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Bisexuality: Issues of Identity, Inequality, and Citizenship

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Introduction

‘People who have sexual partners of the same and opposite gender during their lives seem to represent a serious intellectual and scientific problem for those trying to understand human sexual conduct’ (Plummer 1975: 259).

‘It is very very different [pause] its more difficult, you don’t feel included, it’s difficult to find a community, it’s difficult to find a reference point. You don’t fit, basically...first of all, for many people you don’t exist’ (Merina, bisexual person UK)

- Acknowledgements to the research participants, to Camillo Tamayo Gómez and Dr Ahonaa Roy

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Aims and structure

- To map out some key trajectories for analysis as follows:

- Identities
- Inequalities
- Commodification
- Activism and Citizenship



Methods

Research conducted for Bisexual Identities book (Palgrave Macmillan 2015)

- 25 in depth interviews with bisexual and queer people in the UK, plus participant observation of bi community
- 6 Interview with Colombian bisexual activists
- Web material analysis - Indian
- For interviews: snowball sample, purposive – varied in terms of ethnicity, age, gender identity
- Thematic analysis

Contextualisation

- The evidence is that sexual attraction and/or sexual behaviours towards people of different genders have/has existed throughout history, and across many cultures
- The categories of 'LGBT' are limited in scope and imagination:

'From a Western viewpoint, sexuality constitutes an essential or core attribute of identity; individuals are said to have fixed sexual identities or orientations. Sexuality as it is understood in the United States and Europe, however, often bears little resemblance to sexual relationships and practices across cultures' (Blackwood 2000: 223)

- Bisexual people subject to intersectionality-related in/equalities
- AND, for bisexuals:
 - 47% of women and 36% men felt they had been discriminated against or harassed on the grounds of their sexual orientation in the last 12 months (FRA 2013)
 - Being out as bisexual doubled the likelihood of discrimination by healthcare providers (FRA 2013)
 - ‘Double discrimination’ from both heterosexual and lesbian/gay people
 - Discrimination in the workplace – e.g. views that bi people are untrustworthy, indecisive, or troublemakers (Chamberlain 2009)

Illustrative quote



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‘...you just don’t fit in the same way, it’s similar to L and G in the sense the heterosexuality is certainly privileged in our culture, so to say you are L or G is to say yes you are in the dichotomous framework but on the less privileged side, it’s still quite a step because you are assumed to be heterosexual unless you say otherwise, and I think bisexuality is like an extra step, because people don’t really think – even though government policy is starting to use ‘you can be attracted to both’ it’s still thought that bisexuality doesn’t exist, or is a phase, a way to a mature sexuality – all those prejudices remain, so it’s an extra hurdle you face...’ (Meg John Barker, UK)

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- Bisexual peoples' identities vary widely
- Our sexualities and relationship forms are also diverse, including:
 - Asexual
 - Single
 - Polyamorous
 - Monogamously partnered
 - Kink practitioner
 - Non-monogamous
 - Swinger
 - Monogamous but single

Illustrative quotes



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'I realised [I was bisexual] when I was 15 or 16 years old, and I gave myself a very hard time, I was quite narrow minded and being anything other than straight never crossed my mind until then, although I had clues, I hadn't put them together...I was very narrow minded, it did not go with my plans, and also I think I was still influenced by my religious background. My parents had a very religious...religion is everywhere in Spain' (Pia, UK).

'For me, if you want to have a bisexual identity, you have to overcome three closets... gays and lesbians say all the time that you have to "Coming out of the closet" and be proud of your sexual identity, but for bisexuals, we have to do a step more... the first closet is with yourself, recognize you as a bisexual; the second closet is with the Gay, Lesbian and Transgender community, ... I think it is a really long journey to have bisexual emancipation...' (Lia, Colombia)

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Commodification

- The commodification of certain forms of bisexuality lies at the root of much of the negative stereotyping that plagues bisexual people

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[Bisexual Army - Bisexual XXX DVD - Studio: Private Specials: Who dare fucks the Bisexual Army?](#)

[bisexual: Definition from Answers.com - Answers - The Most ...](#)

[www.answers.com/topic/bisexualBisexual Porn Videos > New - Xhamster](#)

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Quote



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'...commodified bisexuality has been in porn for heterosexual men for a long long time but its got to the point where its actually compulsory...the men are threatened for the sight of other men, so [they want] to have men out of the picture, on a base level...they don't want to see a hairy man...If the straight male consumer actually came across a bisexual women he would probably run for the hills [laughs] ...' (Lena, UK)

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- Activist trajectories vary considerably across e.g. Colombia and the UK – but shared concern with visibility and tackling biphobia
- Some shared territories with same-sex activist rights claims
- Citizenship issues include:
 - Rights/responsibilities issues
 - Extending notions of sexual and intimate citizenship, e.g. critiquing mononormative models of sexual citizenship
 - Queer versus assimilationist models
 - Universalism versus particularist approaches

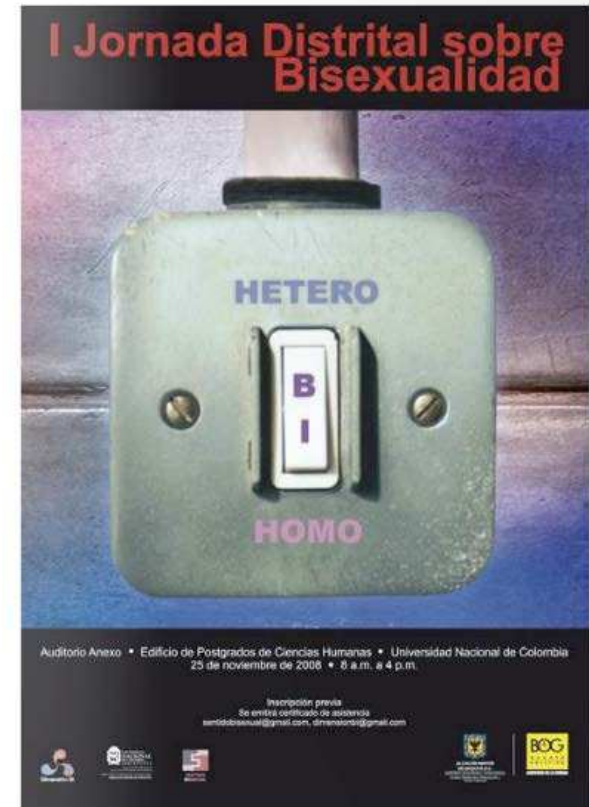
Illustrative quote



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Our principal needs are recognition, respect and dignity for this sexual option... recognition to overcome guiltiness, shame and to not feel judged... people say no! Wait a minute, you are not bisexual, you are gay or lesbian, take an option!!! and this is wrong and disrespectful... because bisexuality is not a thing that you can take off...' (Marcos, Colombia)

Poster of the First District Conference about Bisexuality in Bogotá - 2008



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Conclusion

- Range of different approaches to developing a sociology of bisexuality
- Situated approaches that address intersectional elements are crucial
- Bisexuality can be seen as a strategic identity – alongside others
- There is a need for nuanced, multidimensional approaches to understanding sexualities more broadly
- And a need to address the power dynamics of categorisation/non-categorisation, in an international context
- Some established areas of theory such as citizenship studies are useful in leveraging social change towards greater bi-inclusivity

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