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UNH Undergraduate Students' Attitudes toward Bisexuality

Alli Puchlopek

ABSTRACT

Although many studies primarily discuss gay men and lesbian women, very few have focused on the bisexual population. The few previous studies conducted about bisexuality show that many people have negative attitudes toward bisexuality. This study examines the effects of gender and sexual orientation on attitudes toward bisexuality. 378 students at the University of New Hampshire took surveys asking whether they believed bisexuality was a legitimate sexual orientation. The data showed no statistically significant differences in attitudes between men, women, or other sexual orientations. However, the majority of students in general believed that bisexuality is a legitimate sexual orientation. Another large portion had "neutral" attitudes, suggesting a lack of knowledge about the bisexual population, demonstrating a reluctance to formulate opinions about them. Further research on larger and more diverse samples is still necessary to more accurately measure attitudes toward bisexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, policy makers and society as a whole have gradually moved toward more liberal views of sexuality. Although it seems that people generally accept others with different sexual orientations, the bisexual population remains misunderstood by mainstream society (De Bruin and Arnt 2010). Most empirical research approaches bisexuality with labels such as "LGBT." This over-categorization of sexuality ignores the fact that bisexual individuals still face very different obstacles than homosexual individuals. Previous studies cover a wide variety of reasons why some groups have negative perceptions of bisexuals. Many studies suggest that the bisexual experience is especially difficult because bisexuals must face stigma from both heterosexuals who are uncomfortable with same-sex attractions and homosexuals who may doubt their true sexual identity. For example, some studies propose that bisexuality is doubted as a legitimate sexual orientation, leaving many bisexual individuals labeled as merely confused, or even afraid of their true homosexual identity (Balsam and Mohr 2007; Israel and Mohr 2004; Parker, Adams, and Phillips 2007; Welzer-Lang 2008). Other studies note that many label bisexuals as promiscuous, oversexed beings who cannot conform to one identity, therefore, must be incapable of a monogamous relationship (Fairington 2008; Herek 2002; Israel and Mohr 2004; Welzer-Lang 2008).

The existence of prejudiced attitudes toward bisexuals suggests that society still favors a dichotomous model of sexuality (De Bruin and Arnt 2010). This model may be preferred, but it

is not realistic. Another problem with the current body of research on bisexuality is the lack of expansive knowledge of bisexual individuals in general. Studies rarely focus specifically on the bisexual population. Most studies, as mentioned previously, choose to group bisexuals with gay men and lesbian women, which ignores the complex problems specific to bisexuals.

The present study will shed light on the largely ignored and over-categorized population of bisexuals. Studying bisexuals' experiences can enlighten researchers and students of the true fluidity of sexuality. The goal of the present study is to describe how gender and sexual orientation influence attitudes toward bisexuality. Researching the origins of negative attitudes may provide clearer explanations of the bisexual experience itself. Exploring these attitudes can help fill the gap in empirical research on bisexuality and influence readers to move toward a more modern, expansive view of sexuality. More research on bisexuals can eventually lead to the promotion of positive attitudes toward bisexuality by removing the stigma currently attached to bisexuality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of knowledge on attitudes toward bisexuality is scarce. However, many exploratory articles attempt to explain existing attitudes toward bisexuality from various angles. Since there is a wide gap in research on bisexuals, many articles described difficulty in actually defining bisexuality in general. Fairington discussed a problem defining bisexuality because Western society is used to viewing sexuality as neatly categorized (2008). Anything straying from typical heteronormative labels is difficult to study because researchers are simply not used to approaching sexual orientation in a non-dichotomized fashion. Similarly, Israel and Mohr (2007) suggest that negative judgments of bisexuals may come from society's general discomfort with exploring sexualities that differ from the heterosexual norm. This heteronormative attitude is problematic, and most likely a source of heterosexuals' negativity toward bisexuals. Simply ignoring a whole population of people will only perpetuate a heteronormative view of sexuality. By studying bisexuality, researchers gain a completely new perspective of a population that has been overlooked far too long.

