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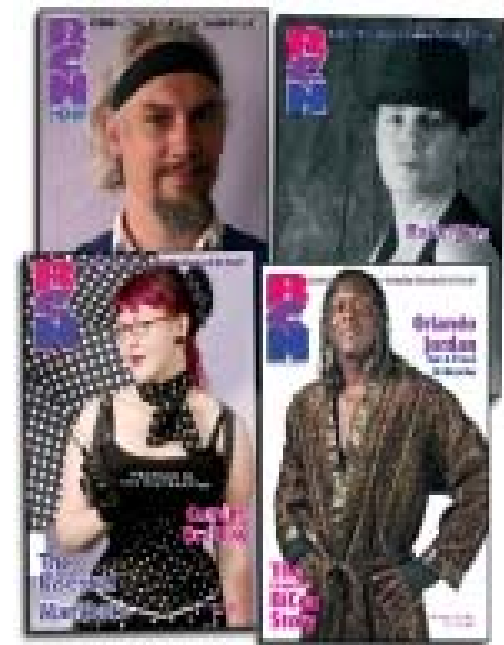
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Theorising Bisexuality

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Aims, structure

- Aim: To map out possible theoretical tools which can be used to understand bisexuality (mostly within sociology)
- Objectives: to provide overview of some approaches, with illustrative quotes
- Structure
 - Bisexual studies
 - Interactionism
 - Poststructuralism
 - Queer theory
 - Trans theory
 - Materialism

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

- Acknowledgements to the research participants

Contextualisation

- The evidence is that sexual attraction and/or sexual behaviours towards people of different genders have/has existed throughout history, and across many cultures
- The categories of 'LGBT' are limited in scope and imagination:

'From a Western viewpoint, sexuality constitutes an essential or core attribute of identity; individuals are said to have fixed sexual identities or orientations. Sexuality as it is understood in the United States and Europe, however, often bears little resemblance to sexual relationships and practices across cultures'
(Blackwood 2000: 223)

Definitions - genealogy

- Earliest: 'bisexed' or 'bisexous' as androgynous (mostly in theology)

'From the middle of the nineteenth century, the term bisexuality is used in the fields of anatomy and physiology to refer to forms of life that are sexually undifferentiated or thought to exhibit characteristics of both sexes. By the early years of the 20th century, bisexuality is used to describe a combination of masculinity and femininity in an individual – psychical rather than physical traits – and had also come to signify a sexual attraction to individuals of both sexes... Although the three meanings of bisexuality – a combination of male/female, masculine/feminine, or heterosexual/homosexual – have different histories, they are far from distinct' (MacDowell 2009: 4)

- Importance of sexologists

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Cont.

- In recent bisexual studies, the term 'bisexual' is widely used as an adjective to refer to sex acts and attractions to both same-sex and other-sex (or gender) persons (see for example Rust 2000)
- As a noun to refer to bisexual people
- The term 'bi' is sometimes used as shorthand for bisexuality and bisexual people

- Difficulties with term
 - Dualistic
 - Queer better? Pansexual, omnisexual? MSMW/WSMW?

Twentieth century

- Various trends in thinking:
 - Freud – ambivalence
 - Wilhelm Stekel – celebratory/master bisexualities
 - Kinsey – continuum

The 1970s saw the publication of a number of important books about bisexuality including Margaret Mead's *Bisexuality, What's it All About?* (1975), and Fritz Klein's *The Bisexual Option: A Concept of One Hundred Percent Intimacy* (1978)

BUT foreclosure of sexual identities/sedimentation into oppositional gay/lesbian and heterosexual categories, post Stonewall riots

Theorising bisexuality

- Little bisexual scholarship in the USA and the UK between the late 1970s and the 1990s
- Lots of reparative studies and others in 1990s
- Little within political science except 'lesbian and gay' studies that absorb bi or deal with it in tangential way
- More within sociology e.g. Highleyman (1995) and Rust (2000) begin to lay the foundations for a sociology of bisexuality
- A number of USA and UK based theorists have contributed critical approaches to bisexuality studies, including Du Plessis (1996), Hemmings (1997, 2007), Storr (1999a), and Angelides

