

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## 'All the world is queer save thee and me...': defining queer and bi at a critical sexology seminar

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Barker, Meg; Richards, Christina and Bowes-Catton, Helen (2009). 'All the world is queer save thee and me...': defining queer and bi at a critical sexology seminar. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9(3&4) pp. 363–379.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 Taylor and Francis

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/15299710903316638>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# **“All the world is queer save thee and me...”: Defining Queer and Bi at a Critical Sexology Seminar**

**Meg Barker<sup>1</sup>, Christina Richards<sup>2</sup>, and Helen Bowes-Catton<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>The Open University, <sup>2</sup>West London Mental Health NHS Trust, <sup>3</sup>The Open University

## **Abstract**

On 7<sup>th</sup> November 2007 the UK Critical Sexology seminar series ([www.criticalsexology.org.uk](http://www.criticalsexology.org.uk)) hosted a one day event focusing on international perspectives on bisexuality. This seminar drew together academics and activists from several different countries and disciplinary approaches, most of whom were informed, to some extent, by queer theory. As part of the day we chaired a discussion considering the potentials and pitfalls of bringing together queer theory and bisexuality research, and the links between these issues and the agendas of queer/bi activism. This article reports on the main themes emerging from this debate and discusses them in relation to wider writing on queer theory and bisexuality. One specific tension that emerged was the usage of the word ‘queer’ and what this meant to participants. Another was the tension between a bi identity politics agenda of giving a voice to a largely silenced sexuality and a queer agenda of challenging dichotomous understandings of sexuality and gender. It is clear, from the discussion and other work in this area, that rather than polarising this as an either/or debate, it is more productive to consider the possibilities of both/and conceptualisations and to view this as a creative tension. In this paper we explore these possibilities in depth, considering the way queer theory can open up multiple and fluid sexual, gendered and self experiences, whilst remembering the lived experience many have of fixed identities and the importance of these for achieving visibility. We also explore the links between academic research and theory, and real-world practice.

**Keywords:** activism, activist-academic relationships, bisexuality, critical sexology, identity politics, queer theory.

## **Introduction**

In 1828 the social reformer Robert Owen famously severed business relations with his partner William Allen with the words: “All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer” (Bartlett & Kaplann, 2002). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the word ‘queer’, which, in Owen’s early nineteenth century usage meant ‘odd’ or ‘strange’, was also applied pejoratively to homosexuality (Chambers 1988, Jagose, 1996). In recent years, however, queer has become a reclaimed term, similar to ‘mad’ (Curtis, Dellar, Leslie & Watson, 2000) and ‘nigger/nigga’ (Kennedy 2003; NWA, 1991). Attendant to that reclamation, queer has become loaded with a range of different meanings, both personal and political, and has emerged within the academy as a theoretical critique of fixed and binary categories of identity (Seidman 1994). Beginning in the humanities, but also with roots in second wave feminism and HIV activism (Jagose, 1996; Stein & Plummer 1994), queer theory and activism aim to challenge fixed and binary categories of identity, particularly those around gender and sexuality, but also more broadly question stable notions of the self via deconstructive practice. As Rodríguez-Rust notes, queer now exists both as “an anti-identity outside, and in partial conflict with conventional identity-based movements,” and “as an umbrella term to refer to all sexual and gender minorities” (2001: 544).

As Stein and Plummer note, people defining as gay men and lesbians (which may, of course, have included many who were ‘behaviourally bisexual’, Angelides, 2001) had, from at least the early 1970s onwards, followed the example set by the black civil rights movement, and “organised themselves along the lines of an ethnic group” (Stein and Plummer, 1994: 181), claiming minority status in order to more effectively campaign for rights and recognition (Weeks, 1985). Queer theory, with its problematisation of such identity-based political movements, led to “a rejection of civil rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression and parody, which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics” (Stein & Plummer, 1994: 181).

The UK bisexual community, which began to take shape in the early 1980s, was producing its first academic and activist literature by the end of that decade, just as queer theory began to emerge. Although many bi activists had a long history of working within the gay and lesbian movement, (Lano, 1996), the UK bisexual movement did not itself have a long history of identity politics to reject. The agendas of

identity politics are more evident in the earliest UK bisexual literature - seeking, for example, the recognition of bisexuality by lesbian and gay organisations that was beginning to take place in the US (Off Pink Publishing, 1988), and there is a shift during the 1990s to a queerer political discourse (Bowers-Catton, 2007a). However, even in this early work identity politics and the label 'bisexual' are seen as potentially problematic, and are pragmatically adopted for the present, with activists expressing the hope that it might one day be possible to move beyond the limitations of labels (Off Pink Publishing, 1988).

