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**British Bisexuality: A Snapshot of Bisexual Representations and Identities in the
United Kingdom**

Choose to bat for both sides, choose to have your cake and eat it, choose anything that moves, choose to lie at the door of night clubs, choose to keep your options open, choose to swing both ways, choose to sit on the fence and admire the view, choose to assume nothing, choose to steal lesbian energy and give it to men, choose a little bit of everything, or completely fail to choose at all.

Choose both.

Bicon 2004

www.bicon2004.org.uk

Meg Barker, Helen Bowes-Catton, Alessandra Iantaffi, Angela Cassidy and Laurence

Brewer

SUMMARY. This article summarizes the state of bisexuality in the United Kingdom today. First we provide an overview of the United Kingdom Bisexual Conference (BiCon) and the studies conducted at the Conference by the Bisexual Research Group in the Summer of 2004. Then we provide an in-depth examination of the representations of bisexuality in the British media to give a picture of the prevailing context in which United Kingdom bisexuals live. Following this we present the results of the two pieces of research: a survey questionnaire and a focus group discussion. The purpose of this research was to produce a report by and for the United Kingdom bisexual community on the kind of people who attend this BiCon and their understandings and experiences of bisexuality. Specifically we focus on: who constitute the active bisexual community, how they identify themselves, and what bisexuality means to them in relation to the dominant societal perceptions of bisexuality exemplified in the mainstream media. We conclude with some reflections on the United Kingdom bisexual community today and the possibilities and pitfalls in embarking on such research in this area.

KEYWORDS. Bisexuality, United Kingdom, identity, media representation, sexuality, survey.

INTRODUCTION

There is a thriving bisexual community in the United Kingdom. Over two hundred people participate in the annual BiCon events (Barker & Yockney, 2004) and that is just a small proportion of the bisexual-identified people who are involved in local and on-line communities. There is also a dedicated group of bisexual activists who meet regularly, organize awareness training workshops, and attend relevant committees and events (Bi Activist Group, 2006), and a subset of bisexual academics and non-academics who are committed to conducting research which will prove useful and informative for the United Kingdom bisexual community (Bi Research Group, 2006).

This paper is a report on three, related, pieces of work that this group has conducted. The first is a thorough, ongoing, examination of representations of bisexuality in the British media to obtain a clear picture of the main discourses around bisexuality which are available in the United Kingdom today; secondly, a questionnaire survey on the identities of attendees at the annual United Kingdom Bisexual Conference; and thirdly, an in-depth focus group discussion with a subset of these conference attendees about bisexual identities and experiences and how these relate to dominant understandings and explanations of bisexuality that are available in the United Kingdom.

The latter two pieces of research took place at the 22nd United Kingdom Bisexual Conference (BiCon, 2004), which occurred in Manchester, a city in the North of England. BiCon is an annual event which is located at a different venue each summer, usually a university premises with attendees staying in student halls of residence. The conference lasts for a long weekend (three to four days) and includes workshops and seminars run by attendees on topics as diverse as body-painting, bisexual community, Christianity,

bisexual politics, feminism, alternative relationships, bondage, bisexual identity, juggling, self-harm, shamanism, sex laws, and sign language. There are introductory workshops for newcomers to BiCon and sessions that focus more on the needs of the bisexual community and how these might be met. There are social events in the evenings and space for people to meet informally throughout the days.

Of course BiCon attendees are by no means representative of everyone who identifies as bisexual in the United Kingdom. Depending on one's definition of *bisexual* the number of British bisexuals could range from the few hundred who are actively involved in this bisexual community (or, perhaps more accurately, communities) to half of the population (Klein, 2001). However, we felt it would be useful to provide a snapshot of the kind of people who take part in the annual bisexual conference as it is such an important event for bisexuals in the United Kingdom and does attract such a large number of people. It would be useful if future research could investigate those who identify as bisexual but are not involved in this visible bisexual community to explore the differences between the two groups and the reasons for their lack of involvement, in the same way that our current research has investigated reasons for involvement in BiCon.

The BiCon research was intended as an initial start towards contributing the skills of members of the Bi Research Group to some work which could benefit the bisexual community as a whole, rather than simply aiding the research of the individual academics in this group. Voluntary sector organizations and individuals who participate in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) research frequently complain that academics come in with pre-formed questions and conduct research *on* them which is not of use to the communities themselves. They protest that researchers often focus on the same

groups of people again and again leading to participant fatigue and do not feed back to them in a meaningful or useful way once the research is completed (Hagger-Johnson, Hutchinson, MacManus, & Barker, 2006). It was our intention to do something different to this and for our research to be a useful contribution, beginning to ask questions which members of the bisexual community wanted answering and would find useful in terms of political activism and meeting the needs of members of the community. Accessible reports of all stages of the research have been made available in the *Bi Community News* publication (BCN) and on the BCN website.

