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Monro, Surya

Intersectionality and bisexuality

### Original Citation

Monro, Surya (2013) Intersectionality and bisexuality. In: London LGBTQ Learning Network: intersections, 30th July 2013, London, UK. (Unpublished)

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**Intersectionality and bisexuality – Dr Surya Monro, University of Huddersfield,  
s.monro@hud.ac.uk**

## **Introduction**

Before I begin I just want to explain that the research material in this brief talk has been very generously provided by a number of bisexual and queer people based in the UK. It was gathered in 2012 for a book that I am writing for Palgrave Macmillan which will be out in 2015, provisionally titled 'Bisexuality'. I would like to acknowledge them, and the University of Huddersfield which is providing me with time to write the book.

## **Intersectionality theory**

...that brief introduction leads me now into a discussion of intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory was forged by feminists of colour and critical race theorists, drawing on insights provided by poststructuralism/postmodernism (McCall 2005). US scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced the term 'intersectionality' to mean a crossroads where different identities (in her case, race and gender) intersect. Intersectionality approaches can be used to examine the way in which we are not just defined by sexuality, or gender, or ethnicity, or social class, or ability; we are each a unique mixture of different social characteristics. Because society is structured by many forms of inequality, some people - and groups of people - have identities that combine two or more marginalised or stigmatised characteristics. Importantly, these marginalised identities do not just add onto each other, but rather intersect in particular ways. In addition, characteristics such as race and sexuality are seen as being routed through each other, or mutually constitutive, so that it is not possible to think of 'race' and 'sexuality' as discrete social forces.

Intersectionality theory provides, therefore, a way of addressing complexity, and the different ways in which social characteristics work in interaction, so that for example at one point discrimination on the grounds of sexuality and gender might shape someone's life chances, but this person might simultaneously use class privilege to resist or circumnavigate this.

- It moves beyond the debate about whether sexual (and other) categories are necessary by developing the notion of strategic essentialism (essentialism is when we feel that we are born as LG or B or that it is core to our identities; the term is associated with biological determinism and can be problematic) where for example someone identifies as bisexual in order to raise the political profile of the non-LGH population;
- It provides a means to address within-group differences and inequalities without destroying the basis for group identification; this is important politically as well as conceptually for communities grappling with diversity issues;
- It reveals areas of privilege as well as marginalisation, providing a more nuanced picture of groups such as bisexuals; again, this is crucial politically in enabling inequalities to be tackled and enabling bisexual or queer individuals to identify issues which they can take a stand on from positions of relative privilege;
- The notion of intersectionality has entered political and political realms and may provide a useful means of effecting positive change.

## **Bisexuals as marginalised**

The recently published Bisexuality Report (Barker et al 2012) provides a very useful overview of the ways in which bisexual people are marginalised socially – in mainstream society and in some cases by the lesbian and gay communities (although thankfully the latter

less so now that people are becoming more aware of the specific issues facing bi people). We face issues such as the challenges of managing a complex and fluid sexual identity, and of negotiating both straight and lesbian/gay scenes (what other sexual orientation requires you to come out to a potential date, for example?), and the mental health challenges that seem to accompany the type of minority prejudice that bi people experience. It is not that bi people are tragic victims, or indeed that they are any more, or any less, socially disadvantaged than lesbians, gay men or for that matter trans people. Of course, social privilege and marginalisation depend on a whole host of factors. It is rather that we need to move swiftly away from biphobic old chestnuts, such as the idea that bisexuality is just a phase, or doesn't exist, or is a soft option, or that bisexuals are all greedy folk who like having orgies. Bisexual people come in many shapes and sizes and ranges of relationship preference, from celibate and asexual through to polyamorous (being open to more than one honest relationship at a time) or non-monogamous. I have argued elsewhere (*Gender Politics: Citizenship, Activism and Sexual Diversity*, Pluto Press 2005) for a need for us all to build alliances, and that is one of the reasons why I was delighted to be invited here tonight.

### **Biphobia**

One of the ways in which bisexuality is complex is that in some cases bi people may avoid homophobia (notably male/female bi couples who 'pass' as straight). However, they may also experience homophobia. As research contributor Christian explained:

...when I was physically attacked in the streets when I walked with my boyfriend hand in hand or arm in arm, I assume I was attacked as a gay person.....bisexual people can have homophobic abuse.

