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‘I didn’t know that I could feel this relaxed in my body’: Using visual methods to research bisexual people’s embodied experiences of identity and space

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Introduction

Recent research into bisexuality has tended to use discourse analysis to explore bisexual people’s articulations of identity. Such research demonstrates that, although many bi people argue that they experience their identities as coherent and unified, and vehemently reject binary categories of sex, gender, and sexuality as bogus and constructed (Bowes-Catton, 2007), such discourses inevitably creep back into their identity talk (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer, 2008) resulting in ‘structurally fractured’ articulations of identity (Ault, 1996). Following the ‘turn to the body’ in sociological and psychological research (Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991; Stam, 1998; Reavey, 2008), we argue that an approach to identity research which privileges discourse makes it difficult for participants to articulate identities outside of the prevailing binary categories of male/female, straight/gay, and obscures experiential and material aspects of sexual identity such as embodied experience and performativity. Our research therefore aims to move towards an understanding of the ways in which bisexual identity is grounded in the bodily practices and performances of lived experience. In this chapter, we present preliminary results from the application of visual methods, such as modelling and photography, to bisexual people’s embodied experience of space, with the aim of moving towards an understanding of the experience and production of bisexual identity, both in everyday life, and in bisexual spaces such as BiCon, the annual gathering of the UK bisexual community.

The research context

From the late 1990s to the present, the vast majority of qualitative work on bisexuality has focused on the ways in which bisexual people and communities construct their identities through language (e.g. Ault, 1999; Berenson, 2002; Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002; Bowes-Catton, 2007). Generally such work has involved collecting data through
interviews, focus group discussions, or existing sources such as bi community materials and bi activist texts, and subjecting these to some form of discourse analysis. Researchers have been particularly interested in the ways in which bisexual people and groups construct and present their identities within a linguistic and cultural context that sees sexuality and gender as dichotomous (gay or straight) and leaves little discursive space for bisexuality (Barker & Langdrige, 2008).

Bisexuality is commonly understood to refer to sexual attraction to both sexes, but these discourse analytic studies consistently find that many bisexual people vehemently reject the notion that sexuality can be reduced to binary categories, and express deep ambivalence about the term ‘bisexuality’ itself, because of the way it reinforces this binary view of sexuality (Bower, Gurevich and Mathieson 2002, p.31). Petford (2003), for example, described the preferred definition of bisexuality within the bi communities she studied as ‘mutable sexual and emotional attraction to people of any sex, where gender may not be a defining factor’ (p.6). Similarly, Berenson (2002) noted that for her participants, bisexuality was less about ‘the inclusion of both men and women in the realm of their possible attractions’ than it was concerned with ‘a refusal to exclude’ (2002, p.13).

Despite such explicit rejection of dichotomies, however, these studies find that discourses of bisexual identity, rather than moving beyond binary definitions of sexuality altogether, frequently construct discursive space for bisexuality by recasting these binaries in ways that position bisexuality as normative or natural. For example, Ault (1999, p.180), Bower, Gurevich and Mathieson (2002, p.37), Hemmings (2002, p.29), and Bowes-Catton (2007, p.64) note that such discourses often dismiss the categories of heterosexual and homosexual as bogus and divisive constructions imposed on a whole and natural bisexuality, or recast the binary in terms of bisexuals and monosexuals, or queers and non-queers.

Notwithstanding these attempts to rework dominant understandings of sexuality in ways that leave space for bisexuality, such studies also demonstrate how very difficult it is for bi people to talk about their sexuality without making reference to the polarities of
gay/straight and male/female. While bi people’s identity talk often involves the explicit repudiation of these categories, the constraints of discourse mean that it is almost impossible to describe one’s sexual subjectivity without making reference to them, resulting in ‘structurally fractured identities’ (Ault 1999, p.173-4).

The findings of these studies were supported by our own discursive research on bi identities, conducted as a discussion workshop at a bisexual community event in the UK (Barker et al., 2008). At the beginning of the discussion, participants unanimously rejected dichotomies of sexuality dismissed gender as ‘irrelevant’. For example, one participant stated:

‘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”… it’s about as important as something like eye colour’.

Another said that being bisexual meant that:

‘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’.