Previous research on the bisexual population describes some clear patterns in attitudes. One example of a negative attitude voiced by heterosexuals and homosexuals alike is the doubt of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation (Herek 2002; Israel and Mohr 2007; Lewis et al. 2009; Parker, Adams, and Phillips 2007; Welzer-Lang 2008). In Welzer-Lang's rich qualitative study, many homosexual participants voiced concerns that people merely label themselves as "bisexual" because they are confused about their sexuality (2008). Interview participants also claimed that many bisexuals are simply homosexuals who are afraid of society's reaction to coming out. Many homosexuals claimed that bisexuals lived socially as heterosexuals by marrying the opposite sex while maintaining sexual relationships with people of the same sex outside their marriage. One respondent said specifically, "Without generalizing to all bisexuals, they have a habit of living their heterosexual side out on a social level while hiding their homosexual boyfriend" (Welzer-Lang 84-85). Similar themes appeared in Israel and Mohr's study, which expanded on other possible reasons why bisexuality is often not considered a

legitimate status (2007). This study suggested that bisexuals might be simply in denial of their homosexuality, wishing to have homosexual relationships privately while being able to “maintain heterosexual privilege” in public social lives (Israel and Mohr 2007:121). It is logical to consider that bisexuals may fear society’s reaction to coming out as a homosexual, but these studies suggest they are ridiculed for not doing so already.

Another source of negative attitudes is the doubt of bisexuals’ loyalty in monogamous relationships (Herek 2002; Israel and Mohr 2007; Welzer-Lang 2008). Homosexuals in particular have voiced this concern, such as in Fairington’s study where she mentioned homosexuals’ fears of a bisexual partner “going straight” (2008:268). Because these concerns exist within the sexual minority community, bisexuals face opposition among both the heteronormative mainstream society and among people who identify strictly as homosexuals. Balsam and Mohr addressed the adversity bisexuals’ face against both groups by discussing how bisexuals form identities within their communities (2007). The study found that compared to lesbian and gay individuals, bisexuals were generally less open about their sexuality and felt more confusion about their sexual identity. Additionally, the study found that bisexuals felt less connection to the sexual minority community. This study could not determine the exact source of bisexuals’ confusion and lack of openness, but the research suggests that forming communities specifically for bisexuals (separate from the gay and lesbian community) could help the general well-being of such individuals. This would create a public forum for bisexuals to share experiences unique to them while also leading to healthier ways of coping with the struggles of stigmatization.

Some studies also note that many consider bisexuality a mere “transitional” phase between heterosexuality and homosexuality (Israel and Mohr 2007; Welzer-Lang 2008). Diamond’s ten-year longitudinal study on non-heterosexual (lesbian, bisexual, or unlabeled) women sought to explore the possibility that bisexuality may be merely a temporary phase in one’s life rather than a permanent status (2008). The study showed that women who identified as bisexual or unlabeled in the beginning of the study were unlikely to change their identity label to heterosexual or lesbian later. Often, bisexual and unlabeled women fluctuated only between those two statuses, and continued to report attractions to men and women at even ratios throughout the study (12). These findings conflict with the common belief that bisexuality is only a transitional stage. The women in this study maintained attractions to both sexes throughout the ten-year period. They also consistently chose identity labels that reflected attractions to both sexes.

Previous literature also discussed the implications of negative attitudes toward bisexuals. Lewis et al. claimed that some of these implications include stigmatization of bisexuals in mainstream society, and lack of a community specifically for bisexuals (2009). This study also hypothesized that bisexuals experience more mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, than homosexuals (Lewis et al. 2009). To measure mental health of bisexuals in this study, researchers surveyed both bisexuals and homosexuals to see who was more likely to experience sexual minority stress factors. Some of the factors researchers

hypothesized would lead to depression and anxiety were discrimination, inner conflict about sexuality, and openness about sexuality. The study's results did suggest that bisexuals are more likely to be depressed than homosexuals are. Although the study could not prove causation, it is likely that negative attitudes toward bisexuality and the lack (or scarcity) of a bisexual-specific community could influence depression in bisexuals.