On impetus for the study was that previous discussions with key bisexual activists and BiCon organizers revealed that little was actually known about the event and its attendees, despite it being the single largest and most visible bisexual event in the country for the past 20 years. This meant that when activists in the community needed to liaise with the media, local authorities and other agencies about BiCon, it was often quite difficult to say who actually attended and so be better able to focus the media campaign. Knowing more about people's backgrounds, identities and where they lived could help future BiCon organizers when thinking about how to publicize the event and to better respond to the needs of attendees. On top of this, it also seemed useful for everyone to know more about the visible, organized community, as it is very often easy to form impressions that simply might not be true.

The current research took the form of a questionnaire survey, which was given out to all members of the 2004 BiCon, and a focus group discussion about experiences of being bisexual. Because of our strong commitment to doing research *for* the bisexual community rather than simply *on* it, we will be adapting future versions of the survey to

take into account the thoughts and feelings expressed by the participants. The focus group discussion was conducted with a subgroup of nine attendees who volunteered because they were interested in discussing their perceptions and experiences in depth. Frith (2000) argues that such discussions are particularly useful for investigating sexual behavior and attitudes because of the interaction between participants, the insight into language used and the comfortable nature of the situation.

Before presenting the outcomes of the survey and focus group discussion we will first consider the broader contexts of these research findings by outlining some recent coverage and representations of bisexuality in British mass media. If such findings are to feed into media campaigns and awareness-raising sessions it is vital to have a clear picture of what the prevalent existing discourses around bisexuality are in the United Kingdom. Also, the responses of the participants to the questionnaires and focus group discussion can be better understood if they are situated in relation to the dominant perceptions of bisexuality which they draw on in places, and resist in others.

BISEXUALITY IN THE BRITISH MEDIA

Mainstream media depictions generally reflect and perpetuate the dominant ways of understanding present within society. As Bell and Garrett (1998) argue, media representations can tell us a great deal about the social meanings and stereotypes which are projected through language and communication. For example, past authors have examined the ways in which bisexuality is portrayed, or not portrayed, in Hollywood movies (Bryant, 1997) and other forms of media (Garber, 1995). This section considers how bisexuality has been covered and represented in the British media in recent years. The examination here is a briefer version of that presented elsewhere (e.g. Barker, 2003;

BiMedia Group, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; 2005) since the aim is not to give a thorough analysis of popular United Kingdom culture, but rather to provide a basic overview of common perceptions of bisexuality in this country.

In general, there is very little overt media representation of bisexuality. For example, fictional characters tend to be presented as straight if in a relationship with someone of the “opposite sex”, and gay if in a relationship with someone of the “same sex”. If someone becomes attracted to a person of a different gender to the one they were before, they are portrayed as changing from straight to gay (or vice versa), for example as seen in the American TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997), (also popular in the United Kingdom), where the character Willow makes such a transition and is subsequently labeled as a “lesbian.” This pattern is also common in British media, particularly in television soap operas and dramatic series, where portrayals of bisexuality tend to be as a temporary confusion on the way to becoming heterosexual or homosexual. A particularly high-profile example of this was seen in 2004, when the long-running soap opera *Coronation Street* (Reynolds, 2004) had a plotline which never considered bisexuality as a possible identity for “confused” character Todd Grimshaw. After having a clandestine affair with a man, Todd eventually left his pregnant fiancée to come out as gay, leaving the series shortly afterwards. In recent years, there have been similar plotlines in other long-running United Kingdom television series such as *The Bill*, *EastEnders*, *Emmerdale* and *Holby City*, all of which presented attraction to both genders as a phase on the way to a stable gay/lesbian identity. Indeed, at times the *b word* is actively resisted: Bob in the United Kingdom television show *Bob and Rose* strongly

denied that “bisexual” was the appropriate way to describe him (as a gay man in love with a woman) (Davies, 2001).

In a similar fashion, non-fictional media coverage in the United Kingdom often elides bisexuality as a legitimate identity, presenting sexuality as simply dichotomous. Newspaper reporting and reviews of the film *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) frequently described it as a “gay western”, (e.g. Rich, 2005) despite the two main male characters, portrayed in a long term, ‘closeted’ relationship, also having long term female partners.

