experiences of regional health care prejudice contributed to a delayed diagnosis and unnecessary distress, pain, and disruptions to my daily life.

As our relationship progressed, Kevin spoke to me more about his challenges in high school, particularly as peers had been harsh toward him.

“First, they teased me because of my weight, so then I started walking for hours of a night, getting fitter and feeling better. That did not matter though, they

then started teasing me that I was gay and throwing slurs around and threatening to fight me.”

“That’s awful!” I said “Why did they even say you were gay anyway. Not that there is anything wrong with it, just where did they even get that from.”

“Oh, that was kind of my fault” he said sheepishly. “I got challenged to gay chicken² and I ended up kissing the guy. Never wore it down afterwards.”

“Oh yikes, I nearly got into the same situation. I chickened out though.”

“Aw, missed out on kissing a girl, huh?” he joked.

“Well, I mean, that time I did.”

“Oh! that’s interesting, tell me more.”

I looked away and started feeling embarrassed. I had not meant to tell anyone about my time with Jasmine. I tried to dismiss it, saying,

“It’s nothing, do not worry.”

Kevin was persistent and kept nudging and tickling me until I told him briefly about my past girlfriend. He nodded and smiled and did not sexualize it at all, just treated it like any other relationship I have had.

“It doesn’t bother you?” I asked cautiously.

“Why would it bother me?” he asked confused.

“Well, some people do not trust bisexual people won’t cheat on their partners.”

“There is nothing wrong with liking lots of people,” he said “I do not really like guys, but there are some things I would not mind trying someday. Same for you, you should feel comfortable to look at whoever you like. That doesn’t mean you want to leave me.”

“How can you say that, aren’t you jealous?” I asked bewildered.

“Nah, come on, I’ll show you.” He took me out to the shops and encouraged me to discretely check out other women and whispered things like “Isn’t she pretty?” and “doesn’t she have a nice butt.” I was so embarrassed and buried my head into his chest whilst he laughed. Previous boyfriends had told me things like “Just do not go making out with other girl” and “I do not want to see you looking at anyone.” This was the first partner that was not just accepting but encouraging me to acknowledge my attraction to women.

Kevin and I lived about a 40-minute drive away from my mum and sister, although neither Kevin nor I had a car. Mum did still allow me to come over for the night, or have Violet stay with us on weekends or during school holidays. One night Violet was visiting my house and her head had been shaven because of a bad case of headlice. I know she had

been trying to grow her hair out at the time. As Kevin was cooking dinner, Violet began to sniffle and cry.

“Hey, what’s wrong bubba?”

“I’m so ugly” she cried “I’ll never be pretty, I hate myself. I’m so ugly.” I grabbed her and cuddled her close to my chest. It hurt my heart hearing her say those words.

“You are beautiful, so beautiful. Even without your hair, darling. I promise.”

It was hard to hold back my own tears. How could she feel that way about herself, I thought. But hair can be an important part of feeling feminine (Coleman et al., 2022). Ironically, at the time of writing this, my sister styles a very similar short cut, but now of her own volition and she recognizes the importance of loving oneself at every stage. I did not have much money, but the next day I took her to a secondhand shop so we could find a few dresses and accessories she could have. I remember seeing her little smile as we picked out things together and then went for a milkshake.

Chapter seven: (2011-2016) educating and allyship

Being an ally to trans people is more than just being supportive. It involves being non-prejudiced, being willing to speak out against discrimination, and knowing your place and when to be humble when allowing for trans people to speak for themselves (Chen, Joel & Castro Lingl, 2023). Toward the end of my final year at high school, my sister was starting to find her voice, and I was deciding on how I can make a meaningful future for myself whilst supporting others. My school offered a subject called Society and Culture. The classroom was a fairly understanding space with a small class and explored the topics of cultural norms and traditions across different societies. When the topic of gender came up, I spoke about my sister and experiences as her sibling, watching her challenging typical male gender roles.

“Wait, so your brother thinks he’s a girl?” one of my classmates asked.

“Yep, she is a girl,” I explained.

“But, like, she was born a boy, right?”

“She was not born a boy. People just assumed she was.”

“It sounds like Amber’s sister might be a transgender young person,” my teacher explained. “There are some people whose identity doesn’t match what we assign them at birth.”

The staff were very understanding, encouraging the other students to adopt a similar perspective. Prior to graduating, I made sure I spoke with the school counselor and the deputy principal to advise that my sister would be enrolling in high school soon and I wanted the school to be supportive of her gender identity. Although my sister did not choose to wear the female uniform until her senior years, the school was prepared for this to occur sooner, if requested.

As I got closer to graduating, I applied to University of Queensland, as there were not many universities in the area and I figured if I had to travel, I might as well choose a metropolitan university. I had settled on studying Social Work, as the degree promoted social justice and addressing disadvantages, and I was inspired to help young people in tough situations from my lived experience. After ‘gate-crashing’ a few of my lectures, Kevin decided to sign up for the mid-year enrollment of Social Work as well. Kevin and I did not know anyone in the Brisbane area, but we share-housed and worked on getting through studies together, each of us doing a few casual jobs. It was partway through my degree when my sister was around 11 or 12 that she spoke to me about exploring her sexuality.

“I kind of like girls,” she said “but I think I am a girl. It’s very confusing.”

“Well, you could be trans and a lesbian you know,” I told her. I remember my dad explaining the same thing to me when I was younger and wondering about the intersection of gender and sexuality.