While bisexuality as a category has always been problematised to some extent by UK bisexuals, it was some time before bi activist literature began to trouble the gender binary. In the 1980s and early 1990s, research on bisexual-identified people, and materials produced for bisexual events, generally defined bisexuality in relation to binaries of sexuality and gender, defining bisexuality as the condition of being attracted to both genders (either at the same, or different times), and locating it as a combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality, or as a midpoint between the two. An example of the former is an advertisement for pride in the 1990 National Bisexual Conference brochure which has the heading: "7-8-9-10. We Love Women, We Love Men" (Hemmings, 2002: 167). The latter is frequently exemplified in the 1988 UK collection, *Bisexual Horizons* (Rose, Stevens & the Off Pink Collective), such as the following statement: "having lived my life for a number of years as a heterosexual and then for an equally long period as a lesbian, I have lately arrived at a kind of bisexual synthesis" (105). In this literature bisexuality is generally depicted as a sexual minority identity in addition to heterosexual and gay/lesbian identity. For example, "bisexual sexuality is not somehow qualitatively different from that of heterosexuals, lesbians or gay men" (Rose, Stevens & the Off Pink Collective, 1988: 51). This understanding of bisexuality has gained currency in mainstream British society, and is reflected in current laws and policies which protect people whose sexual orientation is towards "persons of the same sex as him or her, persons of the opposite sex, or both" (Equality Act 2006: 27).

In recent years, however, there has been a shift in bi activist texts and communities towards a more 'queer' understanding of bisexuality. First, there has been a move away from speaking of attraction to *both* genders, and towards attraction *regardless* of gender. The theme of UK BiCon 2005, for example,

was “love counts more than gender”. Petford writes that she found a consensus among the UK bi community (from publications and email discussions) that bisexuality could be defined as “mutable sexual and emotional attraction to people of any sex, where gender may not be a defining factor” (2003: 8). Similarly, a participant in Barker et al.’s UK discussion remarked “. . .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” (2008: 14).

Secondly, it seems that there has been a move towards seeing sexuality and gender as fluid and changeable over time rather than stable and fixed. A 2004 survey conducted by the UK Bi Research Group at a community event found that, while 85% of respondents listed ‘bisexual’ among their identities, 51% of respondents ( $N=93$ ) identified with the term ‘queer’ as well as ‘bisexual’. A smaller group of people reported that they did not like using specific labels to describe their complex and fluid sexuality; they tended to be more comfortable with the term ‘queer’ than ‘bisexual’ (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer, 2008: 152). Clearly, more in depth research is needed to explore the multiplicity of reasons behind such statistics. Barker et al. explore the biphobia still commonplace in media representations as well as the inclusiveness of BiCon to those who consider themselves to be ‘allies’ rather than identifying as bisexual themselves.

The shift from discourses of identity politics to a queerer political discourse is, however, a shift in emphasis rather than a linear progression from one conceptualisation of bisexuality to another. Bowes-Catton (2007a) and Barker et al. (2008) comment on the ways in which authors of bi activist texts and members of the UK bi community continue to draw on both of these ‘adjacent, but competing’ discourses of bisexuality, often within the same paragraph or utterance. The conceptual and linguistic dominance of binary categories of gender and sexuality makes it difficult to articulate a sexual or gender identity without reference to polarized terms such as ‘male/female’, ‘straight/gay’. Ault notes, in her study of Canadian bisexual women, that while her participants consciously objected to these binaries, “their own discourse on sexual subjectivity [was] inescapably marked by these discourses” (1999: 173-4). Similarly, Barker et al.’s UK discussion group found it difficult to talk about their sexuality without reference to dominant

binary discourses of gender and sexuality, despite their explicit rejection of these elsewhere in the discussion (Barker et al., 2008). Participants drew on the concepts of ‘male’ and ‘female’, ‘opposite sex’ and ‘same sex’, for example, when several agreed that when they were in a relationship with a partner/partners of one gender they noticed themselves becoming more attracted to people of the ‘other gender’ (sometimes known as ‘gender monogamy’). For example, one participant said: “I’m finding myself looking at women more. I’ve got one [man] and so I don’t need any more” (155).

At the recent Critical Sexology Seminar on bisexuality at London South Bank University twenty academics, activists and people with an interest in the field gathered together to debate the intersections between bisexuality and queer theory, politics, and activism. Critical Sexology is an open event that takes place three times a year in an academic setting, therefore it is available for anyone to attend but tends to mostly attract postgraduate students in humanities and social sciences, lecturers, researchers, some psychomedical professionals (sex therapists and psychiatrists) and some who are politically involved in activism and linked in to academic circles through research or personal connections. The major themes of the discussion were pulled together by the authors and are presented here. First, we consider the multiple meanings of the word ‘queer’ and the potentials and problems inherent in this multiplicity. Then we move on to consider the extent to which queer theory should inform bisexual activism and research and vice versa. Specifically we explore how bisexuality might be considered to fit (or not) under a queer ‘umbrella’ and the ways that bisexuality might be eclipsed by the use of the word ‘queer’ in various contexts. Finally we draw out tensions, for bisexual and other activists, inherent in the often academic and abstract language of queer theory.

