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Bisexual studies: Where have we been and where are we going?

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# Bisexual Studies: Where have we been and where are we going?

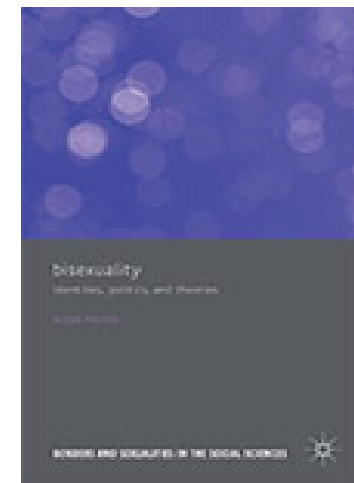
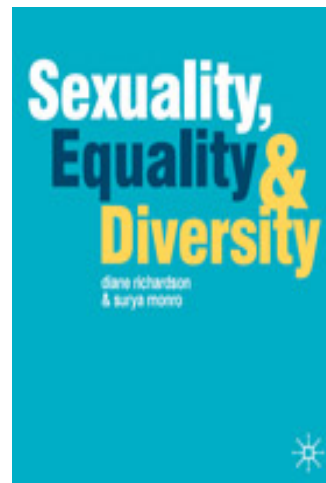
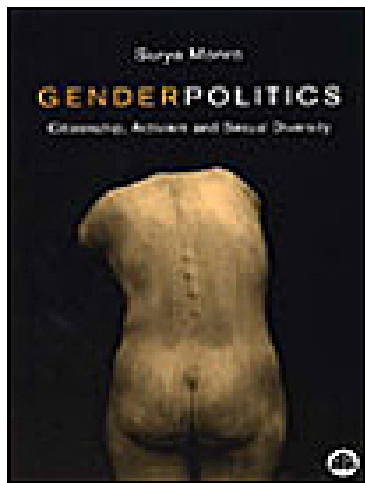


EuroBiRecon Amsterdam 2016

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# Who am I? plus acknowledgements

- Thanks to funders, research participants, activists, friends, colleagues. **Trigger warning**



# Aims of the talk

- To provide snapshot of history of Bisexuality Studies – why is it not more well known? Why don't we tend to use mainstream social theory more and why don't others use Bi studies more?
- To provide a quick tour of some useful theories
- Broadening our gaze to look at related challenges
- What can help us in our activist and academic journeys?



# Structure of the talk

- The history of bi studies
- The social science erasure of bi studies
- The problems with bi as a concept and claiming bi academic space
- Interactionism
- Citizenship theories
- Focusing on Intersectionality
- The big broad challenges and what they might mean for bi studies
- Resources

# The anglo history of bi studies

- Middle Eastern and Southern European cultures
- Industrialisation, imperialism, categorisation
- Western science and the sexologists
- Bi-positive scholars and reparative bisexuality studies
- Poststructuralism, cultural studies, psychology....



# Notable trends

- Tendency towards autobiographical, fringe, activist literatures....
- Emphasis on men due to resourcing following AIDS/HIV crisis
- Other terms evolving e.g. Men who have Sex with Men and Men who have Sex with Men and Women, pansexual, omnisexual, pluri-sexual
- Important contributions especially in raising bi visibility, and developing notions of biphobia and bi-centric theory
- Limited 'conversations' between bi studies and broader sexualities literature

# The social science erasure of bi studies



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## A Review of Sexualities Scholarship 1970-2015

- Content analysis of 85 books (US and UK) focusing on sexualities plus interviews with key authors
- Found varied pattern on inclusion/exclusion but strong tendencies for bisexuality to be overlooked, subsumed into other sexualities, or denigrated
- Reasons for this varied across the different eras, including the heterosexist nature of the literature, the impact of gay and lesbian-focused identity politics, and queer deconstructionism

*I think 'B' was added to LG in the later 1980s...In any event the B has rarely (if ever) been taken seriously in my experience (Ken Plummer personal communication 10 January 2016).*

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# The problems with bi as a concept



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- An anglo and a white-originated term – how relevant is it?

*...I really like the acronyms 'Men who have Sex with Men' and 'Women who have Sex with Women', I can just think about where I grew up...Black men would go to a sauna or a club and have sex with other men but they would never call themselves 'gay' or 'queer' (Jacqui, Black British bisexual, in Monroe 2015: 77)*

*First of all I never openly say that I am whatever, because first of all I don't know how to identify myself and secondly I don't find that I need to come out, or whatever, so even for the Christians, say some of them they don't really like the idea, they reject homosexuality. But they never say something back to me (Jo, bisexual British and of Chinese origin, in Monroe 2015: 77)*

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- Heterosexism and homophobia
  - Cut across different populations – term ‘homosexual activity’ can also apply to bi people doing same-sex sexualities
  - Bisexual activism tends to focus on recognition not material/structural changes
  - Where rights very absent or material conditions poor, tendency to go for material/structural changes – and bisexuality falls by wayside

*Homosexuality is illegal in 78 countries and is punishable by death in Mauritania, Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and parts of Nigeria and Somalia (Itaborahy and Zhu, 2014)*

# Claiming academic space - and space in policy networks



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- Those scholars working within academia to foreground bisexuality and/or integrate bi-awareness with other knowledges are playing important role
- But also those addressing human rights and policy aspects – e.g.:

*47% of [bisexual] women and 36% [of bisexual] men felt they had been discriminated against or harassed on the grounds of their sexual orientation in the last 12 months (FRA 2013)*

*There is very little awareness of the health issues that bisexual persons face. The situation of bisexual persons was hardly mentioned, or not mentioned at all, by most interviewees. This invisibility is reflected in healthcare provision. (FRA 2016: 73)*

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# Cont.