During 2006, there were several episodes of political scandal in which male politicians were found to have had sexual relationships with other men. Newspaper reporting overwhelmingly describing them as “gay”, despite them also having sexual relationships with women. This was particularly acute in the case of Liberal Democrat leadership contender Simon Hughes, who, after repeated questioning about his sexuality, responded by denying that he was “gay”. When Hughes was subsequently threatened with outing by tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, he offered them an interview in which he stated: “I am perfectly willing to say that I have had both homosexual and heterosexual relationships in the past”. The newspaper headlined this story as “I’M GAY TOO: A SECOND LIMP-DEM CONFESSES” (Kavanagh, 2006). Coverage from most of the other newspapers followed this line, and questioned his suitability for the party leadership due to his “lies”. Although Hughes does not identify explicitly as “bisexual”, preferring to avoid sexual labeling, a minority of media coverage was, after a few days, more sympathetic to his situation, realizing that in fact no lies were told. However, his leadership bid was ultimately unsuccessful, although how much this can be attributed to the scandal is unknown (Bi Community News, 2006).

If explicitly bisexual characters *are* represented in fiction, then they tend to be promiscuous, wicked people with insatiable desires. Bryant (1997, p. 67), using examples from the 1992 *Basic Instinct* and *Blue Velvet*, writes that “If Hollywood is any guide, it is not safe to be bisexual or to be in the company of people who are”. These depictions may be rooted in double discrimination against bisexuals from both heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities. Ochs (1996) argues that bisexuals are frequently viewed by gay men and lesbians as possessing a degree of privilege not available to them and are seen in general as amoral, hedonistic spreaders of disease and disrupters of families. Some United Kingdom television does now include characters who openly identify as bisexual, for example Jane in the BBC2 series *Coupling* (Vertue, 2000), although she is also depicted as mentally unstable and is therefore not a completely positive portrayal. An episode of the Australian show (shown on United Kingdom BBC2) *Kath and Kim* (Kershaw, 2002) used the word ‘bisexual’ and showed Kath deciding that sexuality is fluid after realizing that both she and her fiancé had been attracted to people of the same gender.

Recently, bisexuals in the United Kingdom have welcomed one of the first positive clearly bisexual characters on a popular British TV show: Captain Jack Harkness, who appeared in the first series of relaunched cult show *Doctor Who* (Davies, 2005a), which aired in a primetime BBC1 slot on Saturday nights. Captain Jack still retains some bisexual stereotyping, particularly through being flamboyantly promiscuous, as he puts it: “So many species, so little time”. Also, his character, albeit a *good guy* and happy with his sexuality, is a rather shady intergalactic conman. The *b word* does not actually get used during the show, although the actor who plays Jack, John Barrowman, does in fact

identify the character as bisexual (Hall, 2006). Jack is clearly presented as being attracted to both the male Doctor, and his female assistant (among other characters), and this fluidity is portrayed as being somehow modern or evolved in comparison to 21st century humans, as exemplified by the Doctor's statement to his assistant: "Relax, he's a 51st century guy, he's just a bit more flexible when it comes to 'dancing'." (dancing was used as a metaphor for sex during the episode) (Davies, 2005b). Following his appearance on Dr. Who, Captain Jack subsequently starred in a spin-off series, *Torchwood*, aired during 2006, in which most of the central characters engage sexually with both men and women (Davies, 2006).

During 2004, bisexuality received a lot of direct press coverage following the story of famous footballer David Beckham having an affair with an openly bisexual woman, Rebecca Loos (Whitaker, 2004). Loos continued in the public eye following these reports, appearing in the tabloid newspapers and on shows like *Celebrity Love Island* (Arnold, 2005). She remains openly identified as bisexual, reporting that she has had both male and female lovers since the affair (Thurlbeck, 2004). However, other examples of celebrities and reality TV stars claiming a bisexual identity are often responded to dismissively by the press, with the use of phrases such as "bi-curiosity" and accusations that they are just being fashionable, or doing so for publicity purposes (which is of course possible). In the 2004 series of *Big Brother* (Jones, 2004), many contestants were initially described as bisexual only to be revealed, in the newspapers, to have been merely "curious" or even "lying" (BiMedia Group, 2004c), the latter echoing the popular current perception that bisexual men do not exist and must be "straight, gay or lying", as the *New York Times* notoriously put it (Carey, 2005).

These often contradictory stereotypes were strongly played out in a documentary on bisexual women, aired firstly as *BiCurious Girls* and subsequently as *Bisexual Girls* by the commercial channel Five (Warner, 2003/4). The programme followed the stories of three women “exploring their sexuality”: a student in Brighton, a table dancer, and a hairdresser. The documentary concentrated on the hairdresser, Debbie, who had decided she was attracted to women, but hadn’t yet “done anything” about it. We met her partner, Orville, who seemed none too happy with the whole situation and briefly saw her coming out to her family. The show set her up with a lesbian-bisexual couple who introduced her to their world, which was largely a commercial experience: buying the equipment – i.e. a (pink) strap-on, going to the right bars, and spending money in a lapdance club (involving a bisexual table dancer). The message was that either she would join this new, gay world or return to her normal life: bisexuality was literally a stage while she made up her mind (text shown at the end of the documentary stated that she married Orville and had a baby). Pink was omnipresent in the show’s graphics, sets and in the women’s clothing, often juxtaposing the femininity of bisexual women against the masculinity of butch lesbians. There was also an interesting level of racial coding in the show: Debbie’s straight life involved her mostly black partner, family and friends, whereas the gay world was overwhelmingly coded as white. Overall, bisexual women were represented as either torn in their relationships (Debbie), or as not involved in serious relationships and at it with everyone (the other two girls) (BiMedia Group, 2004).

