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Bisexuality: Working with a Silenced Sexuality

Meg Barker & Darren Langdrige

My friend told her father about her new boyfriend. He responded: ‘the last thing I heard you were a lesbian’.

At psychotherapy supervision one of my colleagues presented a male client who was in a sexual relationship with a woman but defined himself as gay. After some group discussion of whether the label ‘heterosexual’ or ‘gay’ was most appropriate for him I suggested that there might be other possibilities if he wanted a description of his sexuality. The group appeared baffled until I offered: ‘well I’m bisexual’.

Bisexuality has been acknowledged to be a silenced sexuality within several domains including mainstream media (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer, in press), lesbian and gay communities (Gurevich, Bower, Mathieson & Dhayanandhan, 2007), sexology (Rust, 2000), and psychology and psychotherapy (Petford, 2003). Our own anecdotes above serve to illustrate the frequent overlooking of bisexuality as a potential identity position in both popular understanding and applied psychological contexts. Indeed, Firestone’s (1996) collection on bisexuality was subtitled: ‘the psychology and politics of an invisible minority’; there is a wikipedia entry for ‘bisexual erasure’; and prominent UK bi-activist Jenni Yockney speaks of exclusion of ‘the b-word’ as one of the main problems confronting bi people when trying to access services (Barker & Yockney, 2004). Several authors have linked bisexual invisibility to the high rates of mental health problems reported amongst bi-identified people relative to heterosexual, lesbian and gay identified people (e.g. Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christensen, 2002; Oxley & Lucius, 2000). In this paper we present the intertwined popular and psychological exclusions of bisexuality before critically considering whether queer theory (Jagose, 1996) offers alternative possibilities for increasing the acknowledgement of this silenced sexuality.

In popular representations, bisexual invisibility takes various forms. Barker et al. (in press) note that when fictional characters become attracted to a person of a different gender to the one they were before, they are generally portrayed as changing from

heterosexual to gay (or vice versa) (e.g. Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; Whedon, 1997). Attraction to 'both' genders is portrayed as 'just a phase' (e.g.. Todd Grimshaw in *Coronation Street*; Reynolds, 2004) or one set of attractions is erased. For example, the movie *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) was frequently described as a 'gay western', (e.g. Rich, 2005) despite the two main male characters having long-term female partners, and newspaper reports overwhelmingly describe as 'gay' married politicians who have sexual relationships with other men (e.g. Kavanagh, 2006). Furthermore, women's bisexuality is also often downplayed in terms such as 'bi-curious' and/or portrayed as purely for the titillation of heterosexual men (Barker et al., in press). This is clearly a complex topic given that, for many lesbians and gay men, transitory phases of other-sex desire are a normal part of their sexual identity development. However, such personal and public understandings, along with dichotomous sexual identity theories, invariably result in the impossibility of bisexual identities being recognised and valued alongside lesbian and gay identities.

This exclusion of bisexual identities is reproduced and perpetuated in the discipline of psychology in the tendency to regard sexuality as entirely dichotomous. One of the current authors, Barker (2007), conducted an in depth analysis of the representation of sexuality in popular psychology textbooks. She found that two thirds of the textbooks failed to mention bisexuality at all. Many of the books clearly demonstrated dichotomous assumptions in definitions of sexuality - heterosexual or homosexual (e.g. Toates, 2001), or their questioning of why 'some people prefer partners of the other sex and some prefer partners of their own sex' (e.g. Kalat, 2003, p.345). The remainder of the textbooks mentioned bisexuality very briefly and then continued to address research which dichotomizes sexuality. Some confusingly mentioned Kinsey's research before continuing to the usual dichotomous research (Kinsey conceptualized sexuality as on a continuum and found that around 37% of men and 13% of women had had at least one 'homosexual encounter' - Fox, 1996). Some explicitly downplayed the existence of bisexuality, for example Myers (2003) reported low frequencies of bisexuality, arguing by analogy to handedness that 'most people are one way, some the other. A very few are truly ambidextrous' (p.476).

