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Bisexuality: Theoretical and Political Challenges

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Aims

- Aims to map out some of the territory concerning bisexuality – specifically bisexual erasure and the reasons for this



- And to raise some implications

Structure

- Empirical basis
- Definitions and variations
- Academic erasures
- Lesbian and Gay community erasures
- Heteronormative erasures
- Why is bisexuality erased?
- Examples of successful activism and democratic participation
- Some implications
- Conclusion

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Empirical Basis for the research



- 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
 - Interviews with 6 Colombian bisexual and queer people
 - Web analysis of Indian situation
 - Also drew on previous qualitative research with gender variant people in India and with bisexual people in the UK

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Cont.

- LGBT Equalities Initiatives in Local Government in the UK
 - Large ESRC funded study in local authorities in Northern Ireland, North and Southern England, and Wales
 - Interviews with local authority officers (at different levels, different services) and partners in voluntary/community organisations (37)
 - Participative Action Research, Action Learning Sets in each of the 4 case study areas (40)
 - Interviews with key national stakeholders and councillors (20)
- Acknowledgements to Diane Richardson, Camillo Tamayo Gomez and the ESRC

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Definitions of Bisexuality

- 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)

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
 - Western-originated
 - Queer better? Pansexual, omnisexual? MSMW/WSMW?

Variations in bi people's lived sexualities



...it was a group of friends, I was with my boyfriend, lots and lots of couples that would go out and we'd go clubbing, you know obviously have quite a few drinks, dance the night away then come back and all meet at somebody's house where it was suitable for us to stay up all night...and people got a bit fruity and just went off into different corners or wherever, or we'd all end up in the same room and we'd be touching and kissing [pause] it wasn't swinging as such, it was just people enjoying being around other people that they loved (Kay, UK)

The relationships I've had, I've only had sexual relationships with one man and that was in a very artificial way, in relationships with women, its been heavy petting, and when there is penetration involved that really take me out of my comfort zone...(Reggie, UK)

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The erasure of bisexuality within academia



- Much of the 'LGBT' literature either overlooks or marginalises bisexualities, or subsumes bisexualities into other identities
- For instance, Ken Plummer's typology of homosexuality (1975: 98) incorporates men who are having sex with men and women as 'homosexual', thereby 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)*

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Bisexual-focused academic work

- There is a body of international scholarship e.g. Oscar García's (2006) *'Bisexualidad: De la Tercería a la Ruptura de Dicotomías'* (Bisexuality: From third positions to ruptured dichotomies)
- Merl Storr, Steven Angelides, Clare Hemmings, Monro...
- International Journal of Bisexuality Studies

- BUT much of anglo literature is auto/biographical, are about activist interventions – has developed in a different space to 'mainstream' social and political science approaches to sexualities

The erasure of bisexuality by the lesbian and gay communities

- Historically, bisexuals have been actively excluded from ‘lesbian and gay’ space in the UK – this is now changing to a degree
- This is also evident in Colombia:

I think the people that are more aggressive to bisexuals are the gay community, because they can't understand our sexuality and preferences, and they believe that we are just a couple of undecided people... and this is really really difficult because the gay community think that bisexual people don't know what they want and just want to have fun...

(Carlos, Colombia)



The erasure of bisexuality in other spaces

- Interviewees described discrimination, and erasure of bisexuality elsewhere:

I have experienced biphobia in quite a few different forms, some from people telling me I shouldn't identify as bi (because I'm in a stable relationship), some from people telling me they were fine with gay people but thought bi people should have to 'make up their minds', and a huge amount of biphobia from my parents, who said I was just 'polymorphously perverse' and clearly this bi thing was just a phase, and then later conveyed to me that they thought I was lying about my sexuality in order to rebel. They reasoned that bi people were diseased and perverted, and I hadn't died of sexually transmitted diseases yet, so clearly I must be lying (Elisabeth, UK)

Cont.