Many studies have discussed in great length the reasons negative attitudes toward bisexuality exist, but very few have quantitatively measured these attitudes. Herek conducted a study measuring specifically heterosexuals' attitudes toward bisexuality (2002). In this study, respondents indicated their own attitudes toward several types of people, including bisexuals, on a feeling thermometer. Some of the other groups included in the questionnaire were homosexuals, people of different religious groups, drug users, and many more. Participants expressed very negative feelings toward bisexuals; often scoring them on the extremely "cold" side of the thermometer. The study also found that men's attitudes toward bisexual men were particularly negative. De Bruin and Arndt also measured attitudes toward bisexuality, but measured for variables in addition to gender (2010). This study included variables such as race, sexual orientation, and religiosity. Similar to Herek's study, this one also found that men had more negative attitudes toward bisexuality than women (2002). Both heterosexuals and homosexuals reported negative attitudes toward bisexuality; however, heterosexuals' attitudes were most negative. Both Herek's (2002) and De Bruin and Arndt's (2010) studies suggest that gender and sexual orientation may influence attitudes toward bisexuality, but these two articles represent the only quantitative research of note measuring these two specific variables. Identifying possible variables can help future studies (such as the present one) determine where negative attitudes come from, and how various groups formulate them.

Even though there may be expansive, rich qualitative studies on bisexuality, future researchers cannot determine influence of attitudes without supporting quantitative data as well. The individuals in qualitative studies discuss interesting ideas, but quantitative research is necessary to draw conclusions about the entire population. Many previous studies also avoided studying multiple variables at once, such as sexual orientation and gender. The present study will yield quantitative data measuring multiple variables in hopes of showing more detail about attitudes toward bisexuality than previous studies. The present study's first hypothesis is based on findings from previous research about gendered attitudes toward bisexuality (Herek 2002; De Bruin and Arnt 2010):

H1: Females will have more positive attitudes toward bisexuality than males.

Although Herek (2002) did not measure sexual orientation, De Bruin and Arndt (2010) found that heterosexuals had more negative attitudes toward bisexuality than homosexuals. Homosexuals could be more likely to support bisexuality because both experience stigmatization from mainstream, heteronormative society. Since all sexual minority groups (including gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals, transgendered people, and people who identify as queer) share this common experience of stigmatization, they may be more willing to accept a

non-normative orientation or worldview. Both De Bruin and Arndt's research and this idea of shared experiences lead to the present study's second hypothesis (2010):

H2: Sexual minority groups (homosexuals and bisexuals particularly) will have more positive attitudes toward bisexuality than heterosexuals.

A quantitative study of how gender and sexual orientation affect one's attitudes toward bisexuality will hopefully add more accurate data to previous literature. Up to this point, most studies on bisexuality have been exploratory. Exploratory research can help researchers form definitions of bisexuality and individuals' opinions of it, but there is a lack of research on how large populations feel about bisexuality. Knowing whether or not there is a relationship between gender, sexual orientation, and attitudes toward bisexuality can help future researchers pinpoint where attitudes come from and why certain populations feel the way they do. Understanding these attitudes can hopefully change them in the future; it is impossible to reverse prejudice without studying how it develops. With this knowledge, researchers can determine effective methods for integrating bisexuals into mainstream society.

METHODS

To gather data necessary to measure attitudes toward bisexuality, one survey question was contributed to a class social survey constructed by students in the Fall 2011 Methods of Social Research class at the University of New Hampshire. Students used a convenience sampling method with the help of the professor, who gained permission from a few professors within the sociology department who were teaching large lower-level courses. These courses were the best available option for sampling because they contained the largest numbers of students and, since many students choose Introduction to Sociology as a general education fulfillment, students in Methods of Social Research thought the backgrounds and opinions of these students would be diverse. However, the problem remaining with convenience sampling is that the existence of bias in the direction of those students who are more interested in the topics covered by the survey. In addition, the opinions of those in sociology classes might differ from those enrolled in other courses; students who choose to take sociology classes may be not only more interested in, but also more aware of sociological issues covered in this survey. This could lead to bias of the results in the direction students who know more about sociological studies in general. To conduct the survey itself, representatives from the Methods of Social Research class visited a number of lower-level classes and read those students a verbal recruitment statement. This statement ensured anonymity by strongly discouraging students from writing names on their surveys. Students received no compensation for completing the surveys.

