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## Uncomfortable encounters

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# Introduction

The 'hetero world' – well, *that* term. I hate it. But if you want to call it that... I sometimes get the feeling I should 'act normal as that is already crazy enough' and let's all be average. When, for example, I go to a gay bar, I don't have that feeling. I like it very much. It's liberating. I sometimes hear people say 'Why do we still need separate bars?' and I say 'Stop it, I'm happy about it.' And why do we need a separate website? Well, yes, you're right. It would be fine if it all went together. But if you do that immediately then, well, we're not ready for it. Not at all. It would be a disaster. I actually like it, that open vibe; you can do what you want and be who you are. And whether that's jumping on a boat during Gay Pride, or hanging out in a basement in leather gear, or being a master of painting...or whatever. Do your thing. And I like that very much. (Koen, 25 years)

Koen, a Dutch young man who is attracted to other men, discussed his need for separate gay venues and spaces. He sometimes meets people who do not understand why these places still exist. After all, in Dutch society people can be openly gay. He, too, wishes that separate places were no longer necessary. However, he perceives mainstream society to be 'a hetero world' in which expectations regarding what is 'normal' constrict him. He feels limited in and uncomfortable about how he can express himself in the hetero world; hence he sometimes chooses to visit gay bars and websites. This dissertation focuses on Dutch same-sex oriented young people and their experiences of living in a tolerant, yet heteronormative, society in which being 'normal' is highly valued.

## Dutch tolerance

In the Netherlands, youth grow up in a society known for its high tolerance of homosexuality. The Netherlands was a frontrunner in implementing equal rights legislation for lesbian and gay people. In 1994, the country adopted the Equal Treatment Act, to protect against discrimination on the ground of a heterosexual or homosexual orientation, amongst other grounds. Furthermore, in 2001 the Netherlands was the first country in the world to legalize marriage for same-sex couples. The country ranks high in lists comparing legal equality and social tolerance of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in European countries and globally (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

2014; ILGA 2014, 2017<sup>4</sup>; Kuyper 2016; Kuyper, Iedema, & Keuzenkamp 2013). In 2014, the majority of the Dutch population reported having positive attitudes toward homosexuality, and the proportion of people with a negative attitude had decreased to 7% (Kuyper 2016).

Tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality could be considered a general societal norm (Buijs, Hekma, & Duyvendak 2011; Hekma 2011). Being tolerant is considered a virtue and part of Dutch identity (Gordijn 2010; Hekma 2011; Van Nieuwkerk 2004). Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens note that 'whereas lesbian and gay rights have a rather short history in the Netherlands, they are nonetheless mobilized as exemplary of a Dutch 'tradition of tolerance'' (2010: p. 970).

The origins of Dutch tolerance have been traced back to the wars of religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Davis & Nencel 2011). Persecuted religious minorities from other European countries found a safe place in the Netherlands, provided that their practices were not manifested in public. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious tolerance and a conflict avoidance mentality were basic ingredients for the process of 'pillarization.' The evolution of pillars in which religious, political, and socioeconomic groups organized and demarcated their own institutional arrangements and cultural life – including their own schools, trade unions, sports clubs, and political parties – ensured the existence of their own social group, identity, and values (Davis & Nencel 2011; Keuzenkamp & Bos 2007; Mepschen & Duyvendak 2012). From the 1950's onward, depillarization took place in the wake of secularization. Nevertheless, the country preserved its tolerant image through respecting the autonomy and participation of all social groups. Pragmatism and consensus seeking are highly regarded and differences are tolerated to avoid societal conflicts (Davis & Nencel 2011; Ghorashi 2002; Keuzenkamp & Bos 2007; Ten Hooven 2001). This culture of tolerance has earned the Netherlands its reputation of being liberal and of seeking pragmatic, political, and legal solutions in tolerating traditionally controversial practices, such as homosexuality, abortion, the consumption of soft drugs, euthanasia, and sex work (Hekma & Duyvendak 2011; Mepschen & Duyvendak 2012).

When it comes to homosexuality, there are two relevant issues that strengthen the tolerant image of the Dutch: Namely the self-image of the Dutch being liberal toward sexuality and sexual morality, and the self-image that Dutch society is egalitarian, which features the belief that all people in society are equal, also irrespective of their sexual orientation (Schalet 2011; Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Wekker 2016). Many Dutch people cherish

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<sup>4</sup>In the ILGA's annual European Rainbow map, which maps and ranks European countries on the human rights situation for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people), the ranking of the Netherlands dropped from 4 in 2014 to 10 in 2017. On the whole spectrum of LGBTI, the Netherlands could not be considered a European frontrunner in legislation anymore, since other countries such as Malta, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Belgium have progressed more on constitutional developments and legislation on gender identity and intersex.

and are committed to maintaining this image of being tolerant, since it is central to their national identity.<sup>2</sup>

## Normalization

In the wake of (almost) accomplished legal equality and high levels of social tolerance, expressions of overt homophobia have declined. Scholars in Western countries observe that homosexuality has become normalized (Richardson & Monro 2012; Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen 1999). Normalization refers to 'processes of social acceptance, so that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people are not seen as any different from anyone else' (Richardson & Monro 2012: p. 1). The visibility of LGB people is no longer controversial and they can easily enter mainstream societal and political arenas. This process of normalization potentially transforms the way same-sex oriented young people experience their same-sex sexuality.