The psychological research on these topics that filters into popular culture also tends towards dichotomizing, biological ‘explanations’ and erasure of bisexuality. The research of Rieger, Chivers, and Bailey (2005) was widely publicised, despite clear flaws in design and analysis (Hutchins, 2006), resulting in articles in the *New York Times* reporting that all men were ‘straight, gay or lying’ (Carey, 2005) and in the glossy magazine *Psychologies* that ‘true bisexuality is infrequent in men’ (Borno, 2006, p. 42). Wilson and Rahman’s (2005) recent popular science book *Born Gay* explains why many biological psychology researchers and authors seem to want to deny the existence of bisexuality. They argue that sexuality is dichotomous, and that this ‘implies that sexual orientation is set from an early age, whereas a prevalence of intermediate sexualities [would fit] better with the argument that later learning experiences, ‘chance’ factors or lifestyle choices are influential’ (Wilson & Rahman, 2005, p. 16). This is clearly at odds with constructionist understandings of sexuality across the social sciences (e.g. Weeks, 2003) and with many current understandings of evolutionary theory that emphasise diversity and variation (e.g. Hird, 2004; Roughgarden, 2004).

As part of our ‘Queer(y)ing Psychology’ project (Langdrige, 2006) we have been exploring whether queer theory perspectives offer possibilities for less exclusionary understandings of sexuality than the popular dichotomous perspective prevalent across mainstream media and psychology. Queer theory is concerned with disrupting binary categories of identity and therefore providing a challenge to many of the assumptions underpinning Western common-sense understandings of self and identity. It has emerged out of academic work, principally in the humanities, alongside HIV activism and the politics of second wave feminism (Seidman, 1996) and offers up a radically different way of understanding sexuality, selfhood and sexual politics.

Bowes-Catton’s (2007) paper *Resisting the Binary* reports that discourses within bisexual politics have shifted over the past 30 years from an ‘identity politics’ agenda claiming recognition for bisexuality as a legitimate ‘quasi-ethnic’ sexual identity, towards a queer agenda resisting dichotomous understandings of sexuality and presenting bisexuality

more as attraction regardless of gender (a definition preferred by many of the participants in Petford, 2003, and Barker et al.'s, in press, research). Bowes-Catton (2007) and Barker et al. (in press) note how authors of bi activist texts and attendees at bi conferences continue to draw on both discourses within their writing and conversation, finding it understandably difficult to speak of sexuality completely outside dichotomies of sexuality and gender. In this way the lack of available alternative discourses silence us all, even those who are most invested in challenging such dichotomies

But what does queer theory have to offer as another way of conceptualizing bisexuality within psychology which might make it less invisible? Whilst many bisexual activists and theorists have readily embraced queer theory, the situation with regard to bisexuality and queer theory is undoubtedly complex and potentially problematic. Bisexuality is not even indexed in Piontek (2006)'s *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies*. Indeed, there has been very little discussion of bisexuality within queer theory in general, with most 'queer discussion' remaining focused on lesbian and gay histories, theories and practices. Fox (1996) and Angelides (2001) argue that bisexuality is not allowed to exist in the present tense (Petford, 2003): it is seen in psychoanalysis as belonging to the past as part of a stage towards mono-sexual maturity, and by queer and constructionist perspectives as part of a utopian future when there will be no need to label sexualities – although it will presumably still be invisible then. Whilst queer theory stresses sexual contingency, multiplicity and intersectionality, such that bisexual practices are recognized and valued in all their complexity, bisexuality as a stable identity – indeed, as a history - is problematised alongside lesbian, gay and heterosexual identities. Thus queer theory and activism could very likely constitute the creation of a new form of silencing bisexuality before it has even found a voice.

Gamson (1995), like Grosz (1995) with feminism, recognises the tensions between the lesbian-and-gay and queer theories, arguing that people and communities need to engage with *both* identity movements and queer politics if they are to realise political success. However, without first recognizing and valuing bisexual identities in themselves, any move to queering all sexual identities may – ironically - once again result in the erasure

of bisexual lives. The situation is thus complex and whilst queer theory has much to offer – personally, politically and theoretically – the too rapid appropriation of this particular theoretical perspective by bisexual communities and academics may leave bisexual women and men uniquely dislocated. It could also leave history lacking a bisexual story to enable even an ‘impure’ (Grosz, 1995) sense of personal belonging and political engagement.

So, what does this mean for us as researchers? Perhaps the key is to recognise how we might work to ensure bisexual identities are not silenced in our own attempts to further theory in sexualities research. That is, we may need to work dialectically when researching bisexuality, acknowledging the value of more traditional identities research whilst not neglecting more radical queer theories. This requires working within extant narratives of sexual identities, recognising and valuing bisexual identities strategically whilst also seeking to advance theory. By doing this we can challenge and problematise fixity and continuity, placing politics and power centre-stage as we reflexively engage with the research process and acknowledge our own role in telling stories of sexualities. This is clearly not an easy place to be, given our desire to pursue our own research agendas, but may be the best way to ensure that we do not inadvertently further silence those who are already silenced.

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