The film biopic *Kinsey* (Condon, 2004) was released in the United Kingdom in 2005, depicting the life of Alfred Kinsey, along with his famous continuum of sexual behavior and findings that 37% of men reported at least one homosexual experience

(Kinsey, 1948). It is interesting, given the publicity surrounding this film, and depictions of fluid sexuality in television series like *Kath and Kim* (Kershaw, 2002) and *Dr Who* (Davies, 2005) that dominant understandings of sexuality in the United Kingdom remain dichotomous, with little recognition that someone could be attracted to men *and* women or have relationships with both. Such dichotomous understandings are also prevalent in popular psychology magazines and books. For example, the glossy women's magazine *Psychologies*, although titling their article "Why We're All Bisexual" (Borno, 2006), draws on the widely publicized research of Rieger, Chivers, and Bailey (2005) to argue that "true bisexuality is infrequent in men" (p. 42) and presents a purely biological understanding of sexuality, stating that "science has finally revealed that sexuality [just like handedness] is on a certain track from birth...partially shaped by the genes (about 40 per cent) and partly by hormones in the womb" (p. 41). The analogy with handedness again suggests that sexuality is overwhelmingly dichotomous.

Wilson and Rahman's (2005) recent popular science book *Born Gay*, published in the United Kingdom, expands on these common arguments about the non-existence of male bisexuality put forward by the biological psychologists who often feature in news and magazine articles on sexuality. They argue that a dichotomous understanding "implies that sexual orientation is set from an early age, whereas a prevalence of intermediate sexualities fits better with the argument that later learning experiences, 'chance' factors or lifestyle choices are influential" (Wilson & Rahman, 2005, p. 16). However, this is a more controversial view than is presented in the book, as some currents of biological and evolutionary thought now emphasize the variation and diversity of gender, and present evidence of widespread bisexuality amongst both animals

and humans (Bagemihl, 1999; Roughgarden, 2004). Furthermore, this argument is not consistent with the understandings of human sexuality seen in most social science approaches to the subject (Weeks, 2003). Similar presentations to this overwhelmingly dominate psychology textbooks, so the psychological understandings filtering through to the popular imagination are likely to be of a dichotomous sexuality with no room for bisexuality (Barker, 2007). Angelides (2001) argues that research based on dichotomous understandings of sexuality erase bisexuality as a category, and Petford (2004) suggests that such assumptions may well contribute to discrimination experienced by many in the bisexual communities and the myth that bisexuality is “just a phase” on the way to a mature straight or gay identity. In his article on Kinsey, Lipsett (2005) quotes the social psychologist, Wood, regarding dichotomous thinking about sexual orientation: “the interesting thing about [Kinsey’s] research is that he was doing it 50 years ago, and we are still hooked on the theory if you’re not gay, then you must be straight...it’s like *Groundhog Day* without the learning curve” (p. 8).

In summary, it seems that there are some moves towards a perception of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity in the British media and in popular understanding. However, this remains against the backdrop of a dominant understanding of sexuality as dichotomous and bisexuality as some form of phase, immaturity or deviance rather than an identity where both/and scenarios can co-exist (Gibian, 1992; Bennett, 1992). One of the main issues, which reinforces dichotomous either/or definitions of sexual orientation, is that bisexuality is often defined in terms of sexual action or desire, as illustrated by several of the media examples discussed so far. It is often reduced to who does (or would like to do) what to whom in bed. Unlike the gay and lesbian movements, the bisexual

community is still struggling to make the transition from sex to rights, as far as the wider societal context is concerned. For example, the depiction of Rebecca Loos in the British media (Bi Community News, 2006), highlighted earlier, locates the image of the bisexual woman firmly within the confines of heterosexual pornographic imagery, which was lamented by Bode back in 1977: “One impression, they think, that is relayed is that bisexual women are promiscuous, exciting, shadowed by the sexual – as if their only thoughts or emotions were sex-related” (p. 203).

