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Biphobia and the hypersexualisation of bisexuality

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Aims, scope, limitations

- To explore the ways in which bisexuality is hypersexualised
- To begin to develop a materialist analysis of biphobia
- Coming from a materialist feminist position, my position also draws on:
 - Liberal notions of autonomy and self determination regarding sexualities
 - Notions of sexual and intimate citizenships
 - An emphasis on informed consent amongst adults

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Methods

- Research conducted for Bisexual Identities book (forthcoming Palgrave Macmillan 2015)
 - 25 in depth interviews with bisexual and queer people in the UK, plus participant observation of bi community
 - Snowball sample, purposive – varied in terms of ethnicity, age, gender identity – more identified as female than as male
 - Thematic analysis
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- Acknowledgements to the research participants

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Materialist approaches to bisexuality

- Materialist feminisms (see Hines and Sanger 2010, Monroe 2010)
 - Concern with lived experiences
 - And with structural inequalities relating to the distribution of resources
- The commodification of certain forms of bisexuality lies at the root of much of the negative stereotyping that plagues bisexual people

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Variations in bi people's lived sexualities



...it was a group of friends, I was with my boyfriend, lots and lots of couples that would go out and we'd go clubbing, you know obviously have quite a few drinks, dance the night away then come back and all meet at somebody's house where it was suitable for us to stay up all night...and people got a bit fruity and just went off into different corners or wherever, or we'd all end up in the same room and we'd be touching and kissing [pause] it wasn't swinging as such, it was just people enjoying being around other people that they loved (Kay)

The relationships I've had, I've only had sexual relationships with one man and that was in a very artificial way, in relationships with women, its been heavy petting, and when there is penetration involved that really take me out of my comfort zone...(Reggie)

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Key terms for understanding hypersexualisation and biphobia

- ‘Hypersexualised bisexuality’:
 - the discursive framing of bisexual people (and others involved in bisexual behaviours) in such a way as to prioritise their sexuality over other aspects of their identity
 - Framing bisexuals as being people who are very sexual in particular, objectifying, ways
- The term ‘biphobia’ means *‘prejudice against bisexuality’* and *‘the denigration of bisexuality as a life choice’* (Bennett 1992: 205 - 207).
- Fahs (2009) notion of *‘performative bisexuality’*

Lived experiences of biphobia

- Discrimination against bisexual people is well-documented (e.g. Barker et al 2012) and results in lived experiences such as:

You don't fit, basically...first of all, for many people you don't exist. Its the complete invisibility and erasure of bisexuality [pause] you need to be stronger, to say all the time "I am bisexual, I identify as bisexual" when other people tell you "you don't exist" or, if they recognise that you exist, then you are "greedy", you "can't decide", you are "not able to decide", you don't have the, you "lack the mental skills" to decide...but now I really feel that I have to say all the time, that I am bisexual. Its this constant battle (Merina)

Sexual prejudices

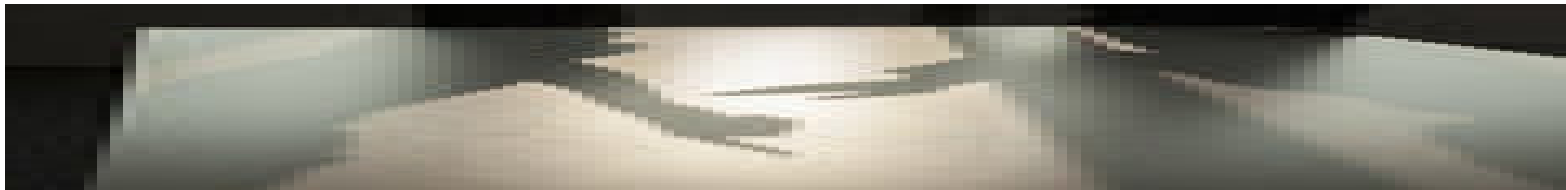
- Biphobia is linked with other forms of prejudice, including erotophobia (fear of eroticism), and prejudice against people who have more than one sexual partner (see Klesse 2005)
- The bi communities overlap with kink, poly and fetish communities
- All of these challenge mononormative society
 - They are marginalised by heteronormative mainstreams
 - And by homonormative lesbian and gay activists
 - They flourish as subcultures
- The failure of the bisexual communities to become desexualised is one reason for lack of political clout

How does hypersexualisation help constitute biphobia?