- The erasure of bisexuality is sedimented within institutional structures and processes
- Bisexuality 'off the radar' in some municipal organisations

...you can't make homophobic comments in the workplace, because it counts as bullying and harassment...but they aren't necessarily aware that calling bisexual people greedy falls under that as well; and it tends to be, certainly in terms of anecdotal evidence and things I've heard from people it's more acceptable to make those comments about bisexual people and they won't be challenged as much by employers (Bisexual Community Member, Wales, ESRC project)

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Erasure and biphobia

- The term ‘biphobia’ means *‘prejudice against bisexuality’* and *‘the denigration of bisexuality as a life choice’* (Bennett 1992: 205 - 207).
- Erasure as an aspect of biphobia
- ‘Hypersexualised bisexuality’:
 - the discursive framing of bisexual people (and others involved in bisexual behaviours) in such a way as to prioritise their sexuality over other aspects of their identity
 - Framing bisexuals as being people who are very sexual in particular, objectifying, ways

Lived experiences of biphobia

- Discrimination against bisexual people is well-documented (e.g. Barker et al 2012) and results in lived experiences such as:

You don't fit, basically...first of all, for many people you don't exist. Its the complete invisibility and erasure of bisexuality [pause] you need to be stronger, to say all the time "I am bisexual, I identify as bisexual" when other people tell you "you don't exist" or, if they recognise that you exist, then you are "greedy", you "can't decide", you are "not able to decide", you don't have the, you "lack the mental skills" to decide...but now I really feel that I have to say all the time, that I am bisexual. Its this constant battle (Merina, UK)

More about biphobia

- Barker et al (2012) outline key negative stereotypes including:
 - Viewing bisexual people as greedy
 - Assuming that bisexual people are promiscuous or incapable of monogamy
 - Assuming that bisexual people are a threat to relationships/families
 - Viewing bisexual people only in terms of their sexual practices, for example as objects to fulfil sexual fantasies (such as threesomes)

Sexual prejudices

- Biphobia is linked with other forms of prejudice, including erotophobia (fear of eroticism), and prejudice against people who have more than one sexual partner (see Klesse 2005)
- In the UK, the bi communities overlap with kink, poly and fetish communities
- All of these challenge mononormative society
 - They are marginalised by heteronormative mainstreams
 - And by homonormative lesbian and gay activists
 - They flourish as subcultures
- The failure of the bisexual communities to become 'desexualised' and normalised is one reason for lack of political clout

Example of how hypersexualised bisexuality plays out in real life

We were in a jazz club, we had a kiss, and a man came up to us and said “oh my god, you guys look amazing, I’m a photographer from a magazine and I’d really like to photograph you”. And I was so angry. And [girlfriend] really liked it, she was really flattered by it, and we had a big fight about it (Yaz, UK)

...it [commodification of bisexuality] perpetuates harmful stereotypes of bi people as being (for example) universally sexually available and inconsistent (Nancy, UK)



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Challenging erasure - Colombian activism



- 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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Successful examples of activism and of democratic engagement - Colombia



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Activism and democratic engagement - UK



- Bisexual people were amongst the early campaigners for the decriminalisation and depathologisation of homosexuality in the UK (1950s +)
- 1970s shift to autonomous lesbian and gay organising
- Bisexual communities took different path – more focused on grassroots activism and lifestyle politics
- The first national bisexual conference in the UK, called BiCon, took place in 1985, and it was titled *The Politics of Bisexuality*
- Step-change in UK bisexual politics with 2012 publication of *The Bisexuality Report* – and use of UK political opportunity structures
- Engagement of UK bisexuals in consultation, trainings, and research

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Bisexuality – what does it mean for social and political science?



- The destabilisation of normative and discreet ideas of categorisation
- Unpacking the ways in which lesbian, gay, and heterosexual identities are discursively created and consolidated
- The inclusion of bisexual activist and other voices in all their diversity
- Acknowledging the culturally situated nature of all identity categories

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The implications for activism

- Bisexual visibility is important
- There is a need for lesbian and gay activists – and heterosexual rights advocates – to fully include bisexuals and to acknowledge the specific challenges facing bisexuals – and for productive alliances
- There is a need for bisexual activists to acknowledge areas where some bisexuals may access heterosexual privilege
- It is important to recognise cross-cultural differences in sexual/gender identities and the ways that race, class and other factors affect bi people

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Conclusion

- My new book *Bisexuality: Identities, Politics, Theories* (Palgrave MacMillan, June 2015) provides contribution towards rethinking bisexuality and wider sexuality studies
- I feel need for more nuanced and intersectional approaches to sexuality/gender studies
- Need for inclusion of issues concerning gender diversity AND other diversities – ethnic, faith, nationality, ability, age.....
- So that we use identity categories for activism and research where useful – but are aware of their limitations.....
- Never forgetting that human rights activism has real implications for real people's lives...

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Resources

- <http://www.hud.ac.uk/research/researchcentres/criss/staff/drsuryamonro.php>
- <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/selg/index.html>
- <http://www.bisexualindex.org.uk/>
- <http://bicommunitynews.co.uk/>
- <http://www.biuk.org/>
- <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/EURO-BINET/info>