“A lesbian?!”

“Well yeah, you feel you’re a girl, right?”

“Yeah...”

“So, if you liked girls, that would make you a lesbian.”

“And if I liked guys, would I be gay?”

“Well, no. You’d be straight. Or you could like both and be pan or bi like me,” I said.

“Wow, it’s so confusing, but I think I get it.”

“Just be who you are and like who you like, bubba,” I said and wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

Within the TransPathways study (Straus et al., 2017), nearly half of parental respondents realized their child was trans during the child’s adolescence between ages 13 - 19. Sometime toward my final years in university, my sister called me one night and explained she wanted to come out to Mum again. Gender was not something she had really mentioned again since the daytime television show all those years prior. I felt the signs were obvious with her gender expression, growing her hair long,

wearing nail polish and accessories, choosing feminine clothing outside of school clothes. Despite this, it had not been an overt discussion within the household.

“It did not really go well,” my sister sighed. “Mum got upset and cried.”

“I’m sorry, honey. What happened?”

“She was worried she did something wrong as a parent. It felt awful.”

“Oh, yikes, I’m so sorry.”

“Rick (mum’s husband) came and calmed her down,” she explained. “Eventually we started talking about what I’d like to do, like about my name and pronouns and stuff. She’s agreed to call me she and her more often.”

“That’s wonderful to hear, sorry it was so tough, though.”

I spoke to Mum about it and after she had had time to cool off. She recognized it probably was not the best reaction she’s ever had.

“Ya think?!” I retorted.

“I know, I know!” Mum said exasperated “I reacted out of fear. I’ve been so worried something bad would happen to her if we acknowledged she was this way.”

“But it’s nothing new, Mum.”

“I know,” she sighed. “It might be wrong of me to say but there is a sense of grief for the little person I knew.”

The concept of loss and grief is a common roadblock identified in research related to parents of transgender people (Lev, 2004; Zamboni, 2006). Although it is a bit odd, as my sister never died or disappeared. However, ambiguous loss is exactly the lens Catalpa and McGuire (2018) encouraged to frame the complexity of trans youth’s experience of parental reactions to their disclosure being both acceptance and rejection. In some ways, as a family we had to let go of any perception of maleness, of a brother, of a son, and instead embrace a sister and daughter.

“But she is still there, and she’s always going to be my baby.” It was slow and gradual, but I did notice a change with my Mum following this conversation.

Although the signs had been there for a long time, it was different when a now teenaged child comes out as trans. Mum now referred to having two daughters and supported my sister in getting more gender affirming clothing.

“I’m still really worried someone will do something horrible to her,” Mum told me one day when she let Violet go out of the house on her own in full feminine expression.

“I know, Mum, but she’s got good friends and will look after herself. It’s better than worrying about what could happen if we did not let her be herself.”

In the end, we cannot shelter young people from every negative experience. As much as it hurts, we must let them grow and explore, providing the safe hands for them to return to when they need it (Mercer, 2015).

Epilogue: living authentically

This critical autoethnography has specifically captured key experiences of my adolescence from ages 12 to 24 related to bisexuality and supporting my sister through her identity as a trans girl. There are many other reflections and events that were unable to be included within this scope. I came out to my mother in my mid-twenties following problematic dialogue about bisexuality and being asked why I cared so much—well because I am Bi! I have never heard a negative word about bisexuality from my mother since and she actively shares supportive LGBTIQ+ messages. I came out to my friends and broader workplace in my late twenties and now dress like a walking rainbow. My sister socially transitioned in her final years of high school, including wearing the girls uniform and a vibrant pink dress to her formal. She is now on estrogen and presenting as herself in all contexts. The experience of being an older sister to a trans girl has given me the unique opportunity to learn and practice acceptance of diversity and advocacy from a young age, which have been invaluable attributes to my professional career as a Social Worker working with multiply marginalized children and youth, including LGBTIQ+ young persons. Occasionally, I still find myself wondering if I am going to be judged for living authentically, and there is some residual doubt in the validity of my sexuality. Even throughout writing this manuscript, I questioned the merit of such a study. I attribute this to the profound impact of the invisibility and erasure of bisexual identities within the socio-cultural and political context of my adolescence. It was through exposure to, and acceptance by, other queer people and passionate allies that I felt most at peace. It is my hope and aspiration that all young people within the LGBTIQ+ rainbow experience the same.

Limitations of this autoethnography

This study is limited to the perspective of one participant: A bisexual woman reflecting on her youth (ages 12–24) in Australia and how experiences of belonging influenced her mental health and wellbeing. This autoethnography is not designed to be generalized to all bisexual young women, however, there may be some aspects of this study that are relatable

and salient to some other young bisexual women navigating the space of belonging.

Future implications

Future studies could explore the experiences of other cisgender siblings of trans people, as well as experiences of bisexual women in Australia and elsewhere to better understand the experiences of these groups. As adolescence is a period of significant identity formation and development, it would be particularly helpful to understand how sexual and gender identity is developed and influenced during this pivotal time-period.

Notes

1. Use of first-person language throughout this study denotes the narrative and perspectives of the first author.
2. Gay Chicken is a dare-based game where two same sex people try to get as close to kissing their partner as possible. Winning is achieved by with mutual kissing or being the more assertive partner who does not back away from the challenge.

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Data availability statement

Not applicable.

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