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# 13  Negotiating Identity – Life Narratives of Bisexual Christians

ALEX TOFT

Sociological exploration specifically targeting bisexual Christians is in its infancy. Explanation regarding this is two-fold. Firstly, it is possible to argue that bisexual Christians are marginalised due to their identification as, and assimilation of, two identities which many see as contradictory. Extradition from the bisexual community, often seen as staunchly atheist,[1] could occur due to individual's identification as Christian, conversely Christian congregations are seemingly less likely to be welcoming of bisexuals. Secondly, identification as bisexual is problematic in the perception of others. The conceptualisation of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity may be progressing in academic discourse (see Fox, 1996), however throughout both the heterosexual and homosexual community bisexuals are ostracised due to a lack of understanding and a perpetuation of stereotyping (Eadie, 1997; Hemmings, 2002).

Previous empirical research on bisexual Christians has been partially successful; of particular note is the work of Wilcox (2003) and Yip (1997) both of whom have conducted large mixed-methods explorations. It is my contention however, that such work has not substantively addressed the diverse and differing needs of bisexuals. The categorisation of bisexuals into the acronym LGBT, undoubtedly has brought cohesion and strength to the plight of 'non-heterosexuals,[2] but such offhand generalisation has rendered bisexual as synonymous with homosexuals regarding the challenges of living with spirituality. The Anglican Church (2000) has issued separate guidelines regarding bisexual life-styles and has grounds of reasoning for doing so. Throughout this chapter it will become apparent that previous research has been inclusive of bisexuals in order to provide an appearance of being so.

Using data obtained from a large mixed-methods project involving quantitative and qualitative data collection tools this chapter focuses upon one specific theme of many that has arisen from the data, the negotiation and

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[1]  GALAH is one of the many examples of online atheist groups for non-heterosexuals - www.galah.org

[2]  The term non-heterosexual is problematic, but I use it here to denote what is seen as the 'other'.

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management of sexual identity in the lives of bisexual Christians. Taking the self-identifications of the respondents as a starting point the chapter progresses to explore how respondents 'do' their sexual identity in conjunction with the perceived tensions of their spirituality. In the realms of religious censure how is this sexual identity affected and re-constructed to sit concurrently with their religious identity?

## Contextualising the Research

Although traditionally ignored within sociological discourse (Rust, 2000) research pertaining to the adoption of a bisexual identity is a growing field of investigation. The implications and understandings of what it means to be bisexual are becoming clearer due to a proliferation of auto-biographical narrative style accounts attempting to ascribe meaning to bisexuality (Off-Pink Collective, 1988; Hutchins and Kaahumanu, 1991; Suresha and Chvay, 2005). Such methodology has been adopted for the investigation of bisexual Christians lives with, to date, the only academic text focussing solely upon bisexual Christians: 'Blessed Bi Spirit' (Kolodny, 2000). The production of schema attempting to summarise bisexual experience has been the focus of much social research with simple (Kinsey, 1948) and complex (Tucker, 1995) models being produced.

Diagrams and scales attempting to conceptualise bisexuality fail to recognise the vast diversity of bisexual experience which withstands reduction to the measurement of sexual, physical and emotional attraction, although for some respondents this may be perfectly apt. Adjoining themselves with theorists such as Garber (2001) and Rust (2004) there is the suggestion that bisexuality has the potential to revolutionise sexual identification. Such radicalism stems from the assumption that personal attraction is based upon gender in the first instance; it is therefore a logical step to propose that bisexuals have side-stepped gendered attraction on the basis that it is not the key initiator for relationship construction (of all forms). Self-definitions of bisexuality are too diverse to go into detail here but Ochs' (2008) recent publication seems to reiterate that possession of a bisexual identity is rather individualised and personal. With no traditional structural blueprints to follow bisexuals are left to 'make it up as they go along' (see Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan, 2004 argument regarding same-sex families - it could be argued that this is even more fitting for the life stories of bisexual men and women).

Upon identification as bisexual, accessing Christian space becomes more difficult and respondents are required to begin the negotiation process and determine parameters of acceptability within their particular denomination or belief system. The Christian faith has just two over-arching grounds for not

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fully accepting bisexual Christians into the Church. Here I will use the Anglican Church as an example. Firstly, bisexuals are seen to be promiscuous.

> If bisexual sexual activity involves simultaneous sexual relations with people of both sexes then … this would either imply promiscuity or infidelity or both?
>
> (Church of England, 2003, 283)

This standpoint represents a problematic understanding of what bisexuality entails and seems to suggest that the Anglican Church understands bisexuality as a constant battle between same and opposite sex attraction. Further to this there is a particular need to separate the terms monosexuality- attraction to one sex- and non-monogamy- the engagement in open and fully disclosed relationships running concurrently (H. Wishik and C. Pierce, 1995, 125). Perceiving bisexuals as sexually licentious and drawn equally at all times to members of any sex implies an underlying duality. It would seem that the official stance suggests bisexuals are simply combinations of heterosexual and homosexual desire, further confusing what it means to be bisexual and the term 'bi-sexual' which superficially implies a splitting of two sexual identities.