For decades, the conventional academic paradigm on gay and lesbian youth focused on vulnerability to stigmatization, on having to come to terms with their sexual orientation, on coming out as an important stage of sexual identity development, and on increased risk for mental health problems. Yet, this paradigm does not reflect or represent the experiences of all same-sex oriented young people. It is now no longer exceptional for same-sex oriented young people to openly express their sexual orientation at an early age. Many of them perceive themselves to be normal, instead of stigmatized or 'at risk.' In addition or subsequent to the struggle and risk paradigm, scholars have pointed to the importance of exploring young people's sexuality experiences in light of normalization processes and taking into account their individuality (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Diamond 2008; Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013; Savin-Williams 2005). Some of them call for more attention to individualized emancipation, change, resilience, fluid sexuality, and positive aspects of sexuality in the lives of same-sex oriented young people (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Diamond 2008; Savin-Williams 2005).

In a society in which homosexuality is normalized, sexual identity may become a less central feature in people's lives. As a consequence, sexual identity expression, identity politics, labeling, and LGB-specific venues and networks may be less meaningful or important for same-sex oriented young people. Savin-Williams even speaks of 'post-gay teenagers' who 'are increasingly redefining, reinterpreting, and renegotiating their sexuality such that possessing a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity is practically meaningless' (2005: p. 1).

<sup>2</sup>A body of literature on homonationalism describes that acceptance of homosexuality has become a symbol of Dutch tolerance, at the expense of a new Other which is assumed to threaten Dutch identity or Western modernity: migrants, people of color, and Muslims. As a consequence, anti-migrant, racist, and anti-Muslim sentiments are sometimes justified or defended in the name of protecting lesbian and gay people and progressive sexual and gender culture in the Netherlands (Buijs et al. 2011; Duyvendak 2015; Hekma & Duyvendak 2011; Mepschen et al. 2010; Wekker 2016).

## Uncomfortable encounters

While Dutch tolerance and processes of normalization provide a solid foundation for the acceptance of a same-sex orientation, Dutch studies present a less optimistic picture. LGB young people still enjoy less psychosocial wellbeing and life satisfaction, and experience more victimization and suicidality compared to heterosexual counterparts (e.g., Collier, Bos, & Sandfort 2013a; Kuyper 2015a; Van Beusekom et al. 2015; Van Bergen et al. 2013). Being open about one's same-sex orientation is not self-evident for all same-sex oriented young people, and adjusting behavior or avoiding LGB topics or particular places is not rare (Kuyper 2015a; Van Bergen & Van Lisdonk 2010; Van Lisdonk & Van Bergen 2010a).

Apparently, normalization has not smoothed away all inequalities or is not 'within reach' for all young same-sex oriented people. Several international scholars have observed that normalization and living a 'post-gay' life is more available to privileged subgroups such as higher educated, middle- or upper-class, urban or suburban, young White people living in tolerant, liberal environments (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013). Thus, although specific contexts allow for a post-gay life or for celebrating a gay or lesbian identity, large-scale studies show that, on average, a same-sex orientation still impacts on participating in Dutch society and on individuals' wellbeing.

It seems as though a same-sex orientation still matters and may entail 'uncomfortable encounters.' I understand uncomfortable encounters to encompass all interactions that unintentionally or intentionally mark a same-sex orientation in subtle or explicit ways, while it is unnecessary or should not matter. This concept is not synonymous to blatant or overt discrimination, rejection, and violence and also focuses on subtle interactions. Uncomfortable encounters occur daily and include mundane occurrences and unintentional comments that make one realize they are different and hence feel uncomfortable. Uncomfortable encounters communicate the message that a same-sex orientation is not 'natural,' expected, or part of the normative. Examples are the uncomfortable encounter with oneself to embrace a same-sex orientation; other people being uncomfortable around same-sex oriented people; experiencing awkward, annoying, or distressful interactions with others related to one's same-sex orientation; being confronted with stereotypes, prejudice, or jokes; a same-sex partner not being taken seriously or being ignored; and explicit attention to one's same-sex orientation whereas it should not matter. Anticipating uncomfortable encounters may, for example, lead to adjusting one's behavior or speech, or thinking twice before being open about a same-sex orientation or the gender of one's partner.