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# Interactionism

- Identities constructed via interaction with others
- Reflexive processes
- Social construction of biphobia, double discrimination
- Bisexuality as ‘unintelligible’

*It is very very different [pause] its more difficult, you don't feel included, it's difficult to find a community, it's difficult to find a reference point. You don't fit, basically...first of all, for many people you don't exist' (Merina, bisexual person, UK)*

- Early approaches – social, political, legal (rights and responsibilities of citizenship within a state) and range of sexual citizenship work (Phelan 1995, Richardson 1998, Richardson and Monro 2012)
- Issues for bisexual citizenship include:
  - challenging public/private divide
  - challenging mononormativity
  - challenging categorisation
  - universalism/particularism issues



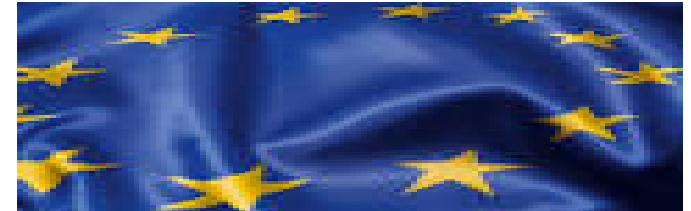
# Citizenship can be a powerful bisexual rights tool

- EU law, international human rights commitments, legislation

*The principle of equal treatment is a fundamental value of the EU which ensures both respect for human dignity and full participation on equal terms in economic, cultural and social life. This is clearly expressed by Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and brought together in the Preamble of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Charter), which constitutes the compass for individual fundamental rights protection under EU law (FRA 2016: 17)*



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# Intersectionality

- Intersectionality theory was developed by feminists of colour and critical race theorists (Crenshaw 1997)

*Intersectionality theory has a great deal to offer to those concerned with gender and sexuality...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 (Monro 2015: 59)*



# Intersectional marginalisations - example

## LGBT History Month UK 2016:

*UK LGBT History Month is now over. It was a mixed month for us at Bi's of Colour. Stage 3 of our history project saw us sending over 30 sets of our posters all over the country...[but] the Bisexual erasure from so called LGBT groups and organisations was even worse than usual. Camden LGBT Forum refused to host any bisexual events, and called them 'Flops'...The bi communities came out in force, as did the queer, trans and intersex people of colour communities, to support their members during February. This was in stark contrast to the large funded organisations who say they're LGBT, but are often only for lesbians and gays only. For many bisexual people of colour, this type of poor behaviour is nothing new (Bi's of colour*

*<http://bisofcolour.tumblr.com/> )*

# The broader challenges and what they might mean for bi studies



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- Heterosexism and homophobia – as well as biphobia
- Economic inequalities and constraints:
  - Individual bi people's lives
  - Those facing intersectional disadvantage affected worse
  - Affects civil society and equalities initiatives/policies
  - Worsening social climate generally

*In almost all Member States covered by the research, respondents referred to resource constraints due to cuts resulting from the economic crisis and its effects on public services in recent years (FRA 2016: 7)*



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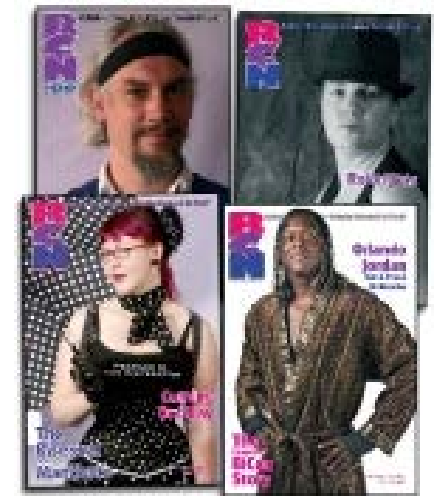
- Migration
  - Political causes, climate change, homophobia/biphobia
- Threats to international rights communities
  - Brexit and other threats to EU
  - Other political threats
- Polarisation of attitudes towards sexual diversity internationally
  - Hegemonic position of Western/Northern countries and development aid
  - Fundamentalist religions –interfacing with racism, Islamophobia
  - Homophobic nationalist identities/homonationalism

- Use of social and political theories to help us with activism
  - Understanding micro-aggression and systemic biphobia
  - Citizenship theory – particularism, universalism
  - Political opportunity theory (eg Barker et al 2012)
  - Intersectionality theory
  - Homonationalism and postcolonial theory
  - And many others.....

- Personal
  - Caring for ourselves and those close to us
  - Strategies for empowerment
    - Spiritual and psychological
    - Activism
    - Expanding our awareness
- We may have specific skills:
  - Strategic identity management
  - Survival of difficulties
  - Coping with fluidity and change



- Community
  - For mutual support
  - For the business of activism
  - The importance of alliances
  - Being politically strategic
  - We need to face the big issues and the smaller ones



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