Secondly there is the suggestion that marriage vows are incompatible with bisexuality (Rosefire, 2000). Christian sexuality is based upon the life-long heterosexual couple blessed in a Church under witness of God; therefore any such deviation is un-Christian.

It is within these confines that bisexual Christians must negotiate and manage their sexuality and reconcile (if they feel it necessary) this with their faith.


## Methodology [3]

The research design consisted of a two-phase structure deployed separately but interlocking with regards to themes and interest. A quantitative questionnaire constituted the first phase, as respondents, either electronically or via the post self-administered a 14 page survey considering various aspects of their lives. An in-depth interview represents the second phase of the project.

Due to the hidden nature of the population, with no official support groups for bisexual Christians and no access to a network composed solely of bisexual

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Christians, an advertising campaign became the main recruitment strategy. Using a publicity leaflet detailing: the project, the role of the potential respondent, the role of the researcher and all ethical implications, national advertising within both the printed and electronic media took place. Religious and secular media were utilised as were publications aimed at bisexual individuals and non-heterosexuals. Examples include: Diva, Gay Times, QUEST, LGCM (Lesbian Gay and Christian Movement) and in the newsletters of inclusive Churches such as the MCC (Metropolitan Community Church).

The majority of respondents (27) were recruited through organisations/ media for bisexuals whose readership coincidently defined themselves as Christian, although networks were not exclusively Christian networks in nature.

As highlighted during the contextualising section of this chapter, bisexuality and the meanings attached to such identification are heterogeneous. The bisexual Christian population itself does not share this variety of meaning in its community, with personal distinguishing features being similar and shared. The sample consisted of an overwhelming proportion of white British respondents (98%) who were either fully employed, students or comfortably retired (91%) and were educated to at least degree level (44%). Such variables were not obtained through desire or want as respondents indicated initial interest in research participation, furthermore it could be suggested that such a sample is consistent with the general attributes of the bisexual population at large (Bowes-Catton, 2007). Variation was achieved in facets that were under researcher control such as locality with a wide assortment of areas represented, most frequent being London (23%) and Yorkshire (10%). More pertinent is the denominational spread achieved with the most represented within the sample, for example: Anglican (23%), Methodist (10%), MCC (17%) and those not affiliated with a specific denomination (33%).

Using the data collected from the initial questionnaire individual interview transcripts were constructed to form the basis of the qualitative data collection process which is the main focus of this chapter. In-depth interviews collected respondent narratives or 'life-stories' regarding their identity management and negotiation focussing upon their experiences of sexuality and spirituality. This allowed respondents to tell their stories and within the boundaries of the guided conversation, expand upon issues that were of particular relevance to them.

**Sexual Identity in the Lives of Bisexual Christians**

**Table 1      Number and Percentage of Respondents Who Answered 'True' to the Following Statements**

| Statement | Entire Sample (n=60) | Male (29) | Female (31) |
|---|---|---|---|
| (A) I am more physically attracted to members of the same sex. | 18 (30%) | 10 (16%) | 8 (26%) |
| (B) I am more physically attracted to members of the opposite sex. | 11 (18%) | 5 (17%) | 6 (19%) |
| (C) I prefer to have sex with members of the opposite sex. | 10 (17%) | 5 (17%) | 5 (16%) |
| (D) I prefer to have sex with members of the same sex. | 15 (25%) | 7 (24%) | 8 (26%) |

Table 1 suggests that respondents were resistant in reducing their sexuality to a behavioural practice or a deterministic unifying statement resulting in understanding bisexuality simply in terms of physical attraction. There is no unanimous collectivised definition of bisexuality from the data collected. Generalised statements unifying bisexual experience have to be handled with caution.

The data proposes that respondents were more comfortable with seeing their sexual identity as beyond this simplistic understanding of human sexuality, preferring to imply that bisexuality is more radical than this. There are 4 main trends of self-definitions that became evident from the research:

1. Bisexuality as a rejection of gendered attraction

> But as I say it's not about the genitalia of the person, just the person themselves and whether I connect with them and for me the connection is spiritual. If we connect spirituality that is most important.
> > (Cynthia a 43 year-old female from the Dorset area)

> No, exactly, it's just like another attribute [a person's sex]. Like I might want somebody who has some intellectual...whatever the word is ... I couldn't see myself going with someone who wasn't that smart, other things are less important like being able to cook or having similar interests to me.
> > (Ruth a 27 year-old Catholic from London)

2. A theoretic construct used to dissolve binaristic dualistic thinking with regard to both sexuality and gender

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Bisexuality is about breaking down the boundaries between sexualities and what it means to be a man and woman.