The present study posed minimal risks to participants. One minor risk was emotional harm to participants due to the personal nature of some of the questions. Representatives' assurance of anonymity most likely reduced this risk, but it is still possible that some questions could stir emotions within participants by reminding them of harmful past experiences.

However, the benefits of collecting this personal information outweigh the slight risk of psychological harm. Since subjects come from sociology courses, the participation in this study could inspire them to learn more about sociological research methods in their future years at UNH. The data collected from subjects provides innovative descriptions of their own community on campus. Knowing the social state of the community can bring to light social problems that students may not notice in daily life.

Regarding attitudes toward bisexuality, it was difficult to conceptualize a definition that would cover every opinion one may have about bisexuality. Previous literature has suggested that one of the most common negative attitudes toward bisexuality comes from the doubts that it is a legitimate sexual orientation (Herek 2002; Israel and Mohr 2007; Lewis et al. 2009; Parker, Adams, and Phillips 2007; Welzer-Lang 2008). If one does not believe bisexuality exists, it is not likely that he or she would be able to answer any other questions about attitudes toward bisexuality. Thus, the question used to measure attitudes was a Likert Scale with the statement: "I do not think it is possible to be bisexual; one must be heterosexual or homosexual." Agreement with the statement would indicate more negative attitudes (disbelief in the legitimacy of bisexuality), while disagreement with the statement would indicate positive attitudes (belief in the legitimacy of bisexuality). Although asking more questions would have helped distinguish specific reasons for negative attitudes, this seemed the most appropriate and useful question for the purpose of this small study. Simply asking whether one believes it is possible to be bisexual can explain if gender and sexual orientation actually influences attitudes toward bisexuality.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Sample

A total number of 378 students from lower-level sociology classes responded to the social survey (N=378). As seen in Table 1, the majority of respondents (about 72%) identified as female. Another 27% identified as male. One respondent identified as intersex, another single respondent as queer, and the remaining two respondents selected "Prefer not to answer" and "Don't know." The overwhelming majority of females are potentially problematic, as this percentage is not representative of the UNH population as a whole. Only 339 of the respondents answered this question, which means some data on this variable is missing. This is most likely due to the placement of these particular survey questions, as they appeared at the end of the survey; it is likely that many respondents did not have time to complete the end portion.

Table 2 describes respondents' sexual orientation. Most of the respondents, an astounding 92%, identified as straight (heterosexual). Meanwhile, 2% identified as gay and another 2% identified as bisexual. Almost 2% claimed to be questioning their sexuality, and less than 2% either did not know their sexual orientation or chose not to disclose it. Only 341 of the respondents answered this question, which means data is also missing from this variable. Once

again, this question appeared at the end of the survey, where some students may not have had adequate time to respond.

Table 1: Respondent's Gender

	Frequency	Percentage
Female	243	71.7%
Male	92	27.1%
Intersex	1	.3%
Queer	1	.3%
Prefer not to Answer	1	.3%
Don't Know	1	.3%
Total	339	100%

Table 2: Respondent's Sexual Orientation

	Frequency	Percentage
Straight	316	92.7%
Gay	7	2.1%
Bisexual	8	2.3%
Questioning	5	1.5%
Prefer not to Answer	2	.6%
Don't Know	3	.9%
Total	341	100%

Gender and Attitudes toward Bisexuality

Table 3 displays data for the relationship between gender and attitudes toward bisexuality. Specifically, it shows how people answered the question: "I do not think it is possible to be bisexual; one must be either homosexual or heterosexual." As discussed in the Methods section, agreement with the statement indicates negative attitudes toward bisexuality and disagreement indicates positive attitudes. This study utilized an alpha level of .05, ensuring 95% confidence that results are not due to pure chance. According to the Chi-Square probability result (.841) the null hypothesis could not be rejected for the present study ($p > .05$). This means statistically, there is no significant relationship between gender and attitudes toward bisexuality.