Although little might have changed in the public media portrayal of bisexuality, the emergence of queer theory, and other alternative theoretical sociological and psychological models, have nevertheless started to address the challenge that bisexuality poses not just to definitions of sexual orientation but to the notion of gender itself. Desiring both genders, or seeing oneself as being “gender oblivious”, as some bi people do, can, in fact, be seen as subversive since it undermines the heteronormative discourses based on gender dichotomy as “the elemental form of human association” (Warner, 1993, p. xxi). However, bisexuality as transgression is nothing new, as stated by Garber (1995), when discussing the historical continuum of “bisexual experimentation”: “Do we need to keep forgetting bisexuality in order to remember and rediscover it?” (p. 20)

It can certainly be more comfortable for society to keep portraying bisexuality as deviant, because when it ceases to be a bohemian or extreme way of living and becomes part of our lives and our societies, we are called to reconsider the very notion of sexual orientation. As Garber (1995) goes on to say:

If bisexuality is in fact, as I suspect it to be, not just another sexual orientation but rather a sexuality that undoes sexual orientation as a

category, a sexuality that threatens and challenges the easy binaries of straight and gay, queer and “het”, and even, through its biological and physiological meanings, the gender categories of male and female, then the search for the meaning of the word “bisexual” offers a different kind of lesson (p. 65)

This lesson is one that also started to emerge from the ways in which attendees of BiCon portrayed and reflected on their own identities in the survey and focus group discussion research.

BICON SURVEY

The BiCon survey was distributed at registration for the 2004 Bisexual Conference. Surveys were also available at the main desk throughout the weekend, and were filled in anonymously and returned both at the conference, and afterwards via a Freepost address set up by that year's organizing team. Out of 273 attendees at BiCon 2004, 92 responses were received: a response rate of 34%, which was quite high considering the scale of this survey. The survey asked for details on demographics (age, location, income, education) as well as mental and physical health, previous BiCon attendance, expectations of BiCon, and identity of attendees. For the purposes of this article, we will give a brief overview of who the participants were and will focus specifically on issues of identity and labeling.

Participants Profile

There was a broad range of ages among BiCon attendees participating in the survey, ranging from 17 to 61, with the majority of participants over thirty. Regarding gender, 47% of the respondents described themselves as mostly/only female, 36% as mostly/only male, and 19% as transgender or genderqueer. Attendees also came from all

over the United Kingdom. In other ways, however, they were less diverse. Members of non-white ethnic groups were under-represented, as over 99% of the respondents were white, compared to 92% nationally (Office of National Statistics, 2004).

Like most people in the United Kingdom, most BiCon attendees lived in urban areas (77%, compared to 80% nationally, ONS 2005a); specifically, in the case of BiCon attendees, in large towns or cities (population over 100,000). Most came from towns with local bisexual groups. Nearly 80% of respondents had education to the level of a college/university degree. Given that in 2003-04, only one in six adults of working age in the United Kingdom held a degree or equivalent qualification (ONS 2005b), this is an *unusually* high level of education, and should raise questions for activists about how representative the “organized” bisexual scene manages to be.

It seems clear from the sample composition that the conference participants are not representative of the general population. This is likely also true of the wider “organized” bisexual community. In this context, given the strong reliance on the Internet in publicizing the conference, if organizers hope to reach and attract a wider audience, some thought might be given to using other means of advertising as well.

BiCon's organizers had a commitment to providing equal and open access to the conference, and this was reflected in the fact that 36% of attendees had either single (24%) or multiple (12%) mental or physical health impairments that interfere with day-to-day life. In addition, 25% of people had had a diagnosis of mental health issues from a professional, with the highest proportions of people reporting experiencing depression (16%), anxiety (8%), and self-harm (8%). It is difficult to compare directly, but we know from other research that bisexual people may suffer from higher rates of mental health

problems than lesbians and gay men; who in turn have higher rates than the general population (e.g. Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christensen, 2002). In the psychological literature, the incidence of mental health issues is often linked to biphobia, bisexual invisibility, lower levels of support and acceptance, and the “double discrimination” bisexual people experience (Oxley & Lucius, 2000; Rust, 2000b). Certainly, this underlines the fact that providing emotional and counseling support for people at BiCon is absolutely vital, and each year attendees who are trained in these areas provide a constant round-the-clock voluntary service available for anyone who might need it.

When asked about their reasons for attending BiCon, “having a safe bisexual space” was reported as the most important factor for the attendees, suggesting the importance of such an event in validating aspects of identity, which may be marginal, or even hidden, in everyday life. Another important feature, which seems to have grown organically within BiCon, is the concept of space in which gender is unimportant or in which people’s self-gender-identification is unquestioned.

Identities of BiCon Attendees

The survey included questions relating to identities, relationships and sexual practices, including a version of the classic *Klein Sexual Orientation Grid* (KSOG) (Klein, 1993). Many conference participants found some or all of these questions difficult or impossible to answer and wrote several reasons for this on the forms. Particularly they expressed problems with the way the grid took the adoption of identity and gender “labels” to be fixed and simple categories.