The concept uncomfortable encounters shares similarities with the academic concept 'microaggressions,' which are described by Sue (2010a, 2010b) as the commonplace

verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages, particularly to members of targeted social groups. I prefer the term 'uncomfortable encounters,' since it highlights the subtleties of the interactions within the Dutch culture of tolerance, rather than micro-aggressions, which bear connotations of violence and aggression.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, uncomfortable encounters do not only take place between heterosexual and same-sex oriented people, but also among same-sex oriented people. As will become clear in this dissertation, same-sex oriented people also police each other and this can be attributed to their position within heteronormative society as well as to the sexual orientation and gender norms in lesbian and gay communities. The role of heteronormativity and gender is pivotal to an exploration of how a same-sex orientation impacts the lives of young people.

## Heteronormativity and gender conformity

Heterosexuality remains the societal norm and this sexual orientation is assumed, expected, and naturalized. Explicit expressions of same-sex sexuality can evoke intolerance. Visible intimacy between two men or two women is met with more objections than intimacy between a woman and a man (Keuzenkamp & Kuypers 2013; Kuypers 2016). The very existence of Dutch national policy to promote equality and social acceptance, and to combat discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (TK 2012/2013) emphasizes that LGB people have an unequal position in society and that the government underscores the importance of attention to inequalities.

In a society that is heteronormative, yet is proud of its tolerance, same-sex oriented young people receive different kind of messages, such as: 'Homosexuality is accepted in the Netherlands,' 'Heterosexuality is the norm,' 'Homosexuality is fine as long as you act normal and don't express yourselves too much,' 'Everyone deserves to live their lives as they want to,' 'Be yourself, but be normal' (Buijs et al. 2011; Felten, Van Hoof, & Schuyf 2010; Keuzenkamp 2010; TK 2012/2013). What these messages have in common is the implication that society favors heterosexuality over non-heterosexuality, and that non-heterosexual expressions can only be tolerated as long as they do not conflict with being 'normal,' according to heteronormative standards. Exploring how Dutch same-sex oriented young people experience limitations or difficulties in expressing their same-sex orientation gives insight into the conceptualization of heteronormativity and its impacts on the lives of same-sex oriented young people.

The heteronormative conceptualization of sexual orientation is characterized by two

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<sup>3</sup>Similar to academic criticism regarding microaggressions, I acknowledge that uncomfortable encounters is conceptually not rigorous enough to measure as a construct in quantitative research and that is not my intention.

principles. First, sexual orientation and gender are closely interrelated. The conflation between heterosexuality, gender, and sex is embodied in the double meaning of the English word 'sex,' which refers to both bodies and erotic activity. As Jackson writes:

The linguistic confusion is not a mere accident, but tells us something about the male dominated and heterosexually ordered culture in which we live. It is commonly assumed that being born with a particular set of genitals (sex organs) defines one as of a particular 'sex' (female or male), which means that one will normally become properly feminine or masculine (the appropriate gender) and will desire and engage in erotic activity with 'the opposite sex,' with someone possessing a different set of sex organs from one's own (1999: p. 6).

Because of this interrelation – or conflation – of sexual orientation and gender, normative gender expression implies normative sexual orientation expression. This is resonated in widespread notions that heterosexual men are expected to be masculine and heterosexual women to be feminine (Connell 1992; Jackson 1999). As a consequence, stereotypes of gay men and lesbian women are based on the notion that they do not conform to gender norms (Herek 2002; Whitley 2001). Stereotypical gay men are presumed to be unmasculine and stereotypical lesbian women to be unfeminine. Vice versa, Rieger and colleagues (2010) found that in public contexts, gender nonconformity is sometimes perceived as a marker of a non-heterosexual orientation. Thus, heterosexual nonconformity is conflated with gender nonconformity.

This association is not without consequences. Negative attitudes toward homosexuality have been associated with disapproval of gender nonconformity (Dewaele et al. 2009; Keuzenkamp 2010; Lehavot & Lambert 2007). International literature demonstrates that gender nonconforming LGB young people experience more stigmatization or victimization than gender conforming LGB young people (e.g., D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger 2002; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks 2006; Russell et al. 2011; Toomey et al. 2010). In the Netherlands, this picture is less clear: Two Dutch studies found that gender nonconforming same-sex attracted young people reported more homophobic perceived victimization compared to gender conforming young people (Baams et al. 2013; Van Beusekom et al. 2015), while Kuyper (2015a) did not observe an effect of gender nonconformity on experiencing such victimization.

The second principle of the general conceptualization of sexual orientation is that gender is perceived to be a binary: The notion that a person is either a woman or a man. Since heterosexuality implies being sexually oriented to 'the opposite gender,' homosexuality – as its opposite – is defined as a being sexually orientated to 'the same gender' (Jackson 1999). This logic reifies a binary conceptualization of sexual orientation: A person is either heterosexual or homosexual (Maliepaard 2015a, 2015b;

McLean 2008; Richardson & Monro 2012; Rust 2002). In such a notion, bisexuality is marginalized as a valid sexual orientation. Dutch society, media, and research pay much less attention to bisexuality than to homosexuality. The invisibility of bisexuality obfuscates that within the group of non-heterosexual young people, bisexual experiences are not rare at all. Yet, knowledge of the experiences and needs of bisexual young people is scarce.