### **Multiple Meanings of Queer in Social/Activist Contexts**

The first section of the discussion at Critical Sexology cohered around the multiple meanings of the term ‘queer’ introduced above. It was felt that we needed to clarify the different usages of the terms that we might be drawing on before considering how bisexual activism and research intersected with these. One of the main ideas that emerged, was of the split between the meanings of ‘queer’ within the academic field of queer theory and its general usage within the popular lexicon. It was felt that there was no consensus about

what 'queer' meant across activism, individual identity and academic study. Also there were shifts in meaning over time and across cultures. For example, one participant commented that queer was still used overwhelmingly pejoratively in Australia, whilst they had found it to be generally applied positively in London.

Participants felt that it was important for queer theorists, bisexuality researchers and activists alike to be aware of the multiple possible meanings of the word 'queer'. Specifically, they need to consider that some may still be influenced by its derogatory history, with connotations of weakness, pathology and a negative form of femininity (especially for gay men) (Piontek, 2006). Indeed, one of the older participants commented that he could never feel completely comfortable using the word, having had it hurled at him so often as an insult. Alongside this, we need to be aware of the reclaimed usage of the term which may, or may not, be related to the way in which some LGBTI-identified people use queer theory as a tool to disrupt binaries of gender and sexuality.

Many participants commented on the 'umbrella' nature of the term 'queer' and how many people use the word as shorthand for the categories lesbian and gay, some include bisexuals under the 'umbrella', whilst others also include trans people (usually meaning transgender and transsexual and sometimes also transvestite), some include intersex people, and some extend it to other sexual identities/practices such as sadomasochism, non-monogamous relating and/or asexuality.

Clearly there are issues here about which categories are included under the umbrella, with frequent arguments from both outside and inside each group about their inclusion or exclusion. For example, some within intersex communities are keen to be seen under the broad rubric of queer, as a group who challenge the binaries of biological sex (OII, 2008), whilst others embrace the term 'Disorders of Sexual Development (DSD)' and perceive themselves as having an aberrant phenotype, thus arguably reinforcing the gender binary as the only non-aberrant way of being (Accord Alliance, 2008). Also, within trans communities, there can be a split between people who have received hormones and/or surgery and those who have not. People who have not received hormones and/or surgery are often accepting of a label (and a

diagnosis) outside the gender binary in order to receive medical services, whereas those who have received hormones and/or surgery may identify solely as their preferred gender (within the male/female binary, Richards, 2007). Therefore people prior to hormones and/or surgery could be seen as fitting more within a queer space than those who have undergone hormones and/or surgery (although the policing of this boundary is a contentious issue, Wilchins, 1997). In addition there are debates over the inclusion/exclusion of identities versus practices within the term 'queer', and debates-within-debates about what constitute identities or practices, and whether it is even meaningful to tease these apart. For example, some within sadomasochistic/kink communities regard SM/kink as an identity they have, whilst others see it as a behaviour they practice entirely separate to their sexual identity (Langdridge & Barker, 2007). Similarly, there are divisions around identity and practice within non-monogamous communities such as polyamory, swinging and gay open relationships (Barker & Langdridge, forthcoming, 2009).

One danger of this usage of 'queer' as an umbrella term was felt to be the possibility of the erasure of some of the identities encompassed within it. As the trans and feminist activist Julia Serano comments:

The reason the mainstream public regularly confuses homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender people, and intersex people is that, in their eyes, we all represent the same thing. We are all often lumped together as 'Queer' (Serano, 2007: 107)

On the other hand, people who are unfamiliar with the complexities and nuances of the kinds of debates mentioned above may well assume that 'queer', in such a context, simply means 'lesbian and gay'. We will discuss this in more detail in relation to bisexuality below. Another perceived danger was the possibility that the queer 'umbrella' may become so broad as to include everything including various (perhaps non-mainstream) heterosexual identities and practices such as sadomasochism/kink between 'opposite sex' couples, pegging (women penetrating men in heterosexual encounters) and swinging (Warner, 1993). There were clearly tensions inherent in the notion of 'queer' as a 'broad church' around how membership of such a church should, or should not, be delineated.

Some participants in the discussion celebrated this un-pin-down-able and fluid quality of 'queer' whilst others found this problematic for the reasons given above. For some participants, queer has a chosen, ephemeral, inexplicable quality. For others it was a usefully indeterminate category for people who do not know what category they 'belong' in. However, many felt that there were problems with the fact that 'queer' as an identity category was unclear and overly broad. One proposition for a way forward was to focus in on the more explicitly 'queer theory' definition of queer as juxtaposed to heteronormativity (the assumption of dichotomous gender and heterosexuality as the norm). We will now discuss the potentials and pitfalls of such a conceptualisation of queer for bisexuality.