Later in the discussion, however, participants drew on dichotomies of gender when talking about their own experiences of bisexuality. For example, one said:

‘I’m finding myself looking at women more. I’ve got one [man] and so I don’t need any more,’

and another noted that their sexual practices varied with gender:

‘I’m pretty much sub[missive] to blokes and top [more dominant] to women’.

Similarly, participants recounted experiences of being attracted to different features in male or female partners, whilst, at the same time, several expressed discomfort with their habitual attempts to discern a person’s gender on meeting them.
Discourse analytic research into bisexual identity, then, consistently shows that binaries of sexuality and gender are simultaneously rejected and re-inscribed in accounts of bi subjectivity, which are ‘inescapably marked’ by the very binary structures of sexuality they seek to undermine, resulting in indistinct and fragmented articulations of identity (Ault, 1999, p.173-4). Despite this, however, bi people vehemently stress the wholeness and coherence of their identities (Bowes-Catton 2007, p. 64, 66).

Faced with this contradiction, we began to speculate that our participants were struggling to articulate coherent identities, not because they experienced their identities as fragmented, but because the structural constraints of discourse forced them to locate their accounts of sexual subjectivity within the very binary paradigm they so vehemently rejected. This led us to investigate visual and creative methodologies for studying bisexuality, and other sexual and gender identities, which would facilitate people to talk in new ways about the experience of sexual subjectivity.

In doing this, our interdisciplinary research follows the wider challenging of the privileging of language in qualitative research, and the ‘turn to the body’ within sociology and critical psychology (Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991; Stam, 1998; Reavey, 2008). This involves recognizing that people’s lived and felt experiences of the social world take place in embodied material and spatial contexts, and viewing the body not just as a surface that can be inscribed with meaning, but approaching the study of the social world from an embodied perspective. From this perspective, power relations are not just transmitted through discourse, but through the ‘dispositions, bodily habits, emotions, and senses that run through the process of thinking and action’ (Del Busso & Reavey, in press). Embodied experience is situated in what Del Busso and Reavey call ‘socio-spatial contexts, which can facilitate or restrict embodied expression’ and our work therefore also draws on feminist and queer cultural geography such as Bell (2006), Valentine and Skelton (2003) and Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter (1997), as well as on theories of the everyday (Highmore, 2002). We agree with Reavey and Johnson (2008) that eliciting visual materials from participants offers one possible way into incorporating such embodied experiences and
awareness of socio-spatial contexts. Perhaps most significantly we will draw on the work of the cultural geographer Clare Hemmings (2002), who has been the only other researcher we know of to date who has explicitly addressed bisexual spaces, although she does not attend particularly to the embodied experience of individuals within such spaces.

By using visual methodologies in the study of bisexual identity, then, we hope to overcome some of the limitations of previous discursive work in this area. We also find that visual methods fit well within the tradition of feminist participatory research (Wilkinson, 1999) in which our work is located, and offer exciting possibilities for research projects whose agendas are set, at least in part, by participants, rather than being imposed upon them by researchers. As Packard (2008) points out, there is of course nothing inherently empowering in the use of visual methods; however they seem to offer the potential for enabling participants, especially those, like bisexuals, who are often marginalized or silenced (Barker & Langdridge, 2008), to gain a voice in research to a much greater extent than traditional positivist methods do (O’Neill, 2008). For example, Reavey (2008) suggests that the use of the visual allows people to show researchers their experiences and their lived spaces rather than simply to describe them.