We asked people what kinds of identity labels they used to describe their sexuality. 85% of people indicated “bisexual”, 22% “homosexual”/“lesbian”/“gay”, 10% “straight”/“heterosexual”, and 51% “queer”. As many participants selected more than one identity label, the findings are complex and reflect two considerations: first, the openness of BiCon to the non-bisexual friends, partners and allies of bisexual people: and secondly, unease about the limitations of traditional identity politics. A small but important minority of people wrote that they did not like using specific labels to describe their complex and fluid sexuality. These people often ticked boxes like “queer” and “don’t use the term”, or added new terms in.

Bearing in mind the challenges of defining bisexual identities discussed earlier, some of the questions asked people to write about the categories they would use to describe themselves, which was hoped to be less problematic than giving people categories to use. Terms that several people had used to describe themselves, other than those mentioned above, included *BDSM*, *kinky*, *polyamorous*, *bicurious*, *straight-ish*, *pansexual*, *dyke*, *fluid* or *me*. In particular, the strong adoption of *queer* by so many people suggests that the word may have changed its meanings for some, indicating something more flexible than the traditional Lesbian Gay Bisexual (LGB) identity labels.

As mentioned previously, 19% of respondents rejected dichotomous gender labels by referring to themselves as trans or genderqueer, and consultations whilst designing the survey led to our use of “mostly/only male” and “mostly/only female” as the other categories because many were uncomfortable with simple male/female labels. It would be useful to explore the understandings of sex and gender underpinning these labels in more

depth in subsequent questionnaires, and this is discussed further in the focus group discussion below.

The tension between the political utility of identity labels, and the shortcomings of traditional identity politics in capturing the diversity and fluidity of sexual practices and identifications, has preoccupied United Kingdom bisexual activists for some time (e.g., Chandler, 1996; Eadie 1993, 1996; George, 1993). In an analysis of discourses of identity in United Kingdom bisexual activist literature during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bowes-Catton (2005) identified a shift in emphasis from traditional, quasi-ethnic identity politics, to a politics of coalition and diversity, and this trend may be reflected in the tendency for many of our survey participants to adopt multiple labels, opt for more inclusive labels such as “queer”, or avoid using labels at all. However, this needs to be explored in greater depth in future research.

BICON DISCUSSION GROUP

The difficulty of articulating and performing bisexual identity in the context of dominant dichotomous constructions of sexuality and negative stereotypes of bisexuality is well documented in activist and academic literature on both sides of the Atlantic (Ault 1999; George 1993, Rust 2000a; Udis-Kessler 1996). Participants in the BiCon discussion group (all referred to by their chosen pseudonyms here) argued that bisexuals are perceived as “greedy” (Vicky) or as “gigantic hos [whores]” (Georgina). Participants also confirmed the conclusion from the media research that bisexuality is often portrayed as a temporary confusion on the way to becoming heterosexual or homosexual, as Kim said: “just a phase you’re going through”, or Georgina: “a stage...on the path to being gay or lesbian”. Perhaps because of this, several participants spoke of feeling a need to

“prove” their sexuality in a way that others do not have to. Kim and Lanei both made a point of overtly displaying their attraction for the other gender when they were in a relationship. As Sandra says, “society’s pressure is always on you when you’re bisexual”.

Another way in which all participants implicitly countered the common stereotype that their bisexuality might be a phase was by being clear that bisexuality had been a major part of their identities for some time. When telling their coming out stories, several participants alluded to societal pressure to identify as either straight or gay. For example, Georgina said “when I first came out...I was bisexual, but then I said ‘ah no lesbian’, then back to bisexual”. These stories also served to counter the perception that participants were “really” gay or straight since they made it apparent that they had tried identifying in these ways and it had not worked.

Participants agreed that sexuality was generally seen as a dichotomy, Lanei arguing that it was “very binary”. They argued that mostly sexuality was assumed to be attraction to the “opposite sex”, as Becky said: “boy fancies girl, girl fancies boy; it’s the same black and white view, no grey confusion”. Then they acknowledged that there was some societal acceptance that there could be attraction for the “same sex” instead. As Georgina put it “you can kind of deal with boy fancies boy, girl fancies girl, it’s still within those boxes...and...there’s no grey area”. She explained that people could only deal with people switching from one to the other: “you started fancying a boy but actually fancy girls, so you can make that transition, but you make it quickly, speed of light.” There was evidence in the focus group discussion of how the dichotomous view of sexuality is socially constructed by the dominant culture; examples were given of other cultures and historical times where some form of “same sex” attraction and relationships were

acceptable as well as “opposite sex” ones (e.g., some parts of India, “romantic friendships” and boarding schools).

