

UNDERSTANDING BISEXUALITY ON ITS OWN TERMS

The concept of bisexuality has presented some unique challenges to our understanding of sexual orientation because bisexuals cannot be identified by a singular emotional attraction to and sexual preference for one gender over another. Bisexuals experience such attraction to both genders and may, accordingly, engage in sexual activity with same and other sex partners. Bisexuality has not always been recognized as a separate sexual identity and in some cases both the lesbian/gay and heterosexual communities have been distrustful of and antagonistic towards bisexuals. This issue of Check the Research reviews some recent studies that explore attitudes towards bisexuals as well as some of the challenges faced by bisexuals in their intimate relationships.

BRIEF BACKGROUND ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION TERMINOLOGY

Terms that describe sexual orientation are relatively recent additions to our language. For example, the terms homosexual and heterosexual were first used in 1869 in the writings of a Hungarian writer, Karl Kertbeny (cited in Rust, 2002) who wrote about human rights abuses based on sexual preferences. In the early 20th century these became medical terms used to describe abnormal or perverted passion for those of either the same sex (homo) or the opposite sex (hetero). In 1934, heterosexuality was redefined as normal sexual attraction while homosexuality remained a contrast to normal sexuality (Rust). In 1948, the sexologist Alfred Kinsey developed the concept of a continuum of sexual orientation, with exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality being on opposite ends of a spectrum. He proposed that people could fall at or between these 2 poles based on their level of attraction and experience with other sex or same sex partners. While Kinsey acknowledged that not all people could be easily slotted into one distinct sexual category, his scale was based on varying degrees of heterosexual and homosexual attraction and did not include a distinct category of bisexual. The concept of bisexuality as a unique sexual orientation had its roots in the early gay liberation movement of the 1970s. Bisexuality is now recognized as a distinct sexual orientation.

"...BISEXUALITY MUST BE UNDERSTOOD ON ITS OWN TERMS – NOT MERELY AS A COMBINATION OF HETEROSEXUALITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY, BUT AS A FORM OF SEXUALITY THAT OFFERS THE POSSIBILITY FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUALITY IN GENERAL."

(Rust, 2002, p. 224)

ATTITUDES TOWARD BISEXUALITY

Canadian researchers Alarie and Gaudet (2013) interviewed 15 francophone university students (18 to 23 years) at an Ottawa university, and documented their attitudes to bisexual behaviour and bisexuality as a sexual identity. The authors noted the tendency of participants to devalue bisexuality, or to discount the validity of bisexuality as a distinct sexual orientation. In fact, their interviews revealed that many participants were unsure of what constituted a bisexual identity. There was a general sense among participants that many bisexuals were pretenders, and that bisexuals were really heterosexuals exhibiting bisexual behaviour. Participants expressed a belief that those who claim to be bisexual are often mixed up, indecisive, or just going through an experimental phase that will eventually pass. Most felt that bisexuality was not a genuine sexual orientation, and that either heterosexuality or homosexuality were the only long-term sexual options.



These participants also noted that women were more likely to experiment with same-sex behaviour in public than were young men. It was acknowledged that men might also experiment with bisexual behaviour, but they tended to be more private about their behaviour. Young men who experimented with bisexual behaviour were often thought to be in transition to a homosexual identity.

“WHEN I WAS 12, THAT IS WHAT I SAID—[THAT I WAS BISEXUAL]. THEN A FEW MONTHS LATER, I CAME OUT AS ENTIRELY GAY. I KNOW A LOT, I MEAN A LOT OF GAY FRIENDS WHO DID THE SAME THING. I THINK IT'S EASIER THAT WAY, BECAUSE IN PEOPLE'S MIND IT'S LIKE: “HE STILL LOVES WOMEN, SO IT'S NOT THAT BAD.” SO IT [BISEXUAL IDENTITY FOR MEN] IS LIKE A BRIDGE ALLOWING YOU TO SLOWLY CROSS OVER TO HOMOSEXUALITY.”

(Male participant, self-identified as gay cited in Alarie & Gaudet, 2013, p. 204)

However, young women who experimented with bisexual behaviour were considered heterosexual, rather than undisclosed lesbians. Young women were often said to use bisexual behaviour as a way to attract and excite male partners. Other studies have also noted that public displays of bisexual behaviours among young women are not uncommon. One survey of 164 U.S. university students reported that 45% of female participants had kissed another woman, even though all participants identified as heterosexual. (Lannutti & Denes, 2012). This study also showed that most participants assumed that women who kissed other women in public were heterosexual rather than lesbian or bisexual. However, the authors noted that the increase in female-female public displays of sexual behaviour did not necessarily contribute to a more positive view, or acceptance of bisexuality, since most participants were more likely to assume that a woman who kissed another woman was more promiscuous than a woman who kissed a man.

“SOME [GIRLS] WILL PRETEND TO BE BISEXUALS JUST TO GET ATTENTION. I KNOW THERE ARE A LOT A GIRLS KISSING OTHER GIRLS TO PLEASE MEN . . . BUT TWO GUYS KISSING? MOST PEOPLE WILL SAY THEY ARE GAY. THE TWO GIRLS HOWEVER ARE NOT NECESSARILY LESBIANS.”

(Female participant, self-identified as heterosexual cited in Alarie & Gaudet, 2013, p. 199)

The gender of the person who participated in same-sex sexual behaviour affected a participant's view of whether the behaviour was evidence of bisexuality or homosexuality (Lannutti & Denes, 2012). Most participants agreed that males who engaged in same sex behaviour were likely homosexual while females who engaged in same sex behaviour were considered to be heterosexual. The possibility of either males or females being bisexual was rarely mentioned by participants.