As queer feminist researchers, we are also committed to producing research that comes from within communities, rather than being imposed upon them (Hagger-Johnson, McManus, Hutchison & Barker, 2006). Visual methods seem ideal for work on bisexuality conducted from this standpoint, because they fit in well with the kinds of activities already being run at bi community events, which often involve the use of art, poetry, music, games, and drama to explore issues of relevance to the community. Community events such as BiCon, the annual UK gathering for bisexuals, also prompt many attendees to create their own artefacts and ephemera such as mix CDs for the disco, badges covered with various stickers and colours to represent different aspects of identity, photographic records of the event, costumes for the Saturday night ball, and memory posts on blog sites. Thus, creative means of identity exploration were familiar to participants within this context.
The incorporation of a visual research project into BiCon 2008, the event where the present studies were conducted, was timely because the organisers had asked two of the authors (Meg and Christina) to extend the usual event with an extra day on the beginning focusing on disseminating and developing research on bisexuality (BiReCon, 2008). This was the culmination of several years of explicit engagement between bi communities and academic researchers which also involved an annual survey of BiCon attendees, workshops and an email discussion group for those interested in helping with research (mostly coordinated by ourselves). Many attendees arrived early in 2008 in order to attend Bi ReCon, and it formed an opportunity for the lead researcher on the current study (Helen) to run an initial visual methods workshop and to inform attendees about previous research in this area.

**Research aims**

The aim of this research was to explore the ways in which visual methods of data elicitation can facilitate access to experiential data about embodied experiences in space, rather than purely discursive accounts about identity, producing rich data about the lived, sensorial experience of being bisexual, rather than accounts of ‘structurally fractured’ identities.

**Methods**

Bisexual space is not just hard to come by in discursive terms, but also in literal ones. Specifically bi spaces in the UK are few and far between. There are a small number of bi social/support/activism groups around the country, and a couple of regular pub/club nights, but there is not a commercial bi scene in the way that there is a commercial lesbian and gay scene. Bi spaces tend to be temporary, and when they do occur, they draw people from a wide area. Regional events such as the BiFests held in Brighton, Manchester and London each year, draw people from all over the UK.

The main event of the organised UK bisexual calendar is BiCon, an annual long weekend of workshops and socialising that takes place somewhere in the UK every summer, and has been taking place since 1982. In recent years it has tended to take place on a university campus, often with onsite accommodation.
According to the annual questionnaire data (see Barker et al., 2008), between 200 and 300 people attend BiCon each year, 85% of whom identify as bisexual, and the rest made up of allies and other minority group members. Ages range from 17-61, but most attendees are over 30 and under 50. In many ways the attendees of BiCon can be seen as ‘the usual suspects’ of LBGT communities, with middle class and white people enormously over-represented- 99% of those surveyed in 2004 were white, while 80% had at least one degree. Just under half (47%) of those who completed the survey at BiCon in 2004 identified as female, and just over a third (36%) as male, with 19% identifying as trans or genderqueer (either in addition to, or instead of, identifying as female or male). 36% identified as having significant mental or physical health impairments affecting their daily lives. According to official statistics, 16% of people in the UK have limiting long-term illnesses, and 7.5% are classed as ‘disabled’, so people with health impairments seem to be well-represented at BiCon. This may be explained by the strong commitment to access within BiCon constitution and organising committees, though our broad definition of ‘health impairments’ should also be taken into account here. The context in which the current research was conducted was therefore overwhelmingly white and middle class, but with diversity in terms of disability and gender identification.

The research conducted at BiCon 2008 was in two parts. For the first study, 11 volunteer participants were asked to take photographs of their embodied experiences of BiCon, and to make notes on the experiences and feelings that had prompted the photographs. They also completed a similar photo-diary of their embodied experiences of a week in their everyday lives, following Alison Rooke’s similar studies of lesbian experience (see Ryan-Flood & Rooke, 2009). They were interviewed about both these diaries between September and December 2008. During the interviews, participants were also asked to draw maps of the BiCon space and talk about their experience of the space.

1 Participants were asked: ‘Do you have a physical or mental health issue which affects your day to day life?’
For the second study, the lead researcher (Helen) ran three workshops at BiCon 2008 itself in which participants were asked to make and discuss models of their experiences of BiCon using Lego, Plasticine and other craft materials. This modelling work draws on and develops David Gauntlett’s (2007) application of Lego Serious Play modelling methods to the study of identity, in which he found that giving people the time to reflect on their experiences and make models representing them enabled them to ‘present a set of ideas all in one go’, and allowed them to articulate clearly things that are usually difficult to express verbally or appear contradictory, thus avoiding some of the problems of discursive research.