### **Queer Experiences in Relation to Heteronormativity**

Participants in the discussion group saw queer theoretical perspectives as both positive and negative for bisexuality. These perspectives were seen as positive in that they move away from binary understandings of sexuality and gender and thus open up a conceptual and discursive space for contemporary understandings of bisexuality and other identities outside the heterosexual/homosexual division, but as negative because they have the potential to eclipse bisexuality entirely as they move away from fixed identity labels. One participant, drawing on Ault's (1999) research, saw queer theory as a 'cloaking device', which homogenised disparate experiences and identities, including those of bisexuals.

Angelides (2001) points out that queer theory denies bisexuality a place within the present tense, due to its "future oriented project" (186). In a similar way to the way in which psychoanalysis sees bisexuality as always in the past (as a phase on the way to sexual maturity), queer theory places it in a utopian future when the need for all sexuality labels will have been surpassed. Participants also felt that queer theory's emphasis on fluidity undermined the existence of bisexuality as a stable identity label and this was concerning for pragmatic reasons such as gaining recognition and rights, funding for events, a place in relevant research projects, and so on. This erasure of sexual categories could be seen as even more problematic for bisexuality than it is for lesbian and gay sexualities since, unlike these other minority sexualities, bisexuality has never reached a point of popular visibility to begin with (remaining unspoken in most mainstream media and psychological texts, Barker et al., 2008; Barker, 2007). Thus it could be

seen as being erased by queer theory before it has ever been properly seen (Barker & Langdridge, 2008).

However, some participants felt that 'queer' was a more useful term than 'bisexual' as it did not make reference to sex specifically (the 'sexual' part of 'bisexual') and it was "an inclusive term that does not refer to gender or sex binaries" (the 'bi' part of 'bisexual'). Even though many within bisexual communities understand 'bisexual' to mean beyond, or regardless of, gender, the majority of people would understand the term to mean being attracted to 'both' due to the construction of the word. Also, the stereotypes about bisexuality and promiscuity may be seen to be reinforced by a word which includes 'sexual' (Barker et al., 2008) (although, there is an argument that denying this is part of a sex-negative fear of reference to bodily or sexual practices, Rubin, 1984). Consequently some eschew the term in order to avoid the assumptions that are frequently made.

There was another, related, tension around queer theory's potential to turn a critical lens on heteronormativity. While this was seen as opening up space for alternative conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, participants also raised concerns that, by defining itself in opposition to heteronormativity, queer theory might in fact reinforce it. In the past it has been sexual others (lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, etc.) who have been interrogated by society and the medical profession alike. Queer theory spins this round to question the whole foundation of heterosexuality, rooted as it is in notions of two, and only two, genders and sexualities (Butler, 2003). However, in speaking up as a broad church whose only defining feature is *not* being heterosexual, queer may find itself being used as the 'other' around which heteronormative identities can cohere. Others have written of the dangers of queer erasing anything outside 'homonormativity' and reinforcing new hierarchies of acceptability in foregrounding the experience of, for example, monogamous white gay men (see, for example, Edelman, 2005).

To some extent bisexuality may be considered to be a subset of queer (as an ILGBT etc. umbrella term). In another sense bisexuality is conflated with queer, at least in as much as recent conceptualisations of it at least share some characteristics such as a resistance to becoming ossified into identity politics and a lack of a coherent definition. It may be said that if one is bi one is de facto queer (although the inverse is not

necessarily the case). As Warner puts it, desiring both genders, or seeing oneself as being 'gender oblivious', as many bi people do, is subversive since it undermines the heteronormative discourses based on the gender binary as "the elemental form of human association" (1993: xxi). However, if queer is seen at least partially as working towards a dissolution of boundaries, including gender boundaries, then someone who is queer cannot suggest that they are 'gay', that is to say 'homosexual', as that involves a return to a stabilised and essential approach to gender. Without a gender boundary everyone who is queer becomes bisexual (within the meaning of bisexual as choosing partners for reasons unrelated to a polarised gender split), as their object choice is no longer made on the basis of gender.