In studying heteronormativity, it is vital to acknowledge gender asymmetry in the way gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality are interconnected. Masculinity and femininity are not simply juxtaposed. They are constructed in relation to each other and are often considered complementary. Jackson (2006) notes that women are regularly 'identified and evaluated in terms of their sexual availability/attractiveness to men and their presumed 'place' within heterosexual relationships as wives and mothers' (p. 115). In contrast, 'where a man's heterosexuality goes unquestioned, his gender is less bound to and defined by (hetero)sexuality than that of a woman' (p. 116). Thus, expectations and consequences of gender nonconformity are different for men and women.

By taking into account power dynamics and the multiplicity of gender, Connell's gender theory contributes to garnering insight into gender asymmetry, masculinities, and femininities (Connell 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). In his theory, masculinities and femininities are hierarchically positioned in relation to each other, with hegemonic masculinity as the normative and singular privileged position that endorses the asymmetrical and heteronormative gender order. In an attempt to provide a more adequate conceptualization of femininities, Schippers (2007) put the relationship between masculinity and femininity at the heart of this theory. In this alternative model, 'hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Schippers 2007: p. 94). Femininity can be hegemonic, too, when it supports hegemonic masculinity and the hegemonic gender order.

As a consequence of gender asymmetry, I assume not only that the relation between sexual orientation and gender is different for men and women (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison 2001; Jackson 2006; Richardson & Monro 2012), but also that heteronormativity and the association between same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity work differently for same-sex oriented young men and young women (Bem 2000; Dewaele et al. 2009; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder 1996), with young men and young women facing different issues and challenges.



This dissertation focuses on the experiences of young people. For many young people, sexuality and gender are important themes in their transition to adulthood, and they are particularly sensitive to social messages concerning sexual orientation and gender. In the phase of middle adolescence (age 15–17), they develop awareness that social conventions concerning, for example, appearance and behavior foster cohesion in social groups. Youth become more rigid toward violations of conventions, as gender intensification and pressure toward social conformity peak in adolescence (Heinze & Horn 2014; Horn 2007; Lobel et al. 2004). Thus, young people's perspectives offer a useful lens through which to study these uncomfortable encounters to disclose the societal messages of heteronormative, gender nonconformity they are confronted with in their daily experiences.

## **Research questions and dissertation outline**

In this dissertation, I address how Dutch same-sex oriented young people experience their sexual orientation and how this relates to gender nonconformity, in the context of the Dutch heteronormative, tolerant society. I concentrate on four empirical research questions.

Being confronted with victimization attributed to one's same-sex sexuality is an explicit way same-sex oriented young people are made to feel uncomfortable within society. In Dutch society, same-sex sexuality related victimization such as harassment, jokes, bullying, and violence is not incidental (Keuzenkamp 2010). Since negative attitudes toward homosexuality have been associated with disapproval of gender norm violation (Dewaele et al. 2009; Keuzenkamp 2010; Lehavot & Lambert 2007), gender nonconformity may impact the likelihood of being stigmatized or victimized. Indeed, gender nonconforming lesbian and gay adolescents are less accepted by peers than gender conforming lesbian and gay adolescents (Buijs et al. 2011; Horn 2007).

Literature suggests a gender difference in the relation between gender nonconformity and experiencing same-sex sexuality related victimization. Gender nonconforming men are more severely rejected than gender nonconforming women (Bem 2000), and gender nonconformity is more strongly associated with homosexuality in the case of men compared to women (Dewaele et al. 2009; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder 1996). Hence, it could be expected that same-sex oriented young men experience more same-sex related victimization than same-sex oriented young women, particularly if they do not conform to dominant gender norms.

In the media, anti-gay violence is often portrayed as violent acts by groups of predominantly male youngsters against gay men in the public sphere (Buijs et al. 2011; Schuyf 2009; Tiby 2007). Such explicit anti-gay expressions between young

men can serve to induce men to conform to norms of masculinity, whereas similar group dynamics have not been observed among young women (Buijs et al. 2011; Herek 1986; Kimmel 2004a). While anti-gay violence in public settings appears to particularly target gender nonconforming gay men, the picture may be more nuanced when same-sex sexuality related victimization is investigated in a wider perspective and in other contexts.

In fact, empirical research has been inconclusive concerning whether same-sex attracted young men experience more same-sex sexuality related victimization than young women, and particularly those who are gender nonconforming. Several international and national studies confirm that young men experience more same-sex sexuality related victimization than young women (Almeida et al. 2009; Baams et al. 2013; D'Augelli et al. 2006; Kuyper 2011), and that degree of gender nonconformity impacts on experiencing same-sex sexuality related victimization (Baams et al. 2013; D'Augelli et al. 2002; D'Augelli et al. 2006; Russell et al. 2011; Toomey et al. 2010 Van Beusekom et al. 2015). Yet, other studies do not report gender differences (Katz-Wise & Hyde 2012; Kuyper 2015a) or impact of gender nonconformity on experiencing same-sex sexuality related victimization (Kuyper 2015a). A shortcoming of most studies is that they do not examine the effect of gender and gender nonconformity on experiences of same-sex related victimization in relation to each other. Moreover, while it is acknowledged that processes of stigmatization are contextual (Dovidio 2001), studies have not systematically compared between social contexts.