The process of transcribing and analysing the data collected in those two studies is still in progress. Thus the data and analysis presented here is only preliminary and should be regarded as exploratory and in its early stages. The data to be analysed consists of the transcriptions of participants’ descriptions of the embodied experiences prompting them to create visual artefacts, rather than the visual images themselves, and thus could be critiqued for continued over-reliance on discursive data. However, we would argue that producing visual materials and using them as the focus of interviews and discussions is a useful way of moving towards a multi-modal form of data collection which allows participants to capture and reflect on particular moments of embodied experience and engage more fully with multiple modalities of experience than a traditional interview or discussion.

We are in the process of developing a poststructural, phenomenological method of analysis for the interviews following Langdridge’s (2007) approach, which applies both a hermeneutics of description, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, to the data (drawing on Ricoeur, 1970). This allows for both an empathetic engagement with lived experience, and a critical analysis of the way that narratives of embodied experience are located within power dynamics. The preliminary analyses below thus aimed to present a sense of the participants’ lived experience whilst relating it to wider issues of embodiment and socio-spatial context.
Analysis

One of the most striking aspects of the data so far in terms of embodied experiences is the common expression that bisexual spaces are places where participants feel that they can breathe differently. Relating to this, the title of this chapter comes from this comment by a participant in a pilot workshop for this study, describing her first experience of being in bisexual space. Below is the sculpture that she produced about her experience and her subsequent description of it:

Um, well I did a two sided collage sculpture and um, I guess this side, um, I picked out a lot of pictures of water and sky and birds and sort of this expanse of feeling which I was just feeling when I was out on the deck (laughs) and just thinking to myself, my God, I have this whole afternoon to be myself, and I can just be bisexual, and it just felt so amazing and I’d never felt that before and it was just like, wow, I didn’t know that I could feel this relaxed in my body, and I actually do, because I go around on my bike with my muscles and my body very contracted all the time, and it just felt like these spaces opening up within my muscles and just like, air, and opening up the spaces, yeah, it just was an incred-(outbreath/ sigh) yhaaaaaa, it feels good, you know. So I wanted to express that.
This embodied sense of bi space as an airy place where you can relax bodily, breathe out and ‘just be bisexual’ also emerged in several of the individual interviews. From a phenomenological perspective, this participant appears to be describing a sense of interpenetration by the world, an overcoming of Descartian dualistic splits to experience themselves as body-subjects rather than body-objects (Merleau Ponty, 1945). In this extract, the participant describes how, in bi space, her body felt physically more open and spacious inside, than in everyday life. She experienced ‘an expanse of feeling’, seemingly expanding out of herself into the space and feeling part of it, the boundary between the world and her body becoming less distinct. This is analogous with the participants in del Busso’s research (Del Busso 2009), who experienced bodily subjectivity when their bodies were in motion, rather than trapped in the gaze of an other. Just as del Busso’s participants found liberation from constraining discourses of desirable femininity in movement, so this participant reports that, in a bisexual space, she experienced a sensation of liberation from her usual experience of ‘going round on [her] bike with [her] muscles and her body very contracted all the time’, where there is a clearer separation between her body and the world.

It is notable that the participants in the initial workshop that this participant was involved in were actually not asked to produce models of their experience of bi space, but of experiences of home. It was anticipated that participants would produce collages depicting their actual homes, but, while many did, many also produced models reflecting their experience of bi community space as home, either by itself or in addition to models showing their experiences of their households. In her analysis of the 1990 National Bisexual Conference in the US, Clare Hemmings talks about how the conference was explicitly conceived as a ‘homecoming’ for bisexual people, as a safe refuge from a biphobic outside world (2002, p.169). Referring to the sense of ‘bisexual home’ invoked here, Hemmings notes that, in this sense, “home” is not simply geographical, but a site of meaning within which one both recognises oneself and is recognised in return’ (2002, p.169).
Related to this, the data from several of the interviews and some of the workshops suggests that BiCon is indeed a space in which one is ‘recognised’, and that bisexuality itself is therefore actually less salient at BiCon than in everyday life. As several participants noted, BiCon is a space where bisexuality is the normative centre and everyone is assumed to be either bisexual or bi-friendly. Indeed it was notable that data collected in the later discussions (where participants were asked to model their experience of being at BiCon) was rarely explicitly about bisexuality. Several participants remarked that they noticed bisexuality more in their everyday lives where it was not ‘the norm’. This is illustrated in the model and accompanying description below:

Erm well. When I’m in, not at BiCon you feel like um, you feel like, kind of like, you are bisexual. And you’re kinda like separated from everyone else because they think you’re weird or something. And they’ve got the bi colours on the little people. Erm there’s like a few bi people I know but it’s kind of a thing of everyone else just thinks you’re strange and stuff. But when I’m at BiCon there’s loads of different people. And but we don’t care we just get on and we like feel normal and stuff. And we don’t feel like anything.
Hemmings (2002, p.172) describes how the US bisexual conference she studied constructed bisexual group unity through reference to its own internal diversity, positioning difference as the core of bisexual identity. It is interesting how the participant above similarly explicitly refers to there being ‘loads of different people’ in bi space: people who despite (or perhaps because of) their differences from one another, ‘just get on and feel normal’, whereas in the outside world ‘you’re separated from everyone else’. The result is that in bi space ‘we don’t feel like anything’, and bi identity is less marked than in everyday life.

Many participants in the photo diary study took pictures on their way to BiCon, and talked about bi space, this ‘bisexual home’ as a place outside daily life, which had to be literally journeyed to. In the photograph and excerpt below, the sense of bi space as a place apart from daily life is continued.

This is the same train station that I go to em, erm, my partner’s, one, and then, yeah so it gives always a lovely sort of feeling of, this is *my* station
where I get away to bi loveliness and yeah, I just thought, that just was part of BiCon, being there.
And also just the space, and the nice airiness, the freedom, it kind of just reinforced being free, being able to be self-determined. So yeah, that's why I took these three.

[Interviewer: And-that kind of openness, is that about the station, or about...?]

Well I’m usually reasonably open, I’m, I said before I’m out at work, which is great, and I try not to sort of like squash bits of meself nowadays, though I know I did very much in the past, but erm I just think I could just re-emphasise, I could just sort of breathe out and there was just all this space and I didn’t have to squash meself in or double life there or and it just felt freeing and liberating.

So here we see ‘bi loveliness’ as something the participant feels that she ‘gets away to’, separate from everyday life. In describing the experience of being on the train to BiCon later, the same participant describes the experience of ‘speeding through the countryside untouched by everyday life’. The railway station is a liminal space that’s full of people coming and going, and this fits Hemmings’ (2002) description of the bi conference space she studied as a ‘space with no actual place’, without borders or constituents. The participant above experiences this airy space as a space of possibility and self-determination. Bisexual space is also presented as a place where, even if one is ‘out’ in daily life, you can ‘breathe out’ and not be ‘squashed’ or ‘contracted’. The sense of expansion and airiness referred to in the first extract is evident in this account too, and again seems to point to the embodied experience of bi space as involving the dissolution of boundaries between subject and object, self and world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

This sense of being free to be oneself in bi space without experiencing oneself as separate from/at odds with the world is also found in the following participant’s description of her model:
I have a sort of the four elements in the middle here. I don’t know what they really are but that’s what they are for me. Because BiCon feels like five bazillion Pagan festivals I’ve been to and so like Stella I don’t have a sense of “I’M IN BI MODE NOW” but I’m just in me mode and I can let all those closet doors open.

So I can be bi and poly and Pagan and into BDSM and whatever and like it’s just I can just be me. I can just breathe and that’s what the tree is. It’s that breathing deep down to the bottom. Where I don’t get to do that during the normal days.

Like this participant, several people in the research referred to having multiple minority identities, and this is reflected in the earlier questionnaire data (Barker et al., 2008) which found that many participants identified with minority genders (e.g. trans, genderqueer), religions (particularly forms of paganism), subcultures (e.g. goth, naturism), and relationship or sexual communities (e.g. polyamory, sadomasochism). The current participants largely saw BiCon as a space where these were recognized and accepted. The identities referred to by this participant are generally reflected in the programmes of BiCons where workshops cover interests such as kink (a flogging workshop), polyamory (workshop on time-management and non-monogamy) and spirituality. As well as
reiterating the previously discussed sense of BiCon being a space to breathe, this participant also spoke of BiCon as a space where she could be ‘all of me’ and could ‘let all those closet doors open’, tying this back to her experience of her own sexuality.