### **Queer Space as a Non-Mainstream Space**

There has been a history in 'minority' activism of marginalising minority constituencies within groups when the group as a whole gains acceptability. For example, some forms of mainstream feminism might be seen as having jettisoned lesbian and black feminist ideas once the aims of the liberal feminist majority were seen as having been met (Tong, 1998). In a similar way, increases in gay and lesbian equality (through the introduction of civil partnerships, employment legislation, etc.) have led to the excision of trans, and bisexual, rights as being part of the cause. This is reflected by the fact that the history of the Stonewall riots has been re-written to exclude trans participants (Wilchins, 1997; Piontek, 2006). Current Stonewall groups now publicise themselves as being for "equality and justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals" (excluding trans) (Stonewall, 2008) but, in the UK today at least, their documentation frequently drops the word 'bisexual' after one or two initial inclusions, such that homophobia and civil partnerships, for example, are described as affecting only 'lesbian and gay' people (e.g. Dick, 2008). This may be partly because, as participants in the discussion commented, bisexuality is seen, by some lesbians and gay men, as "tainted by heterosexuality" (Barker & Yockney, 2004). This was also evidenced at the 2008 London Pride March where the bisexual banner was met, by some portions of the crowd, with chants of 'make your mind up' and 'pick a side', and where trans women were excluded by stewards from the women's toilets unless able to provide a gender recognition certificate. This was in contravention of UK legislation and subsequently became known as 'Toiletgate' (TransAtPride, 2008). The continuation of this historical path can be seen in recent moves in some mainstream trans communities to exclude genderqueer

individuals who do not fit the transition model from one gender to another (Gender Recognition Act 2004; Califia, 1997).

The implication of this is that ‘queer’ can end up as a kind of ‘safe space’ for all those who are marginalised from the acceptable lesbian and gay mainstream (e.g. bisexuals, trans people, those in SM/kink communities). The ‘broad church’ of queer becomes a sanctuary for these sexual and gender outlaws (Bornstein, 1994), much as criminals have historically used churches and temples as a hiding place in times of trouble (Wikipedia, 2008). Over the last decade or more there has been an emergence of feminist, sexual and queer citizens who have provided radical challenges to mainstream approaches to citizenship (Langdrige, 2008) and ‘homonormativity’. For example, Rollins (2003) reports that same-sex marriage, claims for rights to have children, full participation in religion and the military, etc. have been seen, by some, as part of a ‘normalizing’ of sexual politics which reinforces the marginalisation of those who practice their sexual relationships in less ‘traditional’ ways. Warner argues that this normalisation is in danger of reifying dominant and damaging “hierarchies of respectability” (1999: 74).

Participants in the discussion group pointed out that, while, as outlined above, many feminist, lesbian and gay and trans groups have often attained and maintained cohesion throughout the exclusion of ‘out-groups’, this does not seem to have been the case in the UK bi community, which has, participants reflected, “avoided becoming ossified into identity politics unlike lesbian and gay politics”. Bowes-Catton (2007b) and others have highlighted the sense of inclusivity at bisexual events, and it is clear that they are open to a broad spectrum of sexual and gender identities (Barker, et al., 2008) (although inclusivity along other axes may be lower, as we will go on to mention).

### **Queer Theory and Activism**

In the sections above we have argued that a queer theory understanding of ‘queer’ could be seen as a useful space for bisexual identified people and activists, given that it is a ‘broad church’ which provides sanctuary for remaining ‘outlaws’, as well as fitting closely with the ways in which the majority of bi people understand their sexuality. However, the discussion group highlighted some major difficulties with

the pragmatics of applying the insights of queer theory in everyday life, and the limited scope for many bisexual people to engage with its understandings.

The main problem with queer theory was seen to be its specialist language and the potential for exclusivity inherent in this. One participant said that “queer theory is all Judith Butler and deconstruction” and that “specialist knowledge is needed to get sanctuary in the broad church”. Butler (1999), engaging with issues of activism, writes:

The insistence in advance on coalitional “unity” as a goal assumes that solidarity, whatever its price, is a prerequisite for political action. But what sort of politics demands that kind of advance purchase on unity? Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact. Perhaps also part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often tortuous process of democratisation. (20)

Whilst this is an excellent point about activism, which speaks to many of the issues we are tackling here, the language used means that it is almost indecipherable to many who might find it the most useful. Indeed, two of the authors of this paper – whose roots are in psychology rather than cultural studies – have struggled hugely with the writings of Butler and other queer theorists despite a wide-ranging academic background. It is not necessarily so much that Butler, and other queer theorists, are too difficult to understand, but that their work requires a great deal of time and energy which is simply not available to many activists. However, it was also the experience of some in the discussion group that queer theory was a gateway to personal and political understandings of the self and world, and therefore a spur into engagement with activism.

Queer theory is clearly seen by many as being stuck in an ivory tower and having nothing to say to the lived experience of many queer people. Its abstract nature can be experienced as exclusive and alienating: only open to a very small number of appropriately educated people. And yet queer theorists have used the

lives of queer individuals in their work in order to make their points. The resentment felt by many who have been used in this way, but are unable to engage with what has been written about them, was made clear in a recent talk by Bo Laurent of the Accord Alliance (2008) (formally Cheryl Chase of ISNA), where she stated that her group were completely disinterested in engaging with queer and gender theorists. She was only concerned with the pragmatics of care for people with a 'Disorder of Sexual Development' and felt that these theories had nothing to say about this. Laurent's talk highlights another potential danger that queer groups may feel forced back into an essentialist, identity politics, or even pathologising discourse if queer theory is experienced as something that they need to define against rather than embracing. Critical sexology is one attempt to create interdisciplinary discursive spaces where vital dialogues between academics, practitioners and activists can happen.