In chapter 1, I investigate whether the impact of gender nonconformity on the degree of perceived experiences of same-sex sexuality related victimization is stronger for same-sex attracted men than same-sex attracted women in various social contexts. The role of gender and gender nonconformity is investigated simultaneously in the context of parents, extended family, heterosexual friends, school, and strangers. In that chapter, I aim to answer the following research question:

*What is the impact of gender and gender nonconformity on the degree of perceived experiences of same-sex sexuality related victimization in various social contexts?*

The second chapter focuses on the heteronormative conceptualization of sexual orientation as a hetero/homo binary and what this entails for bisexual young people. The visibility of and the attention paid to bisexual people in policy, media, and research are strikingly low, as it is estimated that in Dutch society, there are at least as many people with a bisexual orientation as there are with a homosexual orientation (Keuzenkamp et al. 2012; Kuyper 2006, 2013). One of the reasons for the lack of specific attention to bisexuality is the assumption that bisexual people have similar experiences as gay and lesbian people (and sometimes as heterosexual people), and

that there is no reason to distinguish between these subgroups (Barker et al. 2012b; Oosterhuis & Lipperts 2013).

However, this assumption is incorrect. International studies have shown that compared to gay and lesbian identified people, bisexual identified people experience more problems in several ways: They are less open about their sexual orientation in their social networks, they report more internalized homonegativity, more mental health problems, and more suicidality, and show lower LGB community identification and community involvement (Barker et al. 2012a; Cox et al. 2010; Cox et al. 2011; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks 2005; Herek et al. 2010; Kertzner et al. 2009). In the Netherlands, research on adults shows fairly similar outcomes (Kuyper 2011, 2013; Van Lisdonk & Kooiman 2012), yet the picture for young people is incomplete and inconsistent (Franssens 2010; Kuyper 2011, 2015a).

Specific to bisexual people is that they can face biphobia and be made to feel uncomfortable by both heterosexual and gay and lesbian people. Biphobia refers to the denial of bisexuality as a sexual orientation, the invisibility and marginalization of bisexuality, and stereotypes such as being sexually promiscuous, a threat to families and relationships, and bisexual people taking the 'easy option' (Barker et al. 2012a 2012b; Diamond 2008; Eliason 1997; McLean 2008; Rust 2002).

Although recent Dutch studies have started to compare experiences beyond heterosexual versus homosexual subgroups and increasingly also include bisexual subgroups, a central focus on bisexuality remains scarce in Dutch research (with the exception of Maliepaard 2015a, 2015b; Oosterhuis & Lipperts 2013). Hence, knowledge of specific issues related to bisexual young people is limited. There is also little insight into which bisexual expressions are tolerated and can be normalized, and which bisexual expressions cannot be reconciled with heteronormativity.

Such knowledge is important if Dutch national policy is to be inclusive. It is currently politically correct – and fashionable – in documents and formal language to refer to LHBT (i.e., LGBT) people and emancipation. Nevertheless, explicit visibility of or attention to bisexuality is scarce. Thus, bisexuality remains marginalized under the umbrella of LGBT and is paid mere lip service, while the framing of same-sex sexuality has not fundamentally become more bi-inclusive.

The study presented in chapter 2 aims to provide more knowledge of the experiences of bisexual young people in the Netherlands and the views on bisexuality among same-sex oriented young people. The inclusion of bisexual young people in this study, not only fills a gap in the literature regarding sexual orientation, gender and bisexuality but it also makes clearer the ways same-sex oriented young people conceptualize theirs and others sexual orientation and gender, be it as a fixed binary or as a fluid

spectrum. Moreover, it enables the explorations of which bisexual expressions cannot be reconciled with the heteronormative conceptualization of sexual orientation. Based on these findings, I provide suggestions for a shift toward more bi-inclusive policies. Chapter 2 focuses on the following research question:

*In what ways do bisexual young people differ from homosexual and lesbian young people in how they experience and express their sexual orientation, what unique issues do bisexual young people face, and what does this reveal about the heteronormative conceptualization of sexual orientation?*

In the Netherlands, labeling a same-sex orientation can be an ambiguous process for young people. In other Western societies, scholars have observed that the trend toward the normalization of homosexuality impacts young people's sexual identities and labeling processes (Nash 2013; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman et al. 1999). After all, when same-sex oriented people can be part of mainstream society, labeling a same-sex orientation in conventional ways, such as gay or lesbian, draws attention to their sexual identity and may create distance between themselves and heterosexual peers.