Preliminary analysis of the data presented here, then, suggests that participants in these studies experienced bisexual space as physically and experientially separate from their everyday lives. Bi space is constructed/experienced as a ‘home’ space where bisexuality and diversity are normalised or taken as read, where bisexuality itself may be less salient, and where there is a sense of interpenetration between the embodied self and the wider world.

**Discussion**

In this section, we will compare our use of visual and creative methods in workshop-based research on bisexual identity, to our earlier use of discussion-based sessions, arguing that visual methods have several important advantages over traditional methods, and discussing some of the issues that need to be considered when using visual methods in this context.

The most compelling advantage of using visual methods to research bisexual identity is their potential for disrupting the rehearsal of dominant discourses of identity, which result in the reiteration of ‘structurally fractured’ identity narratives (Ault 1999). The preliminary data presented here suggests that visual and creative methods can be used to elicit rich data about the lived experience of bisexual subjectivities that circumvent the rehearsal of these narratives.

We would argue that this is in part because, as Gauntlett (2007) has pointed out, visual methods give participants time to think before answering the question. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, demand a fairly instant response from participants (within the conventions of conversation). Focus group discussions make it difficult for participants to think because other people are talking (and, likely, influencing their own response). Even with written questionnaires the convention is to respond immediately, rather than to take time considering answers. With visual methods, the process of creating a model, drawing,
or set of photographs gives participants time (from fifteen minutes to several days) to think about their experiences without much influence from anyone else, and to produce and describe artefacts that enable them ‘to present a set of ideas all in one go’ (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006) rather than being constrained by the linear modality of speech.

We also found that there was much less attempt at ‘consensus building’ in modelling workshops than in discussion-based sessions. As we outlined above, in discussion-based research workshops on bisexuality, participants are likely to introduce dominant notions that ‘love counts more than gender’ (BiCon, 2005), or bisexuality means equal attraction to both genders (see Barker et al., 2008), and then trouble these notions to some extent. However, participants would then quickly move on to trying to find commonalities between their experiences, as if the accepted purpose of such discussions were to come to agreements and/or to divine universal rules. However, this was not the case in the workshops using visual methods. One of the accepted conventions of artistic creation is that it is about self-expression and individuality, and in collage and modelling workshops there seemed to be a tacit acceptance that the objects created might all be different. This opened up the possibility that the experiences or identities expressed in the subsequent discussion might also all be different and that there might well be inconsistencies and contradictions between and within people's stories. Participants often pointed out similarities between their creations and those presented by other people, but it seemed just as common for people to speak up in order to point out how different their creations were. The discussion following this then seemed to flow naturally into drawing out multiple ways of experiencing bisexual identity, some of which were shared between some members of the group and some of which were unique. The methods of modelling and collage allowed people to articulate their own experiences and have them affirmed without people feeling the need to link into their own stories or offer advice, as often happens in conversation.

We have argued thus far that the usefulness of conventional discourse-based approaches to research is limited by the constraints that language places upon participants, and have also noted that participants’ understandings of how to ‘do’ group discussion shaped the data we gathered. Whilst our discussion group participants struggled to coherently articulate their
identities in response to interview questions, they were able, when given time and engaged in a creative process, to present a complex and sometimes contradictory set of ideas simultaneously and coherently (Gauntlett, 2007). Visual methods, then, in our experience, are helpful in producing data that overcomes these constraints and meets the phenomenological aims of eliciting rich descriptions of lived experience and multiple meanings, rather than universal understandings (Langdridge, 2007).

If visual methodologies remove one set of constraints from data elicitation, however, they add another, and in this final section we briefly outline some issues for consideration when using visual and creative methods in fieldwork.

