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Monro, Surya

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Bisexuality, Diversity, and a Lack of Recognition

Dr Surya Monro
s.monro@hud.ac.uk

Aims and scope

- Aim of presentation: To trace (some of) the erasures regarding bisexuality, and sexual and gender diversities more widely, addressing:
 - Sex and gender studies
 - Wider UK society
 - The organised UK bisexual community
 - Analysis drawing on the Indian situation
- Intersectionality theory (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1989, Leslie McCall 2005)
- Applied poststructuralist theory (see for example Carol Bacchi 1993)

Methods

- Research conducted for Bisexual Identities book (forthcoming Palgrave Macmillan 2014)
- 25 in depth interviews with bisexual and queer people in the UK, plus participant observation of bi community
- 6 interviews with bi activists in Columbia
- Literature and blog analysis of Indian sexualities/genders situation
- Use of material from large ESRC project (Sexuality, Equality and Local Governance (PI Prof Diane Richardson, University of Newcastle)
- Acknowledgements – especially to Camillo Tamayo Gomez and Dr Ahonaa Roy

Sexuality studies

- 1970s + swift erasure or marginalisation of bisexuality (especially identity-based bisexuality) in much of Western sexuality studies, for example:
 - Ken Plummer’s typology of homosexuality (1975: 98) incorporates men who are having sex with men and women as homosexual, rendering bisexuality invisible
 - ‘people who have sexual partners of the same and opposite gender during their lives seem to represent a **serious intellectual and scientific problem** for those trying to understand human sexual conduct’ (Gagnon, 1977: 259)
- Erasure not just by/within the ‘lesbian and gay’ social movements but in the discursive formation of sexualities within the academy

Wider UK society

- Widespread social erasure of bisexuality, for example:

*...every talk you hear by [national LGB community organisation] will miss off the B and **it will be there at the start and then it will suddenly disappear** and it will be only gay people who are interested in gay marriage, or gay rights or whatever and neglecting the fact that bi people also have same sex relations ...and experience homophobia and biphobia (Bisexual activist, Sexuality, Equality and Local Governance project, see Richardson and Monro 2012)*

*I've experienced biphobia on many occasions. For example, when I was 16 and went to a meeting of my local LGB youth group, one of the leaders said "it's OK, lots of people go through a phase of **saying they're bi before they come out properly**" (Nancy, Bisexual Identities project)*

The organised bisexual community (UK)

- Non-commercialised, voluntary grassroots organising (annual conference, local groups and events)
- High level of overlap with various alternative cultures/communities e.g. goths, polyamorous people, pagans
- Strong on diversity regarding gender variance and disabilities
- Some commitment to tackling areas of acknowledged weakness e.g. racial diversity
- Activism strongly focused on achieving visibility and recognition for bisexuals



Erasures in the bi community

- Socio-economic class:
 - Socio-economic resources and spatial issues
 - Education
 - Divergent sexualities, different interests

...the location of the event, [BiCon] how much it costs to get there. I have been working for the last 12 years now, but I know I used to look at events and not be able to afford to go there...the cost of getting to places was a problem. A lot of assumptions, just the way that people, if somebody makes a biphobic comment they point at a book “well you should have read this”... “well no, I’ve not heard about this theory”, well I’d heard about the Kinsey stuff but I’d never heard of the Klein grid. I am not an academic but I am not stupid either [Interviewer: How did it make you feel when people talked like that?] stupid (Jacqui)

Erasures in the bisexual community cont.



- Race and ethnicity:
 - Whiteness and its invisibility
 - Non-white identities as a resource
 - Racism – direct and indirect
 - The problem with categories

I have had that [happen] on more than one occasion [at BiCon], 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)



Thoughts based on the Indian situation

- From some Indian perspectives, the UK bisexual emphasis on recognition is problematic:
 - Lack of legal rights makes visibility and recognition dangerous
 - Bisexualities are located in commercialised queer scenes, accessible mainly to middle/upper class and caste English speaking urban dwellers
 - MSM sexualities are common and bisexuality prevalent amongst MSM e.g. truck drivers (Quazi Syed Zahiruddin et al 2011)
 - Indigenous sexualities and gender variances are in other formations as well as bisexual: Kothi/panthi/do-partha, hijra....(Mishra and Sarma 2007)



Tentative conclusions

- There are erasures in Western scholarship and UK society concerning bisexuality
- The organised bisexual community is a site of the construction of white, middle class sexualities which tends to lack recognition of race/class inequalities and to reproduce these
- Western emphasis on ‘speakability’, amongst middle class white bisexuals (and LGT people), as opposed to ‘do-ability’ amongst some Southern peoples (see Suhraiya Jivraj and Anisa de Jong 2011) acts to consolidate middle class whiteness and exclude others
- LGBT categorisation will continue to be contingent and problematic, but intersectional analysis will help develop nuanced views.

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