Studies show that among young people, these conventional labels compete with non-labeling (i.e., describing who they like or fall in love with, or saying that they have a boyfriend or a girlfriend) and other ways of labeling such as questioning, queer, using multiple labels or labels that provide space for flexibility and change like bi-curious or pansexual (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Diamond 2008; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman et al. 1999). Savin-Williams (2005) even pointed to a rise in the number of young people considering themselves 'post-gay.' For these people, sexuality is still important, but they find their sexual orientation no longer meaningful in defining who they are.

In the Netherlands, a similar exploration of non-conventional labels or non-labeling, and a post-gay rhetoric could be expected. However, surveys among Dutch same-sex oriented young people showed that the majority still reported using conventional labels to self-identify their sexual orientation (Kuyper 2015a; Van Lisdonk & Van Bergen 2010a). Without knowledge of the meanings young people attach to sexual labels and their motivations to use specific sexual labels, it is difficult to determine how these findings should be interpreted and how this is related to normalization and possible post-gay rhetoric.

The study presented in chapter 3 focuses on how same-sex oriented young people label their sexual orientation to other people and offers an in-depth insight into the labeling processes. Through the lens of labeling same-sex sexuality, I investigate not only the use of labels, but also what specific labels mean for them and why they prefer

conventional labels, non-labeling, or unconventional labels over other sexual labels or non-labeling. What do their labeling processes reveal about the Dutch culture of tolerance and about heteronormativity? Since homosexuality is often associated with gender nonconformity, the association of same-sex sexual labels with gender expression is also studied. In chapter 3, I focus on the following research question:

*How and why do same-sex attracted young Dutch people label their sexual orientation the way they do, and what do their labeling processes reveal about normalization, tolerance, and heteronormativity?*

In the fourth and last empirical study, I focus on Dutch same-sex oriented young people's experiences of visiting lesbian and gay public venues, and particularly the challenges they encountered, in order to gain a better insight into heteronormativity. These venues are interesting to explore since they produce symbolic gay and lesbian identities in reaction to heteronormative society. A sense of community is created through implicit norms and expectations related to sexual identity and gender, based on shared gay and lesbian identities. Even though scholars have observed ambiguity among young generations regarding visiting these venues, since they like to believe that such venues are no longer needed in tolerant societies (Fobear 2012; Lea, De Wit, & Reynolds 2015), visiting these venues proved to be a salient topic in young people's explorations of their same-sex sexuality and meeting other same-sex oriented peers.

In this study, I explore their experiences of comfortably visiting and meeting others in gay and lesbian public venues as a way to investigate the gendered sexual scripts in these venues, and what these scripts reveal about heteronormativity and gender nonconformity. The concept 'sexual script' was introduced by Simon and Gagnon (1984, 1986). Scripts provide instructions in specific contexts or situations on what is appropriate behavior, what is normative, and how behavior should be understood and given meaning to (Simon & Gagnon 1986; Wiederman 2005). They are learned and communicated and offer people guidance about what is expected from them and how to interpret other people's behavior (ibid.). Since sexual scripts are highly gendered, I prefer to use the term 'gendered sexual scripts' (Wiederman 2005).

Scripts in gay and lesbian public venues are constituted in relation to heteronormativity, but are shaped differently because heteronormativity is gendered. More specifically, I assume that these scripts will be different, because gay and lesbian identities are developed in response to heterosexuality, which is characterized by gender asymmetry (Connell 1992; Jackson 2006; Schippers 2007). Central to Connell's gender theory (Connell 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), and reworked by Schippers (2007), is that masculinities and femininities are asymmetrically positioned in the societal gender order because of the privileged position of men and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt

2005; Dempsey et al. 2001; Schippers 2007; Wedgwood 2009). Men and women, and therefore gay men and lesbian women, are differently placed in the heteronormative gender order.

Through exploring the gendered sexual scripts in gay and lesbian public venues, I aim to reflect what they reveal about heteronormativity and gender nonconformity. I theorize that the different scripts and the specific challenges addressed by same-sex attracted young men and women can be explained because of a fundamentally different position of gay men and lesbian women in the heteronormative asymmetrical gender order. In chapter 4, I concentrate on this research question:

*What do different gendered sexual scripts in gay and lesbian public venues reveal about heteronormativity and gender nonconformity; and ultimately, how can these differences be theoretically explained in relation to the different positions of gay men and lesbian women in the heteronormative asymmetrical gender order?*

## Methodology

### Doing mixed methods research: A dialectical stance

In this mixed methods research project, I apply a dialectical stance (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011): I recognize differences between underlying paradigms in conducting quantitative or qualitative studies, and I recognize rather than reconcile contradictory and contested notions that may arise in the process of doing mixed methods research. There are multiple relevant ways of doing research (methodology) and understanding what knowledge is and how knowledge can be gained (epistemology). From a dialectical stance, different methodologies provide different knowledge, which could be visualized as exploring and reflecting on human experience from multiple angles. Combining this knowledge provides a more comprehensive picture and raises new methodological queries.