Initially, participants proposed a continuum model as an alternative to this dichotomy that might fit their sexuality better. Sandra said: “It’s the difference between an on-and-off switch and a sliding scale...society hasn’t yet figured out how to cope with...sexuality on a sliding scale.” This fits in with Kinsey’s (1948) model, mentioned above, which sees sexuality on a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual. Berenson (2002, p.17) notes the utility of continuum narratives in resisting dominant constructions of bisexuality as “a place of ‘stigma and confusion’”, and positioning bisexuality as “a place of resistance”, while offering “a fluid and relatively unrestrained place to locate the self”. However, Becky points out that:

Sexuality cannot be on a rigid sliding scale because if it’s a sliding scale you could still pick one rigid point on there but, I think it’s the bisexuality you can find yourself in a sort of a, for want of a better term, a glut of male fancying and then, go through a season of, being more attracted to girls.

Several participants concurred with this. Some, who knew about it, suggested that their sexuality might fit in better with Klein’s (1993) adaptation of the Kinsey scale which acknowledges that people may be at different positions at different times, and in terms of their relationships, attraction, experience and identity. Georgina wanted to reject the continuum model entirely. She said:

One of the things...about the whole sliding scale thing is...it’s really restrictive because it doesn’t map time, it doesn’t map differences...one way

of describing it is through Venn diagrams so you can say, “you know I’m fancy girls who are tall and boys who are pretty, and goths”.

Several of the participants were uncomfortable with a continuum model because, as Rust (2000a) points out, both dichotomous and continuum-based theories define sexual orientation in terms of dichotomous gender because they present sexuality as attraction to men and/or to women. Participants rejected the “straightforward you are a boy or you are a girl...binary” (Lanei). Becky and Sandra identified as transsexual and many of the other participants spoke of being either “gender queer” or to some degree aware that they were not straightforwardly “masculine” or “feminine”. Sandra said:

The way society classifies things, you’ve got no options, if you are not male then you are female, if you are not female then you are male...my personal experience of this is that I am not male...I generally classify as female because it’s the obvious other option, but if there were other options, then I might very be defining as one of those...some people do but it’s a very uphill task for them.

Since they discarded the dichotomous understanding of gender, participants rejected the ideas that they were attracted to “both” men and women, and argued that they did not perceive gender as the defining feature in their attraction. Kim said:

When I was slowly realizing that I was bi, the first thing was “I fancy women” then it was “I don’t think actually gender is that relevant”...my tagline is that gender is like eye color, and I notice it sometimes, and sometimes it can be a bit of a feature it’s like “oo, that’s nice” and I have

some sorts of gender types, but it's about as important as something like eye color.

Petford (2003) also found that the preferred definition of bisexuality from the bisexual communities she studied was "mutable sexual and emotional attraction to people of any sex, where gender may not be a defining factor" (p.6). However, it is clear that participants in this discussion group, like those in Ault's (1999) research, struggle to talk about and understand their sexuality without reference to dominant constructions of gender. Just as it is very difficult to write this chapter without using the words "male" and "female", "opposite sex" and "same sex", participants drew on these concepts too, for example when several of them agreed that when they were in a relationship with one gender they responded by becoming either more or less attracted to people of the "other gender". For example, Kim continued: "I'm finding myself looking at women more. I've got one [man] and so I don't need any more."

These discussions display the fact that our dominant cultural understandings of gender and sexuality are inextricably linked, as highlighted earlier. Sexuality, including bisexuality, is entirely based on gender, usually being defined by the gender of the people we are attracted to. Gender is then entirely based on sexuality as demonstrated by Kessler's (1998) research on the treatment of intersex people. Kessler states that as many as 5% of people are born ambiguously sexed and are assigned as male or female by doctors. This is done, according to a table which categorises "male" as having an appendage of a certain length which is capable of becoming erect and penetrating a vagina and categorises "female" as having a vagina capable of being penetrated. The "corrective" surgery, which is carried out often deadens sexual sensation, suggesting that

being able to have [hetero] sex is viewed as more important than being able to experience sexual pleasure.

Participants also provided evidence for this merging of sexuality and gender with their own experiences. Lanei said “my social circle presume my sexuality based on who I’m with, presuming I’m either straight or gay, despite the fact that I’m very open about being bisexual.” She said that when she tells friends she is dating someone new they ask “who is he?” whilst when she is dating a woman, men friends will assume that she cannot find them attractive any more. Becky said:

My sexuality and my gender perception run almost parallel. At first it was “boys are boys, girls are girls; boys fancy girls”. Then, when I realized that boys can fancy boys and boys can become girls, it was still a binary thing, but running in parallel. And, as I came to realize that you can actually be bisexual...your desires and your attractions can wax and wane as time goes on, I realized that there was a parallel to gender as well: you don’t have to clearly define, you don’t have to cast off the male to be female and vice versa.