### **Bisexual Practices, Spaces, Activism**

In the Critical Sexology discussion, bisexual activists also found themselves questioning what queer theorists had to say about the pragmatic issues many bisexuals face as a result of biphobia, such as bullying, associated mental health issues, access to healthcare, financial implications, and so on (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christensen, 2002). Queer theory was experienced as being cold and distant from such real world issues, and there were big questions raised about the accountability of a discipline which draws on the experiences of groups but does not speak back to them, at least not in words that they can easily understand. Also, there was a concern that theorists may well not put the time and energy required into understanding the people they are studying, before drawing critical conclusions about their behaviour. Some participants reported hearing a talk by queer theorists about adolescent girls where the researchers had clearly misunderstood much of what their interviewees were telling them, insisting that the bisexual behaviour of kissing other girls was simply carried out as a performance to entice boys. From the transcripts presented at the talk it seemed that the pleasures and dangers of this behaviour was far more complex than that presented and that the researchers' agenda had strongly swayed the interpretations drawn. It was felt by members of the Critical Sexology discussion that queer theory might be "theorising about things which may not be experienced as queer, and not theorising things which are" and that "research agendas are not clear cut: people shift into different roles depending on who they are talking to".

As well as the difficulties of participants and activists reading the writings of queer theorists there are also big questions around how queer theorists *read* participants and activists.

Like Laurent (2008) some members of the discussion felt that an identity politics agenda could not be completely rejected by bisexual communities, however much they themselves resonated with queer theory perspectives, because of the continued problems of bisexual invisibility and biphobia (Ochs, 1996). It is often pointed out at bisexual activist events that people in general understand the term 'bisexual' (partly because of its easily interpretable composition) whilst the term 'queer', particularly in the context of queer theory, is virtually unknown outside the academy and even outside the humanities (e.g. in psychology; Barker, 2007). Whilst, as noted above, many BiCon attendees do label themselves as 'queer' (Barker et al., 2008), 'bisexual' is a much more widely understood way of self-identifying and, as one participant said, the term "queer is not as simple as 'oh there are the bisexuals'". It was also felt that it might be possible for university educated bisexuals in a metropolitan area to embrace queer politics and to critique, for example, civil partnerships and same sex marriage as 'homonormative'. However, situations might be very different for those situated further outside of urban, Western areas and higher education.

This area of discomfort for queer theory could be seen as applying equally to bisexual communities themselves. The bisexual 'scene', within the UK at least, is overwhelmingly white, urban and middle class, with nearly 80% of attendees having education to the level of a college/university degree (compared to 17% of the general population, ONS, 2005) and many to postgraduate level (Barker, et al., 2008). Whilst bisexual spaces may be open to a very diverse range of people in terms of sexual and gender identities, they are clearly potentially exclusive and alienating sites, much like the discipline of queer theory. In fact, part of the easy acceptance of queer theoretical perspectives by many in bisexual communities could be because of this skewed population. Clearly there are many people whose behaviour is bisexual but who do not attend bisexual events, access support, or locate themselves within the bisexual community, and we can only speculate on the reasons for this. Arguably queer theorists and bisexual researchers alike should be prioritising addressing these kinds of complex, uncomfortable, but ultimately vital, questions as well as devoting themselves to the minutiae of bi and queer matters. We, as authors and

participants in the Critical Sexology discussion, acknowledge that we need to be aware of this as much as the queer theorists who we are critiquing here.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, the key issues to emerge from the Critical Sexology discussion were: The complexities involved in the multiple meanings of the word 'queer'; the usefulness of queer (compared to bisexuality) as a critique of heteronormativity, but the danger that it will become the thing that heteronormativity defines itself against; the possibilities of queer as a sanctuary for those outside the mainstream (hetero- or homo-normativity); and the problems inherent in the abstract language of queer theory when it comes to informing activism and individual lived experience. Following from the discussions above, we propose our own utopian vision for the future of the bisexual-queer debate and how we would like to see this to move forward. We raise one challenge for each of: queer theory, bisexual activism/research, and the broader GBIL etc. movement.