Participants expressed many common stereotypes that are often associated with bisexuality, such as bisexuals are promiscuous and hypersexual and they cannot maintain committed, long term and monogamous relationships (Lannutti & Denes, 2012). It is interesting to note that participants were more accepting of female bisexual behaviour than of male bisexual behaviour. Men in particular were more accepting of female bisexual behaviour if the women were stereotypically feminine in appearance, however they were more uncomfortable with bisexual behaviour between 2 women who were more masculine in appearance.



The power of stereotypes to influence attitudes towards bisexuals is illustrated in a recent American study (Callis, 2013). The author interviewed 80 participants over a 17 month period about their sexual identity and their opinions regarding sexual orientation in general. Of the 13 heterosexual women interviewed, 8 said they would not date a bisexual man. The most common reasons given for this decision related to health concerns and the insecurity of having a relationship with a bisexual partner. Thirteen heterosexual men were interviewed, and 11 said they would date a bisexual woman. Most of these 11 men stated that they thought bisexual women would be “fun and crazy,” and they found the possibility of a sexual threesome to be arousing. Lesbians were often wary of dating bisexual women whom they worried might leave them for a man. Gay men also expressed concerns that a bisexual man would leave them for a woman. Many people who were attracted to both males and females hesitated to label themselves bisexual because of the stigma attached to the term.

RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES FOR BISEXUALS

Bisexuals face unique challenges in negotiating their intimate relationships with partners. Bisexuals must decide whether to disclose their sexual orientation with each new relationship. Some partners may become anxious at the thought of potential rivals of both males and females. Others want their bisexual partners to engage in same sex behaviour for voyeuristic reasons. Some bisexual people are torn between their need for sexual and emotional connections with both men and women, and their desire for committed, intimate relationships. This raises issues related to polyamory (having more than one intimate partner) and monogamy in relationships.

“BEING IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH A GUY, WHEN THEY FIND OUT THEY’RE LIKE, “OH, CAN I WATCH?” AND THEN IT’S LIKE, “WELL, NO BECAUSE I’M NOT THIS WAY FOR SHOW. I’M NOT THIS WAY TO CATER TO YOUR FANTASIES.” ...I’VE DEFINITELY ENCOUNTERED PRESSURE IN THAT AREA BUT THAT’S ONLY BEEN FROM GUYS.”

(Female participant, self-identified as bisexual cited in Li, Dobinson, Scheim, & Ross, 2013, p.30)

“I SOMETIMES HAVE THE SENSE OF, IF I’M WITH A WOMAN I WANT TO BE WITH A MAN AS WELL. I FEEL LIKE I’M MISSING HALF OF AN EXPERIENCE THAT I WANT IF I’M MONOGAMOUS WITH ONE PERSON...IF I’M WITH A MAN I’M KIND OF FEELING LIKE I’M MISSING SEXUAL AND INTIMATE EXPERIENCE WITH A WOMAN... AS A RESULT I SPEND MOST OF MY LIFE NON-MONOGAMOUS.”

(Female participant, self-identified bisexual cited in Li, Dobinson, Scheim, & Ross, 2013, p.31)

The issues faced by bisexuals are often not discussed in mental health studies that include bisexuals with other sexual minority populations. In general, studies that do focus specifically on bisexuals show a higher level of mental health problems among bisexuals than in the larger LGBTQ community (Li, Dobinson, Scheim, & Ross, 2013). Researchers have attributed this to the fact that bisexuals may experience discrimination from both heterosexual and gay/lesbian populations. Gay and lesbian individuals may perceive bisexuals as heterosexuals who are experimenting with homosexual behaviour, and heterosexuals may view bisexuals as promiscuous, hyper-sexed, and unable to commit to monogamous relationships.



“I’VE HAD GAY FRIENDS WHO SIT AROUND AND TALK, AND SAY, “WELL, I COULDN’T HAVE SEX WITH SOMEONE WHO’S BISEXUAL. I DON’T TRUST THEM. WE’RE NOT SOMEONE’S ENTERTAINMENT.” THAT’S KIND OF THE FEELING, SO IT’S DEFENSIVENESS AND IT’S A DEFENSIVENESS BOTH FOR I THINK, THE STRAIGHT WORLD AND FOR THE GAY WORLD. AT LEAST THAT’S WHAT I’VE FOUND OVER MANY, MANY CONVERSATIONS.”

(Male participant, self-identified as bisexual cited in Li, Dobinson, Scheim, & Ross, 2013, p.28)

However, some bisexuals also note that bisexuality offers more freedom and opportunities for forming relationships.

“I FEEL LIKE I HAVE A LOT MORE OPTIONS IN PEOPLE THAT I’M ATTRACTED TO, BECAUSE I’M NOT JUST LIMITED TO JUST MEN OR JUST WOMEN. IT’S...THE PERSON INSIDE, IT’S NOT THEIR BODY PARTS, IT’S THE SOUL OF THE PERSON AND THEIR ESSENCE THAT I FIND ATTRACTIVE.”

(Participant, self-identified as bisexual cited in Li, Dobinson, Scheim, & Ross, 2013, p.26)

WHAT’S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Prior to the mid 20th century, bisexuality was seen as a combination of heterosexual and homosexual behaviour rather than as a distinct sexual orientation. With the growth of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, bisexuality became recognized as a unique sexual identity. While bisexual behaviour is becoming more accepted among young people, there are many negative stereotypes associated with bisexuality, and a tendency among some to deny that bisexuality is a viable long-term sexual identity. Bisexuals often face discrimination from both heterosexuals and the gay/lesbian communities. However, bisexuals also note that their relationships are not limited by gender, and so they enjoy greater freedom and opportunities to explore sexual and emotional connections.

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