Despite the fact that the conventional definition of the word “bisexual” as being attracted to both sexes could be seen as perpetuating a dichotomous concept of gender, Georgina pointed out a way in which it could trouble conventional understandings of gender:

You can say lesbian or gay, for example “man drives bus”, “woman drives bus”, “lesbian drives bus”, “gay drives bus”...“bisexual drives bus” is suddenly, “well what?” “Bisexual man drives bus? Bisexual lady drives

bus?” it needs to be further clarified. I think that’s one of the points where it really starts fucking around on gender, because it’s an ungendered descriptor.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the analysis of media depictions that dominant representations of sexuality in the United Kingdom are still binary (people are either presented as either gay or straight). Neither fictional nor news media tends to consider ‘bisexual’ as a possible identity for people who are depicted as attracted to, or engaging in relationships with, men and women. There have been a few moves to represent bisexuality as a plausible identity, but these have tended to offer quite restrictive possibilities (e.g. the young, attractive, highly sexual bisexual woman).

As illustrated by the findings of the questionnaire, BiCon seems to be a space which offers people (whether bisexual or not) opportunities to explore alternative identities to the constraining ones on offer in wider culture. However, it still seems, from the focus group discussion, that a main challenge bisexual people face is to articulate and perform a bisexual identity which resists the dominant binary constructions of gender and sexuality. In common with participants in United States of America and Canadian research into bisexual women’s subjectivities (Ault, 1999; Berenson, 2002; Bower, Gurevich & Mathieson, 2002), participants in the BiCon survey and discussion group employed a range of discursive strategies to resist these dominant discourses. Yet, as Ault notes, “despite bi women’s conscious objections to the binary structures of sex, gender, and sexuality, their own discourse on sexual subjectivity is inescapably marked by these discourses” (Ault, 1999, p. 173). Nevertheless, the resistance continuously displayed by

bi participants in research, as well as by bi academics and activists themselves, can be seen as our collective refusal to submit to simplistic genetic and biological determinism.

The desire to define our identities and to create safe space in which we can express them is also reflected by the thriving of local bi groups and events, such as BiFest (a weekend celebratory event now happening in a variety of locations throughout the year, such as London, Manchester and Brighton); Bisexual Underground (a social monthly evening pub gathering in London) and Bi Activism weekends (self-organised biannual events bringing together community and academic bi activists across the United Kingdom) in addition to BiCon. If there are particular strengths in the visible British bisexual community, we would say that they are firstly this combination of both local and national groups and events, and secondly the move, in bi activism, away from a purely identity politics agenda. In combination, these open the community up to being inclusive of other marginalised groups whose agendas may be similar (e.g. trans, genderqueer, non-monogamous, BDSM and sex positive groups). The percentage of non bisexual-identified people attending BiCon suggests there is a shared sense of such inclusivity and openness to “allies”.

As Petford (2003) argues, there is “a great wealth of wisdom to be derived from the collective experiences of bisexual and other queer communities about psychological development...and...a host of other issues” (p.11). Part of that wisdom is the invitation to find epistemological and methodological paradigms more apt to explore bisexuality as a three-dimensional model of human sexuality, and that are capable of capturing both personal experiences and the social and political meanings created by them (Iantaffi, 2003). Such paradigms could take us beyond traditional dichotomous notions of

theory/practice, researcher/participant and closer to notions such as praxis (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994) and cooperative enquiry.

As bi academics, we feel that the projects here illustrated are the first tentative steps towards more collaborative work rooted within our own communities. We have felt free to adopt both a quantitative and qualitative approach to research in order to create snapshots of our communities from which further research journey can begin. Several research projects have already begun, such as a project on bisexual embodiment conducted by one of the authors (Bowes-Catton), and we hope to continue sharing both their content and process in future discussions. If, in fact, as Gergen (2003, p.16) states, “description and explanations of the world themselves constitute forms of social action”, then we want to ensure that any of our analytical accounts constitute a form of social action that contributes to the construction of realities in which our own lives as bisexuals are not denied or trivialized as a passing phase.

In the meantime, we would like to end this paper with a quote that one of us, Meg Barker, wrote for the recent (2005) international bisexual resource guide, since we feel it sums up the current state of the United Kingdom bisexual community well:

What do bisexuals really want? From the titles of United Kingdom BiCon workshops it seems that we want to have lots of sex, some sex, kinky sex or no sex, just as long as everyone has safe sex. We want multiple relationships. We want one person to love. We want to be alone. We want to embrace our masculinity, or femininity, or both. We want to fuck with gender or we don't think it's important at all. We want a political voice. We want to play silly games. We want to explore our spirituality. We want to

escape religion. We want to sing and dance. We want recognition of the diversity of experiences that fall under the category 'bisexual' (Barker, 2005).

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