The challenge for queer theory, as explored in depth above, is to find a clearer form of address and to fully engage with its subjects, such that they do not feel used by researchers and theorists and are able to easily make some use of that which it produces. This might involve, for example, theorists and researchers writing accessible summaries of their research and ideas for publication in the grey literature (e.g. community, activist and practitioner publications). It could also include queer theorists engaging more fully in the lived experience of participants, before bringing their critical lens to bear on the situation, employing a hermeneutic of empathy in equal measure to that of suspicion (Langdrige, 2007). Finally, it could involve queer theorists thinking reflexively about the potential impact of their work upon those they are studying by considering the consequences of the questions (as well as the potential answers) they come up with, and making sure that they are accountable to the communities that they are speaking about (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

The challenge for bisexual activists and researchers is to continue to engage creatively with the tension between identity politics and queer theory perspectives, recognising that there is no simple resolution and

that neither position should be rejected in favour of the other at this time. Bisexual activists need to remain aware of the constraints implicit in the language of 'bisexuality' and to consider who may be excluded, as well as included, by this label. Specifically, bisexual activists need to think carefully about the axes of culture, class, education, age, etc. which are currently under-addressed. Researchers also need to consider groups outside the bisexual 'scene' for whom the identity may be relevant but who may not adopt the label: those who could be seen as 'behavioural bisexual', 'bicurious' and so on. Both activists and researchers need to be aware of the pragmatic problem that the word 'bisexual' is attempting to do (at least) two things at the same time: speaking for those who view their attraction as to 'men and women' as well as those who see it as 'regardless of gender'. Clearly this is a wider problem for many words with multiple meanings, not least of all 'queer'.

Related to the problems with multiple meanings of words, it is clear that as soon as an acronym like 'LGBTI' is written on the page, a linear structure is imposed, which could be equated with a hierarchy. Our challenge for the broad church of BTILG etc. is for it to recognise its roots in sanctuary and resist the temptation to ostracise and hierarchise in order to make (more privileged) 'in-groups' feel comfortable and secure. This could involve a queer interrogation of dichotomies such as normal/abnormal, sane/mad, disabled/non-disabled, rich/poor, and mainstream/transgressive.

In conclusion, a final, and vital, challenge for queer theory, for bisexual activists and researchers, and for the broader TILGB etc. umbrella movement is to ensure that they do not perpetuate the invisibility of bisexual people further in their work but rather fully represent the experiences and understandings of all those whose identities and practices are encompassed within this term in theory, research, activism and community.

*The authors would like to thank all the contributors to the Critical Sexology discussion group for their ideas and engagement. See [www.criticalsexology.org.uk](http://www.criticalsexology.org.uk) for more information about this ongoing seminar series.*

## References

- Accord Alliance (2008). Accessed from <http://www.accordalliance.org/dsd-information.html> on 15/7/08.
- Angelides, S. (2001). *A History of Bisexuality*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Ault, A. (1999). Ambiguous identity in an unambiguous sex/gender structure: the case of bisexual women in M. Storr, (Ed.) *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader* pp.167-186. London, UK: Routledge.
- Barker, M. (2007). Heteronormativity and the exclusion of bisexuality in psychology. In V. Clarke & E. Peel (Eds.), *Out in Psychology: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Perspectives* (pp.86-118). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Barker M., Bowes-Catton H., Iantaffi A., Cassidy A. & Brewer L. (2008). British bisexuality: A snapshot of bisexual identities in the UK, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 8, 141-162.
- Barker, M. & Langdridge, D. (2008). Bisexuality: Working with a silenced sexuality. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18(3), 389-394.
- Barker, M. & Langdridge, D. (Eds.) (forthcoming, 2009). *Understanding Non-monogamies*. New York: Routledge.
- Barker, M. (2004). Including the B-word: Reflections on the place of bisexuality within lesbian and gay activism and psychology: Meg Barker in conversation with Jenni Yockney. *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, 5(3), 118-122.
- Bartlett, J. & Kaplann, J. (2002). *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. New York Little, Brown & Company.
- Bi Academic Intervention, (Eds.) (1997). *The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity and Desire*. London: Cassell.
- Bi Research Group (Bi-biblio), (2004). *Bicon 2004 Survey Report*. Accessed from [http://www.bicommunitynews.co.uk/extras/biblio\\_report\\_2004.pdf](http://www.bicommunitynews.co.uk/extras/biblio_report_2004.pdf) on 6/8/08.
- Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender Outlaw*. New York: Routledge.
- Bowes-Catton, H. (2007a). Resisting the binary: Discourses of identity and diversity in bisexual politics 1988-1996. *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, 8(1), 58-71.