A key concern in designing our methodology was to minimize the impression that participants were required to produce ‘something arty’. We therefore selected methods of artifact production that we hoped would avoid participants feeling constrained by concerns about artistic merit. In a pilot workshop for this project, we provided participants with collage materials, but some participants commented that they had found it difficult to engage with the ‘artiness’ of the creative process:

I think it’s probably fine for artistic people but I find it very hard to express myself artistically. (Pilot workshop participant)

Using Lego was particularly helpful in addressing this, as participants did not seem to share the same anxieties about their ability to model in Lego as they did about their abilities to make a model in plasticine (whose free-form nature felt too much like ‘sculpture’ to some), or to produce a collage. For most participants, the Lego and Plasticine-based workshops seemed to be less intimidating and more accessible than the collage-based workshops, with less expressions of anxiety about not being ‘arty’, and more positive comments about enjoying fun, playful elements of the workshop.
In both the modelling based workshops, and the collage-based pilot project, we found that providing participants with some materials which they could use to structure their creations (such as the pre-made Lego figures, pictures from catalogues and magazines, and other craft materials such as glitter and lollipop sticks) helped to mitigate fears about being ‘artistic’, and lent a sense of playfulness to the workshop which encouraged people to be experimental and creative (Gauntlett 2007, p.134). Nevertheless, we found that, even with a medium such as Lego, participants seemed to share common understandings of how Lego should be used, such as that blocks should be fitted together, and that like colours should be contiguous. Some participants also commented that, even with this method, they still found themselves worrying about being artistic, or competing to produce the ‘best’ model:

I liked the Lego. Um, (.) I was feeling really, I was feeling a bit self-conscious, because even though I knew, it was one of those things, even though I knew the point of the Lego was that people worry less about being artistically able, even so, I was feeling competitive and worried about my artistic ability in front of the group. I was thinking, ‘this is stupid, just get on with the bloody Lego’, but it was no, I had to be best at the Lego! And yeah, yeah, I was kind of chuckling at my own inability to (.) um, face the fact I might be slightly crap at something even if it was just Lego, but. (Interview 3)

Finally, we found that it was important to be clear with participants about the status and purpose of visual products within the research, and to counter received understandings of the diagnostic role of images in psychological research. We found that our participants sometimes assumed that we were interested in analysing the visual materials they produced in order to discover something about their inner worlds, and were careful to point out inappropriate inferences they felt the models might suggest to us. For example, the participant who made the model below wrote on the workshop feedback form:
The house would have had an inside and an outside and windows and solid walls with more time- the slightly unfinished bit isn’t a reflection of mental state.

Being careful to be clear with participants about the status of visual products within our research (as techniques to give people a chance to reflect upon their experiences and speak about them in new ways, rather than as diagnostic tools or artistic endeavours) also had the effect of helping participants to feel more relaxed about producing ‘imperfect’ visual products.

Conclusions

The current research found that experience of bi spaces was construed, by participants, in terms of a sense of ‘home’, where bisexuality and diversity are taken as read, and where embodied selves are experienced as interconnected with the wider world. Bi spaces were physically and experientially separate from participants’ everyday lives in which, paradoxically, bi identities were felt as more salient.

We hope that this illustrates our argument that visual methods are useful ways of eliciting data about bisexuality that go beyond the rehearsal of ‘structurally fractured’ identity narratives and enable participants to produce accounts of embodied experience which shed light on the ways in which bisexual identity is grounded in material, spatial and sensory experiences of being-in-the-world.
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References


**Biographies**

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Meg Barker is a psychology lecturer at the Open University specialising in counselling psychology. She co-edits the journal *Psychology & Sexuality*, and has produced two edited collections with her co-editor Darren Langdridge on sadomasochism and non-monogamous
relationships. Her research involves working within communities drawing on their own discussions and workshops, and she employs visual methods in this context to explore experiences of relationships and sexual practices. She is also a practicing therapist and co-organises Critical Sexology, the British Association of Sexual and Relationship Therapy conferences, and Bi ReCon. Email: m.j.barker@open.ac.uk

Christina Richards is the Assistant Psychologist at the Charing Cross National Gender Identity Clinic and is a member of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. She is also a Trustee of National Mind and works broadly in critical mental health. She is currently undertaking her doctorate in Counselling Psychology specialising in gender and sexualities, and using visual methods to explore trans women’s embodied experiences of their sexuality. She publishes and lectures on critical mental health, gender and sexualities and is the co-organiser of the biennial BiReCon event. Email: info@christinarichards.co.uk.