Interactionism

- There are many varieties of interactionist thought, but Blumer has captured the basic postulates :
- *'...human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them; 'the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows'; 'these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process by the person dealing with the things he [sic] encounters' (Blumer 1962: 2 cited by Plummer 1975: 10).*
- Kessler and McKenna (1978), Goffman (1977), Mary MacIntosh, Jeffery Weeks, Ken Plummer.....
- John Gagnon and William Simon (1969, 1973) symbolic interactionist focus *on micro-level interactions and scripting*
- *Deviance*

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Quote

...when I was 17 or 18 at university I joined the local LGBT group and I was the only one bisexual, the only public bisexual so I had to take the role of saying 'I'm bisexual, I'm bisexual, I'm bisexual' ... I met the coordinator of the only bisexual group in the country [Spain] and that's how I learned everything I knew about bisexuality and the flag, I didn't know there was a flag. I didn't speak English and had no access to the internet. He told me everything, he told me about Bicon. That night was one of the best nights of my life (Pia)

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Difficulties

- Lacks 'clout' in relation to understanding structural inequalities
- Could be used in a way that underestimates biological aspects of gender/sexuality
- Focus on micro could lead to ethnocentric analysis etc

Poststructuralism

- Body and identity discursively constructed (Foucault, Butler etc)
- Power has multiple sites
- Power relations introjected, replicated via institutional structures (governmentality)

‘When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequences that man and masculine might just as easily signify and female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as a female one’ (Butler 1990: 6).

‘Poststructuralist feminist interventions were key to developing analytical frameworks that moved beyond an understanding of gender as a binary opposition (man/woman)’ (Hines 2010:4).

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Quote

Sometimes I have had my doubts about the concept [of bisexuality]...the most significant doubt from my point of view is the term indicates two gender positions which in most cases, the common sense understanding of bisexuality prefers two different gender positions, men and women so there is a tendency to reinforce gender binary. And closely linked to that, also the sexual binary, to the extent that masculinity and feminist and categories of sexual orientation are also mapped on. This problematic essentialist legacy, and to an extent you could say bisexuality most explicitly stokes it, this explicit appeal to [categories], ultimately LGB categories are part of the same problematic construct. Why do we expect bisexuality to do this political deconstructive labour? (Christian)

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Cont.

- Queer theory (QT) and politics emerged during the late 1980s and the 1990s, at the intersections between (mostly) gay and lesbian cultural studies and AIDS activism
- ‘Queer’ has wide range meanings – typically *‘resistance to the regimes of the normal’* (Warner 1993 xxvi)
- Queer theorists have tended to overlook bisexuality *‘in spite of occupying an epistemic position within this very opposition, the category of bisexuality has been curiously marginalised and erased for the deconstructive field of queer theory’*(Angelides 2001: 7)
- Some bi theorists have used QT e.g. Horncastle (2008) uses bisexual QT as a means of conceptualising the ‘interstitial’ (in-between spaces)

Quote

...in appearance I am a woman, so people may think I am only attracted by women, but as I identify myself as...bisexual people tend to think I may like men or I may like women, and so I think it's really different...queer [and] bisexuality... for me if people identify as bisexual people tend to think of two directions, but for me queer is something [pause] the focus is not as much on gender, for me, I just like that person...the gender is not that important (Jo)

...the reason I identify with bisexual – not necessarily as, because I don't necessarily think of identity as something that is solid, that I am, that include other identities – queer, and Black, and disabled – and I think its important – the specific identity as bisexual is important because the world as I've experienced it, the world we seem to live in – specific to now, Western Europe, 21st century, British or Anglo world – its that the world is structured for people who are straight, who are heterosexual, who know that they are one gender... (Camel)

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Difficulties

- For both poststructuralism and QT:
 - A possible erasure of bodily realities and constraints
 - Lack of political base
 - Marginalisation – because where identities are deconstructed, more dominant identities then become reasserted
 - Tends to be associated with middle class white people and privilege

