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‘It was so brilliant’ Bisexual people’s wellbeing and the importance of the organised bisexual community

Dr Surya Monro

Introduction

- Builds on previous project about sexualities equalities in local government (Diane Richardson was PI, funded by the ESRC) which revealed erasure and stigmatisation of bi people in statutory service provision
- Bisexual Identities project:
 - Focuses on UK but cross-cultural aspects (Columbia, Israel, USA)
 - Aims to lay foundations for Bi social science – as massive gap in literature
 - I have done 25 interviews so far, with range of bisexual people (ages, ethnicities, class backgrounds etc)

Acknowledgements to the people who have generously given their time and experiences

Background

- Higher rate of mental health difficulties amongst bisexual people (e.g. Fish 2007)
- High levels of social erasure, biphobia, stigmatisation of bisexual people
- Bisexuality exoticised, commodified, framed as hyper-sexual
- Service providers tend to ignore bisexuality – ‘off radar’, or stigmatised e.g. ‘best of both worlds’
- This real life impacts in service provision e.g. Housing, social care, healthcare, end of life care (Richardson and Monro 2012) = minority stress

Aims



- Provide overview of biphobia and its implications for mental health
- Discuss organised bisexual spaces and their cultures
- Look at the exclusions within these spaces
- Draw some indicative conclusions about bi spaces and mental health

Biphobia – How it feels

- Erasure/denial of bisexuality = ‘I don’t exist/who am I?’
- Hypersexualisation = ‘I can’t be ‘normal’ – I am greedy/unreasonable/a slapper/must be sexually active’
- Exclusion from social spaces/relationship possibilities = ‘I don’t belong/nowhere for me to go/don’t fit’/I am lonely’
- Strategic closeting = stressful lack of identity acknowledgement/lack of access to service provision
- Lack of service provision e.g. sexual health provision = health risks which also lead to stress

Examples

- *...when I go to a lesbian group I am not very welcome if I say I am bisexual...when I first joined the group I was given the impression it was for lesbian and bisexual asylum seekers, but in fact it wasn't, and there are volunteers who are very much against bisexuals, and they say, well I raised the issue that I wanted to include bisexual in the group and they said "well you are talking from an academic point of view and we are just talking more serious, more life and death". But its not right because there are also bisexuals [sigh] that are persecuted in their own country and when they come here what help do they have? (Pia)*
- *There was a time when I went on [dating site] and I would always say I was bisexual until [sighs] couldn't really stand the couples contacting you and saying 'we really like...' again its the definition that kind of brings out an image of you that is untrue (Yaz)*

Organised Bi communities

- For those who've been involved, mostly very important initially in terms of identity recognition/formation, eg:
- *I was there and I started to communicate, I don't know how, I was able to understand maybe 20% of the meeting. And I remember in that moment I felt I was absolutely desperate, that is the only explanation for my strength...desperate for other bisexuals or understanding, I was desperate for knowledge...to understand bisexuality, to understand what was going on in my mind...was I the only one, was I the only crazy person?...I started talking to people, and I stopped going to the group because I felt, after two months, I felt that I needed to improve my English. But after a few months...I went to BiCon, and I was so lucky, because Bicon was in [city], I have been so lucky...I would probably have gone to another city but I was not able to communicate, so, yeah...I remember going to Bicon...I think that it was one of the most powerful experiences in my life [pause] I felt, that was really strong, I felt "oh my god I am not the only one" (Merina)*

Distinct subcultures

- Organised bi spaces – especially BiCon, have distinctive subcultures, for example:
- *they were...entirely comfortable with the bi aspects...whether or not they actually were, they said that they were happy with that and its wonderful, and these feelings of oppression or argument against [bi] were something to be annoyed about, rather than something that was scary... very much people will be quite 'in place' at a fairly trendy goth type alternative type crowd...quite attached to LGBT communities, were part of other alternative communities (Grant)*

Exclusions

- The 'in' crowd is younger-middle aged, alternative, sex-positive, middle class, and white. This can marginalise other people. For example:
- *I am not sure I gave Bicon a chance really, I found it hard to relax,....there seemed a lot of emphasis at Bicon on sex. Perhaps because I don't feel that comfortable re that identity that was slightly off-putting for me (Reggie)*
- *it felt very middle class...when you listened to people talking, the things they were talking about seemed very academic...things like the location of the event, how much it costs to get there... I used to look at events and not be able to afford to go there.... (Jacqui)*

Institutional racism

- *...every single person in that room [Bis of Colour workshop] had had a racist experience at Bicon. And that includes people asking you if you are in the right place – I have had that on more than one occasion, where people would ask me if I knew where I was, or if I was in the right place, which mirrors experiences I have had on the gay scene...there were things like bringing up instances of racism and people not believing it, people denying it, there are things like discussions of race that are characterised as drama rather than serious issues (Camel)*

Why and where do we go now?

- Subcultures develop their own norms - we are responsible for tackling prejudice within organised bi spaces – this taking place to a degree
- Wider marginalisation of bi communities deeply unhelpful
 - Lack of capacity/all volunteer-run
 - Lack of access/imposition of statutory mechanisms for promoting equalities – e.g. impact assessments around race equalities
 - Marginalised/minority stressed nature of the communities and high level of mental health challenges within the community makes it hard for some [white/middle class/'trendy'] people to imagine other forms of marginalisation/oppression

_____ ONGOING STORY.....