- Barker et al (2012) outline key negative stereotypes including:
 - Viewing bisexual people as greedy
 - Assuming that bisexual people are promiscuous or incapable of monogamy
 - Assuming that bisexual people are a threat to relationships/families
 - Viewing bisexual people only in terms of their sexual practices, for example as objects to fulfil sexual fantasies (such as threesomes)

Example of how hypersexualised bisexuality plays out in real life

We were in a jazz club, we had a kiss, and a man came up to us and said “oh my god, you guys look amazing, I’m a photographer from a magazine and I’d really like to photograph you”. And I was so angry. And [girlfriend] really liked it, she was really flattered by it, and we had a big fight about it (Yaz)



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Bisexual critiques of hypersexualised bisexualities



The way its [bisexuality] been commodified, that was always going to happen...there's a whole sort of discourse around bisexuality, its exotic...that bohemian angle, it masks the actuality of being a bisexual person even in this day and age (Lena)

Framing something as titillating...causes a problem because it seems like it gets framed solely as that, and nothing goes beyond that' (Kay)

...it [commodification of bisexuality] perpetuates harmful stereotypes of bi people as being (for example) universally sexually available and inconsistent (Nancy)

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Gendered inequalities and biphobic hypersexualities

- The gendered and heterosexist dynamics underpinning bisexual commodification contribute to negative stereotyping of bi and lesbian women, and defuse radical bisexualities:
- Lena: *This commodified bisexuality has been in porn for heterosexual men for a long long time but it's got to the point where it's actually compulsory*
- Interviewer: *It's a mainstay of mainstream porn?*
- Lena: *Yes...the men are threatened for the sight of other men, so [they want] to have men out of the picture, on a base level*
- Interviewer: *So they don't want to have just one woman there being on show, they want some sort of interaction?*
- Lena: *But they don't want to see a hairy man, yes [both laugh]*

The commodified erasure of bisexual diversities



- The pornified depiction of bisexuality consolidates stereotypical notions of female attractiveness
- Commodification of bisexuality acts to socially stigmatise bisexual people who either do not wish to, or cannot, fit with idealised and heterosexist notions of attractiveness

... people make money off that kind of bisexuality – making money off a pornified version. I don't think that kind of body form is reflective of what most bisexual people have so it doesn't help...and I've heard people making horrible comments about actual groups of bi people because they are comparing them against this ideal pornified type of bisexuality, saying "oh you're all fat, you're all ugly" (Meg)

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Divergences in the findings

- A few bi people felt differently about hypersexualised bisexualities

...sex will always sell, and men like to look at girls snogging, so it's a commodity, and it's like, 'yawn', if anyone thinks that that's radical or that its positioning lesbianism or bisexuality or queerness on screen then they kind of need to wake up really. On the other hand if that image makes a small 8 year old child think "ooh that looks nice, maybe that's me" one day, maybe that's worth it. I can remember being a lonely, isolated queer kid, when I was little...when I saw things that were slightly out of the ordinary on television I took notice (Rosie)

Conclusion

- Capitalist accumulation fosters certain types of hypersexualised bisexualities and marginalises others
- This is linked to biphobic, patriarchal and heterosexist structuring forces
- In contrast, lived experiences of bisexual people are widely varied
- Most of the bi people in this study were critical of hegemonic forms of bi hypersexuality
- Materialist analysis is useful in understanding biphobia
 - Bi people's lived experiences
 - Biphobia is constituted by/with forces of commodified hypersexualisation
 - Commodified bisexualities are distinctive in their rendering of bisexuality as politically retrogressive

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