> (Nicola, 20 year-old female who does not attend Church)

3. The 'capacity' (Rust, 2004) to be attracted (in all respects) to members of any sex

Its not about being free to do whatever you like, breaking down boundaries of injustice and gender relations (laughs). I've just learnt somehow that I'm attracted to both sexes and its just me.

> (Michael a 26 year-old man with no official denomination)

4. As a combination of heterosexuality/homosexuality or a combination of maleness and femaleness

But I'm not a Church leader, and I wasn't that good a missionary when I did that. But I'm good as a carer because I am using my bisexuality, my female persona at times as a God-given gift and then at times I will use my male side.

> (Richard, 45 from Surrey).

My reaction would be well if you were [bi] you might know more about it. It's like people who are straight saying you just choose to be gay. No! Why would anyone want to choose such a complicated situation. I think that being bi is almost worse than being either. Rather than having a foot in both camps…

> (Adam, a 63 year old Anglican)

These self-definitions give insight into the vast interpretations and understandings of bisexuality and it is with these understandings that bisexual Christians try and access religious space. What, if anything do bisexual Christians have to do in order to gain acceptance in institutionalised religion? The remainder of the chapter will focus upon the negotiation between respondents spirituality and their sexuality.

The most prevalent technique deployed involved the separation of ones religious and spiritual identities, usually through an abandonment of institutionalised Congregational Church attendance, a dissociation with the Christian Church in its visible form. 28% of the respondents never attended Church and had re-aligned their beliefs systems away from this form of worship. Only 32% attended Church on a weekly basis, the remainder of the respondents intermittently attended for special occasions such as Christenings and if they had time to attend. This is a practical separation, however, respondents who did regularly attended Church often displayed a more complex form of this technique. Worried by negativity and rejection from the Church, respondents concealed their sexuality in order to practice their

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religion. This was a technique that one respondent labelled as 'Leaving ones sexuality at the door'.

Respondents were concerned that traditional Church teaching and practices had become stagnant and outdated, alienating them from the Church:

> I used to do some work with the youth as well, find it difficult to fit in because the Church has become something that is so narrow-minded, just anybody cannot walk in.                                                                                           (Richard)

Such disillusionment affected respondents religious identity rather than their understanding of their sexuality, in these instances sexuality becomes the core identity around which religious beliefs and practices are negotiated. Philip, a Methodist who has become disenchanted with denominational belief systems furthers the idea that sexual identity is simply not as important as ones spirituality. For Philip spirituality is everywhere, the love of God permeates throughout society bringing people together to live in harmony. Although for him Church became stifling and 'more like a prison', spirituality is what makes people human and finding God outweighs all other struggles. It is unsurprising that Philip sees sexuality not as a 'core' identity, it is not something that defines him as a person or something he considers that important. Although this seemingly undermines the struggles of bisexual Christians, respondents were unanimous in the condemnation of the Christian Churches obsession with sex and sexuality.

The flexibility of bisexuality played an important role for most respondents and often helped in the negotiation process:

> It is flexible and that is useful because it puts the emphasis on you to come out when you want to ... and you can come out to whoever you want, but obviously you have to be careful.                        (Jim a 26 year-old Anglican from the Midlands)

The formulation of bisexuality as flexible and fluid can be developed further using the 4th trend of self-definition as detailed above. Adam was a striking example of the incapability of society in general to understand that people may be attracted to members of any sex. He sees himself as a person living a double life with dual conflicting identities noting several times that he has a 'gay side' and a 'straight side'. By compartmentalising his identity in such a fashion Adam felt that he was not being un-Christian and that his Church could not question his attendance.

This coincides with the Anglican Church's official standpoint on bisexuality which firmly believes bisexuality is a combination of heterosexual and homosexual desire, which can therefore be selected.

> If Gods overall intention for human activity is that it should take place in the context of marriage with someone of the opposite sex, then clearly the Church

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needs to encourage bisexual people who are capable of entering into such a relationship to do so ...                              (Church of England, 2004: 283)

A bisexual individual should therefore choose to ignore the 'homosexual side' and choose to follow his 'heterosexual side' (Church of England, 2003: 283). Adam uses the same language to justify the fact that he has chosen the 'gay side'.

... in relationship terms ... I am choosing to go in the gay direction, so I am choosing to leave behind the straight relationship possibility ...            (Adam)

In a scenario in which 'coming out' is not an option Adam demonstrates the complex nature of how sexuality is negotiated within organised religion.

## Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has shown how the diverse self-definitions and understandings of bisexual identity has forced bisexuals to negotiate their access to institutionalised religion. The misunderstanding of the Church (namely the Anglican Church in this chapter) has perhaps been inevitable due to such assortment of meaning. Through numerous techniques bisexual Christians have re-evaluated what it means to be both bisexual and Christian in order to align their spirituality and their sexuality.

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