### Data collection, sampling, and reflexivity

The empirical studies focused on same-sex oriented young people in the Netherlands who were between 16 and 25 years old at the start of the data collection. Data collection took place in two phases. An online survey was followed by in-depth face to face interviews. In this mixed methods design, samples were nested, which means that all qualitative interview participants had completed the online survey.

In 2009, participants for the online survey were recruited through convenience sampling. Many recruitment channels were used and participation was self-administered. Recruitment included online and offline general youth as well as

LGB-specific channels, with special efforts to include young people who were religious, bisexual, lower educated, of migrant descent, or living in rural areas. All recruitment materials targeted “boys who feel attracted, or attracted, to boys” and “girls who feel attracted, or also feel attracted, to girls.”<sup>4</sup> An advantage of convenience sampling is that large numbers of people can be reached. However, samples may be more likely to be selective since people are more inclined to participate if they are engaged in or affiliated or familiar with the topic of the study, which may skew descriptive outcomes (Kuyper, Fernee, & Keuzenkamp 2016).<sup>5</sup> Since I focus more on relations or patterns between constructs, instead of reporting descriptive results, the impact of data collection through convenience sampling may be minimal.

Even though extensive recruiting was conducive for the total sample composition,<sup>6</sup> it should be noted that young people of migrant descent were not well represented in the survey sample, despite additional recruitment efforts targeting this group. Young women and young men of migrant descent made up 16% and 17%, respectively, of the survey sample (Van Lisdonk & Van Bergen 2010b), yet further analyses revealed that the composition of countries of descent was highly diverse and did not reflect the composition in the national population. There were relatively many Indonesian and Surinamese participants, and few Moroccan and Turkish participants. Hence, I have decided that the ethnic composition of the sample was too skewed to include ethnicity in the analyses.

The in-depth interviews took place in 2010–11. In the qualitative sample, I aimed for maximum variation in terms of gender, age, place of residence (rural or urban; geographically spread throughout the country), and sexual self-identification. This information was available from the survey data and was used for selection. Responses to other survey questions were not read prior to the interviews, to obviate influencing the interview in any way.

Critical studies such as gender studies and feminist anthropology have developed a good ‘tradition’ of reflecting on how the researcher’s background and position in

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<sup>4</sup>Dutch translation in recruited materials: “Ben je een meisje en val je (ook) op meisjes?” and “Ben je een jongen en val je (ook) op jongens?” It needs to be noted that in the Dutch context, the equivalent of ‘boys’ (i.e. *jongens*) and ‘girls’ (i.e. *meisjes*) is appropriate to use for teens and people in their early twenties.

<sup>5</sup>Comparison between results of a convenience sample and a panel-based sample among Dutch adults demonstrated that the first group reported more exclusively same-sex sexual attraction, were more open about their sexual orientation, reported less internalized homonegativity, had encountered more negative social reactions to their LGB status, and reported more psychological distress and suicidality compared to the panel-based sample (Kuyper, Fernee, & Keuzenkamp 2016).

<sup>6</sup>An example is that among participants recruited through non-LGB related channels, the percentages of bisexual oriented (4,8%) and ‘in the closet’ young people (23%) were a lot higher than among participants recruited through LGB-related channels (Van Lisdonk & Van Bergen 2010b).

society may impact the research. As a lesbian, white, middle-class, autochthonous Dutch woman in her thirties, there are some reflections to be made.

Although I was considerably older than the youngest participants when I conducted the interviews, I felt able to connect as an 'older' young person. The interviewees did not ask about my own sexual orientation. I noticed that some participants considered me straight and others lesbian in the way they responded to me. Prior to and during the interviews I did not share information about my sexual orientation. My impression was that in the interviews with participants who thought I was straight, the interviewees were more inclined to tell me what was special about gay or lesbian public venues, since from their perspective I was an outsider and unfamiliar with these venues. I observed that more young women than young men liked to chat longer after the interview, and that more of them asked advice after the interview. It is difficult to determine whether to relate this to my sex/gender, to differences between young women and men, or a combination of both. Lastly, I acknowledge that I did not extensively address ethnicity, race, or nationality in the interviews and analyses. Although ethnicity and nationality appeared to be relevant in coming out to family, this was outside the scope of this research.

Further information about data collection, sampling, recruitment, and the participants is provided in each empirical chapter.

### **Terminology: Theory and practice**

Sexual orientation and gender are central concepts. Here I describe how I operationalize and use these concepts.

Sexual orientation is a person's capacity for profound sexual and/or romantic attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different, the same, or more than one sex or gender. Same-sex sexuality refers to sexual orientations to only or also people of the same sex or gender. For individuals, their sexual orientation can vary between the dimensions of attraction, sexual behavior, partner preference, and self-identification, and these experiences may change over time (Hegna & Rossow 2007; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin 1948; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolff 1985; McDermott 2010; Saewyc et al. 2009; Savin-Williams 2005).