However, if one looks closely at the numbers displayed in Table 3, there are some subtle patterns. Percentages of people who did not think it was possible to be bisexual were low. Only 3.3% of females and 1.1% of males strongly agreed with the survey statement. Meanwhile, 34.6% of females, 33% of males, and the one participant who identified as queer strongly disagreed with the survey statement. This shows that despite the lack of significant differences between genders, attitudes are more positive than negative.

The “Neutral” category also tells a story about attitudes toward bisexuality. The table shows that 23% of females and 26% of males either could not decide on their agreement with the statement or did not have an opinion either way. This result could be due to either lack of knowledge about bisexuality or, possibly, social desirability bias. Since the bisexual community is so invisible within society, it is possible that students simply did not understand the term, thus, felt incapable of formulating an opinion. Even those who knew what the term “bisexual” itself meant may have indicated neutral feelings simply because they felt uncomfortable divulging truly negative attitudes toward another social group. Even though the recruitment statement before the survey ensured anonymity, the act of marking a response that would indicate a negative attitude may cause the respondent to feel guilty about his or her opinions.

Table 3: Does Respondent Think it is Impossible to be Bisexual - Gender

	Female	Male	Queer	Prefer not to Answer	Don't Know
Strongly Agree	(8) 3.3%	(1) 1.1%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Agree	(20) 8.2%	(11) 12.1%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Neutral	(56) 23%	(24) 26.4%	(0) 0%	(1) 100%	(1) 100%
Disagree	(74) 30.5%	(23) 25.3%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Strongly Disagree	(84) 34.6%	(30) 33%	(1) 100%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Doesn't Apply	(1) .4%	(2) 2.2%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Total	(243) 100%	(91) 100%	(1) 100%	(1) 100%	(1) 100%

Chi-Square: 13.785

Pr: 0.841

Sexual Orientation and Attitudes toward Bisexuality

Table 4 shows the relationship between sexual orientation and attitudes toward bisexuality. Once again, the Chi-Square test’s probability results of .387 shows that at a .05 alpha level, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected ($p > .05$). This table still shows some interesting results regardless of the lack of a statistical relationship. Like the results shown in Table 3 (the relationship between gender and attitudes toward bisexuality), the largest percentages of people of all sexual orientations strongly disagreed with the statement claiming bisexual status cannot exist. Almost 32% of straight people strongly believed bisexuality was legitimate, while another 29% showed at least some positive attitudes. Straight respondents were the only sexual orientation group to show any negative attitudes toward bisexuality at all. Still, less than 15% of straight people responded in this manner. This is a larger percentage

compared to other sexual orientation groups, but less than 15% is still only a modest portion of people in the whole study.

Meanwhile, 67% of gay respondents strongly believed in bisexuality as a legitimate status. None of the sexual minority respondents (gay, bisexual, or questioning) believed it was impossible to be bisexual. Even though the Chi-Square test showed a lack of statistical significance, this still shows that sexual minority respondents generally reported more positive attitudes toward bisexuality than heterosexuals did. Not surprisingly, bisexuals reported the most positive attitudes in general, as almost 89% of bisexual respondents (all but one) strongly supported the legitimacy of bisexuality.

