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Narratives of bisexuality: Marginalisation, resistance, and activism

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Aims, structure

- Aim: To explore some common themes and some divergences in narratives about bisexuality in Colombia
- Structure
 - Methods
 - Cross-cultural and transhistorical contextualisation
 - Marginalisation: Outside of logics of possibility
 - Marginalisation: How does it feel?
 - Resistance
 - Activism

- Research for monograph: *Bisexuality* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015)
- Interviews with Colombian bisexual people conducted via skype in Spanish by Camillo Tamayo Gómez (Autumn 2012)
- Other related research:
 - ESRC project ‘Organisational Change, Resistance and Democracy (with Diane Richardson)
 - Interviews with bisexual and other non-heterosexual people in the UK
 - Analysis of Indian web materials (Dr Ahonaa Roy)

Methods cont

Pseudonym	Age	City	Profession and level of Education	Organization (if applicable)
Lia	29 years	Bogotá	Anthropologist. 5 years College Degree	Female - Bisexual activists group called "Bi Dimension"
Alia	32 years	Cali	Teacher. 5 years College Degree	Female - Non Activist
Marcos	42 years	Medellin	Hair Dresser. High School	Male - Non Activist
Mario	27 years	Bogotá	Sociologist. Master Degree.	Male - Non Activist
Lucia	36 years	Barranquilla	Dancer. High School	Transgender Male – Activist
Paula	43 years	Pasto	Taxi Driver. Less than High School.	Transgender Female - Non Activist

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Cross-cultural and historical 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)

The Colombian context



- 1970s+ Activist networks and academic discussions
- 2000+ Colombian LGBT movement
- 2006 term 'bisexuality' used to distance from LG and T activisms
 - Some bisexuals were articulated in a group inside the LGBT movement called *Bisexuales Unidos* (Bisexuals United)
 - *Sentido Bisexual* (Bisexual Sense) in Bogotá
 - In 2008 another bisexual organization was born called *Dimensión Bi* (Bi Dimension)
 - First District Conference about Bisexuality in Bogotá in 2008
 - 2008b - some groups of bisexuals starting to transmit a weekly radio show called *Doble Vía* (Two ways)

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The many possibilities of bisexuality

- *“I fell in love with the person, not the gender” (Paula)*
- *“From my point of view, we have to respect some mainstream cultural norms in our bisexual relationships... for example, I know that we can have emotional and sexual relationships with people of both sex, we are bisexuals; however, if I have a relationship with a guy or a girl, I have to respect some rules and not try to experiment with people of different gender at the same time... if I have a girlfriend I have to have just relationships with women, and if I have a boyfriend I have to have just male partners... you can't swap genders if you have a serious relationship with somebody... it is a kind of “gender bisexual fidelity” I suppose... a little bit weird, isn't it?” (Alia)*

Marginalisation: Outside of the logics of possibility



- *“For me, if you want to have a bisexual identity, you have to overcome three closets... gays and lesbians say all the time that you have to “Coming out of the closet” and be proud of your sexual identity, but for bisexuals, we have to do a step more... the first closet is with yourself, recognize you as a bisexual; the second closet is with the Gay, Lesbian and Transgender community, because sometimes they can’t accept you as a bisexual and it’s really difficult to try to construct your bisexual identity when non-heterosexual people, “your friends”, judge you all the time; and finally, with the society in general... I think it is a really long journey to have bisexual emancipation...” (Lia)*
- *“In our LGBT Community Centre one day the gay group said to us ‘I don’t believe in bisexuals, because all the members of my group came from the bisexual group’” (Marcos)*

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Marginalisation: experiences

- *“I think guiltiness is related with Judaeo-Christian values, and bisexuals should fight together against these horrible feelings because there’s nothing wrong being a bisexual, but sometimes you don’t want to recognize yourself as a bisexual because you don’t want to feel guilty...”* (Marcos)
- *“I know some bisexual families but I think they are more hidden from the radar, because in the Colombian catholic society is not possible to understand this new type of family and society is always waiting for the “perfect nuclear catholic family” and they cannot accept a bisexual family...”* (Lucia)

Marginalisation and spatialisation

- *“I think to being bisexual in Bogotá is easier than being bisexual if you live in the country side... Firstly, in the country side people are close-minded; secondly, you can find a stronger patriarchal society in the country side than in some cities; and finally these ideas about the “natural order” are more important in the country side... I mean, when I say “natural order” it is in order to talk about issues like the patriarchal society, the “superiority” of men in rural contexts, the “inferiority” of homosexuality compared with heterosexuality, the importance of religion, and so on... all these factors have an influence on the construction of your bisexual identity in rural contexts without doubt...” (Mario)*

Ethnicity and gender

- *“...some Afro descendent communities from Cartagena (Colombian Caribbean Cost) or from Chocó (Colombian Pacific Cost) where polygamy and bisexuality are culturally accepted... but you can find a really interesting thing at the same time: bisexuality is only accepted for men and not for women, reproducing some rules of the Colombian patriarchal society... in other words, the construction of your bisexual identity depends, at the same time, upon following some of the rules of the mainstream context...” (Mario)*
- *“In Afro Communities if I say “I’m bisexual” it is less problematic than if I say “I’m gay”, because if I say “I’m gay” people start believing that I cannot get back to being a heterosexual, but if I say “I’m bisexual” the same people start thinking that it is just a temporary condition and is just all right... and it is more as a strategy in order not to lose my role inside my community” (Lia)*

Resistance and activism

“Our principal needs are recognition, respect and dignity for this sexual option... recognition to overcome guiltiness, shame and to not feel judged... people say no! Wait a minute, you are not bisexual, you are gay or lesbian, take an option!!! and this is wrong and disrespectful... because bisexuality is not a thing that you can take off...” (Marcos)

Poster of the First District Conference about Bisexuality in Bogotá - 2008



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Concluding thoughts

- Bisexuality has emerged as a distinctive category in some Colombian non-heterosexual peoples' narratives
- There is wide diversity in Colombian bisexual narratives
- Marginalisation is a common theme
- Bisexuality is set against gay and lesbian identities, but there is evidence that:
 - bisexual people use identities strategically
 - Bisexuals are marginalised in heterosexual, and lesbian and gay cultural/political spaces
- These narratives demonstrate the ways in which bisexualities are structured by factors such as spatiality, ethnicity, and gender, and also patterns of postcolonialism and globalisation

References



- Blackwood, E., (2000) 'Culture and Women's Sexualities', *Journal of Social Issues*, 56(2): 223-238.

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