The term 'biphobia' was introduced by Kathleen Bennett to mean 'prejudice against bisexuality' (1992: 205) and 'the denigration of bisexuality as a life-choice' and (1992:207). Biphobia is different from homophobia. For example research contributor Jacqui said that:

...one of the worst experiences, one of the first places I went to when I discovered I was bisexual was a Black lesbian group, at a new women's centre in [ ] which was absolutely jam-packed all full of Black lesbians and I thought "Oh my god this is fantastic, I never knew.." it was brilliant. And then someone said "if anyone is not a lesbian, leave now" I couldn't move for a bit and then I had to get up and I went, it was awful....

It seems that social movements do not progress in a linear fashion towards some kind of rainbow-coloured utopia – bi people were part of the early movements for sexual liberation but then were excluded, for a number of reasons such as the impact of lesbian separatism, and the bi movements have mostly followed a separate trajectory – the community (for example BiCon bisexual conference) is very grass-roots, non-commercialised, with links to a whole range of alternative communities such as the personal growth movements, pagans, goths, polyamorists and the 'fan' communities. This is a different sort of social space to those found in Gay Villages and Stonewall, for example. I am going to use the last part of this presentation to look briefly at some of the intersectional dynamics found in the ~~main~~ organised Bi communities.

### **Bisexuals and Intersectionality**

| One thing that really strikes you when you enter the space associated with the ~~main~~-organised bisexual communities (there are several loosely linked networks) is a certain type of diversity – physical diversity with high levels of difference in body type, lots of alternative ‘looks’. There is, indeed, a very high level of awareness around both physical and neurological difference and impairment, and around gender diversity. And, of course, it is somewhere where people can be open and feel safe about their sexuality. This can be immensely important on a personal level, as contributor Camel says:

When I first went (to BiCon) it was incredibly exciting, incredibly liberating...I thought I had got as far as I could get with being out and happy as a bi person.... there are some very strong norms in that community, and I fitted some of them, and I didn't notice, because the way that norms is that you don't notice them...but you notice when you don't fit them. Norms – massive middle classed-ness...crazy levels of education...

However, what is very apparent in the latter part of this quote is the class dynamic, which is proving to be a difficult one for the bi community to address. The key event, BiCon (an annual conference run by volunteers), is held on a university campus, with an emphasis on workshops, and although there is a bursary fund it is still rather costly; it rather unsurprisingly fails to fully represent people across a range of class backgrounds. Another major intersectional omission concerns race and ethnicity (others concern older people, lone parents, and those who are poor and live in rural areas). Whilst there are some BME people at BiCon, it has been described as racist by some of the research contributors, who have experienced direct racism as well as the inhospitable whiteness forged by a combination of white-oriented subcultures (main organised bi community poly, goth, fan, bdsm, pagan etc). Some moves have been made to address this, for example increased awareness about faith diversity. However, there is insufficient awareness that the intersection of race and sexuality is one of the sites where sharp social exclusion can take place. It is important for those of us who are white to challenge our assumptions, for example several of the bisexual BME people in my study have supportive families. At present, some of the BME bisexual people who were involved in BiCon have got so fed up with the racism and whiteness there that they have now organised separately (Bisexuals of Colour, <http://bisofcolour.tumblr.com/>), which is to be welcomed, but is a loss to the other organised bisexual community.

### **What is to be done?**

There are a number of things that we can do to try to address the intersectional marginalisations experienced by bisexual people. These are, of course, underpinned by the acknowledgement that if someone identifies as bisexual then they are bisexual, and they may be facing discrimination (or not, depending on the situation). Some areas for development are:

- Voluntary and community sector organisations that are LGB and/or T focused need to properly include bisexuals and other non LGH (Lesbian, Gay and Heterosexual) people – see the Bisexuality Report for details.
- Voluntary and community sector organisations that are sector-specific (eg focused on age, homelessness, adoption and fostering etc) need to also include bisexuals fully alongside LGs; bisexuals are one of the protected groups under the Equalities Act 2010 (although the term ‘bisexual’ is not used) and there are currently significant omissions e.g. British Association of Adoption and Fostering.

- The organised bisexual communities need to engage more with training for diversity (some has been done), and networking with other communities, as well as actively supporting specific groups set up to counter intersectional disadvantage and discrimination (such as the Bis of Colour group, youth groups in deprived areas etc) – the unfunded nature of the Bi community at present makes these things extremely difficult (there is a lack of capacity) so fundraising is also needed.
- There is a need for recognition amongst white middle class bisexuals of their privilege in terms of race and ethnicity and a concurrent commitment to anti-racism.
- There is a need for an understanding that strategically passing as straight (whether you are bisexual, or gay or lesbian) might be the only option in certain circumstances – these could relate to class, faith, ethnicity, ability, or work or caring responsibilities for example.
- There is a need for Equality and Diversity training with statutory sector and private contracted agencies about bisexuality and bisexual intersectionalities.

Note – references available on request.