Another group with high levels of support for the legitimacy of bisexuality was the group of respondents who identified as "Questioning" their sexuality. Eighty percent of these respondents strongly supported the legitimacy of bisexuality while another 20% showed at least some support. Those questioning their sexuality may consider if they are actually bisexual, thus, indicating more positive attitudes toward this option for a sexual orientation. Once again, this table shows the high percentages of "Neutral" responses. Thirty-three percent of gay respondents indicated neutrality while almost another 25% of straight respondents did. This shows the opposite effect of those who identified as "Questioning." As previously discussed, this may be due to pure ignorance of the existence of bisexuals and their experiences. However, it is interesting to note that only those respondents on either polar "side" of sexuality (that is, identifying as strictly heterosexual or strictly homosexual) may not have the same understanding of sexual fluidity as bisexuals. This is similar to Fairington's (2008) and Israel and Mohr's (2007) suggestion that society may not understand the bisexual experience because people are so used to viewing sexuality on simple, dichotomous terms. Respondents may have experienced difficulty answering this question because they simply cannot imagine sexuality as fluidly as bisexuals might. This could lead to an inability to properly formulate an opinion, thus, leaving "Neutral" as the only reasonable response choice.

Table 4: Does Respondent Think it is Impossible to be Bisexual – Sexual Orientation

	Straight	Gay	Bisexual	Questioning	Prefer not to Answer	Don't Know
Strongly Agree	(9) 2.9%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Agree	(31) 9.8%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Neutral	(78) 24.8%	(2) 33.3%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(2) 66.7%
Disagree	(94) 28.9%	(0) 0%	(1) 12.5%	(1) 20%	(0) 0%	(1) 33.3%
Strongly Disagree	(100) 31.7%	(4) 66.7%	(7) 87.5%	(4) 80%	(1) 100%	(0) 0%
Doesn't Apply	(3) 1%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Total	315 100%	6 100%	8 100%	5 100%	1 100%	3 100%

Chi-Square: 26.391

Pr: 0.387

CONCLUSION

The goal of the present study was to examine the differences between men and women's attitudes toward bisexuality and the differences in attitudes amongst people identifying with different sexual orientations. Findings showed that this study could not reject either of the null hypotheses, however, the data itself still presents some interesting information about attitudes toward bisexuality. Although there were not large differences within the independent variables, the respondents still gave a clear statement of their opinions as a whole. The first main finding of the study is that the majority of respondents did think that bisexuality is a legitimate sexual orientation. The percentages of people who blatantly believed that being bisexual is impossible were low. This indeed shows that college students at UNH may have more positive attitudes toward bisexuality than the populations in previous studies. The second main finding slightly contradicts the first: Not quite the majority, but still a large portion of people reported having merely "neutral" attitudes toward bisexuality. This suggests that the invisibility of the bisexual population makes it difficult for people in other groups to form accurate or even comfortable opinions about bisexuality. It is possible that social desirability bias played a role in students' selection of the "neutral" option. If a respondent does not know enough about bisexuality to form a proper opinion, he or she may not feel comfortable agreeing or disagreeing that it is a legitimate status. This finding supports the point that bisexuality is more invisible than researchers have considered in the past.

There are several significant limitations of the present study. One major limitation is the fairly poor sample used for surveys. Not only are there specific problems with convenience

sampling (as discussed in the Methods section), but the sample used for the current study turned out to be even more disproportional than expected. Diversity was nearly impossible to obtain with the convenience sampling method used for this study. Future studies should use random sampling methods including a much larger, diverse group of individuals in order to report accurate findings that represent the whole population. Another limitation is the survey itself. Since this survey presented questions from a whole class of sociology students, there was not enough space for more than a few questions per person on the survey. Only one question was included to measure attitudes toward bisexuality, and there are likely better ways to phrase this question than in the present study. Future research should not only dedicate an entire survey to measuring such attitudes, but should also take more time formulating questions that will measure attitudes accurately.

This study was one of very few yielding quantitative data on the topic of bisexuality. Even though this study did not produce statistically significant results, it adds at least a bit more information on a topic that empirical research generally ignores. The findings from this study suggest that researchers should focus on bisexuality in order to capture the true opinions of the whole population. Hopefully, future research can contribute to the inclusion and recognition of bisexuals in both mainstream society and within LGBTQ groups. Bisexual individuals can likely form better self-concepts and worldviews with more acceptance from other sexual minority groups. If bisexuals can exist in harmony with both other sexual minority groups and the rest of mainstream society, they may be able to lead happier, healthier lives in the future.

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