The more I learn about research that is carried out about queer identities, I realise how much Bi's are being sidelined – either discounted because they don't fit, or grouped in, their voices are lost in the data... (Kay)

Trans theory

- Trans theory (eg Bornstein 1994, Wilchins 1997, Whittle 1996, Halberstam 2002, Monro 2005, Hines 2007, Hines and Sanger 2010) is directly relevant to understanding bisexuality:
 - firstly, because many bisexual people are also gender-diverse
 - secondly, because the transgender destabilisation of gender binaries and the movement towards other models, such as seeing gender as a spectrum rather than as discrete male/female categories, opens up space for thinking about non binaried models of sexuality

Trans theory cont.

- **Monro (2005)**
 - An expansion of ‘male’ and ‘female’ categories to include various non-normative gender expressions
 - Moving beyond sex and gender (see for example Lorber 1994)
 - Gender pluralism, where sex and gender are conceptualised as a spectrum, or continuum, or set of spectra/continua
- It appears that bisexuality has been rather absent from trans studies to date – perhaps due partly to poststructuralist turn in trans studies
- But shift to gender diversity on bi scene has opened space for more fluidity and plurality

Quotes



...the UK bi community that's centred on BiCon has influenced the development of my identity more recently: the trans-friendliness has given me more space to explore aspects of my gender identity and presentation in a more conscious way than I had before (Nancy)

I thought about my sexual orientation and I thought well, 'I am still attracted to him whether he is male or female', and that opened up a lot of doors for me. If my gender is more fluid maybe my sexuality is too (Lee)

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Materialist approaches to bisexuality

- Materialist feminisms (see Hines and Sanger 2010, Monro 2010)
 - Concern with lived experiences
 - And with structural inequalities relating to the distribution of resources

There is a rather glaring absence of bisexual-specific materialist scholarship within the sexualities literature which takes empirical, materialist approaches – although some exceptions:

‘more empirical attention to material relations, social structures, and everyday social interactions is needed to complement the symbolic emphasis of queer theory and cultural studies’ (Steinman 2011: 399)

Cont.

- Materialist analysis useful in understanding development of categories

Capitalism demands specialization and categorisation for most efficient operation and is inextricably intertwined with patterns of social organisation beyond the realm of the strictly economic (Donald Hall 1996: 101)

- Importance of imperialism, classed/raced/gendered hierarchies in the formation of the categories of homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual



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Cont

- 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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www.bisexualvideos.co.uk

[Bisexual Army - Bisexual XXX DVD - Studio: Private Specials: Who dare fucks the Bisexual Army?](#)

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[www.answers.com/topic/bisexualBisexual Porn Videos > New - Xhamster](#)

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Quote

...commodified bisexuality has been in porn for heterosexual men for a long long time but its got to the point where its actually compulsory...the men are threatened for the sight of other men, so [they want] to have men out of the picture, on a base level...they dont want to see a hairy man...If the straight male consumer actually came across a bisexual women he would probably run for the hills [laughs] ...there is the assumption that all women are expected to be bisexual and there are lots of women who have no sexual feeling towards other women...its almost now that there is some sort of tyranny, that a woman must declare herself bisexual...I suppose its the end point of sexual freedom maybe...its the sort of....you must enjoy yourself ...if you are a mother with young children to look after, who the hell has time...its a damaging thing for people to have to, its another thing that you have to live up to...(Lena)

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Conclusion

- Different theoretical strands offer different possibilities for understanding bisexuality, e.g:
 - Interactionism – micro relations and identity construction
 - Poststructuralism and QT: Deconstruction of identities, resistance and transgression, fluidity, multiplicity
 - Trans theory – gender as spectrum – bisexuality as fictitious but useful identity construction; pragmatic utilisation of ‘bi’ spaces by gender diverse people
 - Materialism – understanding power dynamics rooted in material inequalities; consumerism and bi stigmatisation

References



- Please contact author for references
- Some work available via <http://www.hud.ac.uk/research/researchcentres/criss/staff/drsuryamonro.php>

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