I distinguish between same-sex orientations and LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual). In Dutch policies and studies, LGB (or the Dutch equivalent LHB – lesbisch, homoseksueel, biseksueel) is generally used to describe the group of non-heterosexual people. While 'lesbian,' 'homosexual,' and 'bisexual' are rather common sexual labels in the Netherlands, it should be recognized that not all non-heterosexual people identify with these labels. They, for example, rather do not use a label or identify as queer,



pansexual, or use multiple labels. LGB and the notion of sexual labels and identities could be considered a specific sociocultural manifestation of sexuality (Foucault 1978/1998; Weeks 1981/1999). The concept of same-sex orientations is broader, as it encompasses the full spectrum of same-sex sexualities and all possible manifestations. Overall, I refer to the research group as Dutch same-sex oriented young people. I focus on their same-sex sexuality experiences, irrespective of how they sexually identify. Consequently, sexual labels such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual were avoided in recruitment. In the empirical chapters, the participants are mostly addressed as same-sex attracted young people, since attraction was the dimension used in recruitment texts. In the sections on qualitative data in chapter 2, I refer to them based on their self-identification.

In this dissertation, I use conventional academic terminology for sex and gender. In general, sex refers to the biological and to bodies, and gender to the sociocultural and to socialization and performativity (Jackson 1999; Karkazis 2008; Van Anders 2015; Vanwesenbeeck 2009). More specifically, sex describes a legal, anatomical, and/or biological distinction, typically of being male or female, and sometimes of being intersex, or another status. Gender refers to the social, cultural, and psychological qualities that are associated with being a man, a woman, or gender diverse. This can encompass personal identity and expression as well as societal, structural, and cultural norms.

The academic use of 'sex' or 'gender' is often related to specific concepts or topics. There is an implicit consensus to refer to 'gender differences' and 'same-sex sexuality,' though it is often fuzzy whether the terms accurately correspond to bodies, gender identities, or gender expression. The inconsistent and sometimes imprecise use of 'sex' and 'gender' illustrates how these concepts are frequently conflated, difficult to disentangle, and inform each other (Karkazis 2008; Van Anders 2015; Vanwesenbeeck 2009). Van Anders proposes the use of gender/sex as 'an umbrella term for both gender (socialization) and sex (biology, evolution)' in situations where 'gender and sex cannot be easily or at all disentangled' (p. 1181). Theoretically, her proposal is attractive, yet terms such as same-gender/sex attraction are not reader-friendly and are highly unusual in the Dutch context.

Hence, I choose to refer to same-sex oriented young people and I focus on gender differences between them, with the recognition that the biological and sociocultural cannot easily be disentangled. In the empirical chapters, sex and gender are conceptualized as binary, namely women and men, yet I acknowledge that lived experiences can be less binary (see chapter 2 and General Discussion; Cense & Van Lisdonk 2017; Karkazis 2008; Vanwesenbeeck 2009 2016; Van Anders 2015; Van Heesch 2015; Van Lisdonk 2014 2016, Van Lisdonk & Callens 2017).

Between chapters, language and categorizations in relation to sexual orientation are not always consistent. This is a consequence of the use of different analyses across empirical chapters, the style and lexicon of the journals to which articles/chapters were submitted, and new insights garnered during the research. Here, I mention two of most relevant inconsistencies. First, in chapter 1, I refer to 'male' and 'female,' while I now prefer to use 'men' and 'women. The latter set of terms resonate more with sociocultural than with physical or biological features. Second, the use of the term 'gay' has been inconsistent due to standards in different cultural contexts. Whereas APA guidelines (sixth edition) recommend the use of 'gay men' instead of 'homosexual men' – since homosexuality is still 'associated with negative stereotypes, pathology, and the reduction of people's identities to their sexual behavior' (American Psychological Association 2010: p. 75) – in the Dutch context, 'gay' is more associated with stereotypical images of men than 'homo' or 'homosexual' (finding in chapter 3). Hence, I have been reticent in using 'gay' and reserved this label to refer to gay public venues (in chapter 4), which are organized on the basis of a shared sexual identity.

In chapters 1 to 4, I present the four empirical studies of this research project. Each of these studies focuses on a topic relevant to how Dutch same-sex oriented young people experience their sexual orientation: perceived victimization in various contexts (chapter 1), having a bisexual or homosexual orientation (chapter 2), labeling one's sexual orientation (chapter 3), and visiting gay and lesbian public venues (chapter 4). While same-sex oriented experiences can be pleasurable in many ways, regardless of the differences between participants, the ongoing current throughout the dissertation concerns their expectations and experiences of being subject to or participating in uncomfortable encounters. Accordingly, this research project focuses on how their same-sex orientation experiences – and particularly these uncomfortable encounters – relate to gender nonconformity, heteronormativity, and tolerance.