- Bowes-Catton, H. (2007b). 'Swordfighting, Drag Kings, and Cuddles- Embodying bisexual identity in 'spectacular' bisexual spaces' Paper given at the Critical Sexology seminar 'International Approaches to Bisexuality, London, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2007.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Califa, P. (1997). *The Politics of Transgenderism*. San Francisco, CA: Cleiss Press.
- Chambers (1988). *Dictionary of Etymology*. Edinburgh, Chambers.
- Curtis, T., Dellar, R., Leslie, E., & Watson, B., (2000). *Mad Pride*. London: Chipmunkpublishing.
- Dick, S. (2008). *Homophobic Hate Crime: The Gay British Crime Survey 2008*. London: Stonewall.
- Edelman, L. (2005). *No Future: Queer theory and the death drive*. London: Duke University Press.
- Equality Act (2006). Accessed from [www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/pdf/ukpga\\_20060003\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/pdf/ukpga_20060003_en.pdf) on 6/8/08.
- Finlay, L. & Gough, B. (2003). *Reflexivity*. Oxford: Blackwell Science Ltd.
- Fox, R. (1996). Bisexuality in perspective: a review of theory and research. In B. A. Firestein (Ed.), *Bisexuality* (pp.3-34). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Garber, M. (1995). *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the eroticism of everyday life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Gender Recognition Act (2004). Accessed from [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2004/ukpga\\_20040007\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2004/ukpga_20040007_en_1) on 6/8/08.
- Hemmings, C. (2002). *Bisexual spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender*. London: Routledge
- Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer Theory*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Jorm, A., Korten, A., Rodgers, B., Jacomb, P., & Christensen, H. (2002). Sexual orientation and mental health: results from a community survey of young and middle-aged adults. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 180, 423-427.
- Kennedy, R. (2003). *Nigger: The strange career of a troublesome word*. New York: Random House.
- Langdridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological Psychology*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Langdridge, D. (2008). Voices from the margins: SM and sexual citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 10 (4), 373-389.

- Langdridge, D. & Barker, M. (Eds.) (2007). *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadoomasochism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lano, K. (1996). 'Bisexual History: Fighting Invisibility' in Rose, S., Stevens, C., and the Off Pink Collective (eds) (1996): 219-226.
- Laurent, B. (2008). Why a focus on surgery can't improve health care services for disorders of sex development. Keynote lecture at the conference on Genital Cutting in a Globalized Age: A Forum for Interdisciplinary Debate, London, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2008.
- NWA. (1991). *Efil4zaggin/100 Miles and Runnin*. Los Angeles: Priority Records. (Audio CD).
- Ochs, R. (1996). Biphobia. In B. A. Firestein, (Ed.) *Bisexuality: The Psychology and Politics of an Invisible Minority*. pp.217-139 London: Sage.
- Off Pink Collective (1988). *Bisexual Lives*. London: Off Pink Publishing.
- OII (Organisation Internationale des Intersexes) (2008). Accessed from <http://www.intersexualite.org/> on 15/7/08.
- ONS (2005). National Statistics Online: Social Trends: Education Highlights. Accessed from <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1045> on 21/1/06.
- Petford, B. (2003). Power in the darkness: some thoughts on the marginalization of bisexuality in psychological literature. *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review*, 4(2), 5-13.
- Piontek, T. (2006). *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies*. Illinois, University of Illinois Press.
- Richards, C. (2007). Diagnosis under fire. *The Psychologist*, 20 (7), 413.
- Rollins, J. (2003). Queer politics/queer sex: Marriage and sexual libertarianism. *Radical Statistics*, 83, 87-103. Accessed from <http://www.radstats.org.uk/no083/Rollins83.pdf> on 27/3/06.
- Rose, S., Stevens, C., and the Off Pink Collective (eds) (1996). *Bisexual Horizons: Politics, histories, lives* London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Rodríguez-Rust, P.C. (2000). 'Popular images and the growth of bisexual community and visibility' in Rodríguez-Rust, P.C. (ed.) *Bisexuality in the United States: A Social Science Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking Sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In C. S. Vance (1992), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. pp. 267-319. London: HarperCollins.

- Rust, P. C. (2000). 'Bisexuality: a contemporary paradox for women'. *Journal of Social Issues* Summer 2000, Vol.56, No.2: 205-222.
- Seidman, S. (1994). 'Queer-ing sociology, sociologizing queer theory: an introduction' *Sociological Theory* Vol 12, No. 2 (July 1994): 166-177.
- Seidman, S. (1996). Introduction. In S. Seidman (Ed.) *Queer Theory/Sociology* (pp. 1-29). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping Girl*. Emeryville: Seal Press.
- Stein, A., and Plummer, K. (1994). "'I can't even think straight": "Queer" theory and the missing sexual revolution in sociology" *Sociological Theory* Vol 12, No. 2 (July 1994): 178-187
- Stonewall (2008). Accessed from <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/> on 16/7/08.
- Tong, R. (1998). *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. Jackson, TN: Westview Press.
- TransAtPride (2008). Accessed from <http://www.transatpride.org/TransAtPride/Transphobia.html> on 16/7/08.
- Warner, M. (1993). Introduction. In Warner, M. (Ed.) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics & Social Theory*. pp.vii-xxxi. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Warner, M. (1999). *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wikipedia – Sanctuary (2008). Accessed from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sanctuary> on 16/7/08.
- Wilchins, R. (1997). *Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender*. San Francisco: Firebrand Books.