



**Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation:
"The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the
lesbians"**

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with 20 self-identified bisexual women, this paper contributes to the limited psychological literature on bisexual women by exploring their experiences of social marginalisation. The women reported that they did not feel at home in either lesbian and LGBT communities or the wider (heteronormative) society. They identified a number of understandings - bisexuality as a temporary phase on the path to a fully realised lesbian or heterosexual identity and bisexuals as immature, confused, greedy, untrustworthy, highly sexual, and incapable of monogamy - which they reported as arising from lesbian, gay and bisexual and trans (LGBT) communities and the wider society. Unsurprisingly the women refuted these accounts which they stated did not reflect their experiences of bisexuality. As a result they felt their bisexual identity was invisible and invalid.

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Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the lesbians"

The neglect of bisexual women's experiences in feminist psychology

Feminist social psychology has traditionally aimed 'to end the social and political oppression of women' (Wilkinson, 1996a:4). However, as feminist psychology began to burgeon the importance of moving beyond conceptualisations of the term 'woman' as a single unitary category was emphasised (Kitzinger, 1996; Wilkinson, 1996a). During the late 1980s a number of lesbian and/or feminist scholars specifically noted that heterosexuality was assumed and taken as the norm within feminist psychology. They highlighted how experiences of oppression depend on more than gender alone and discussed how women's sexuality is also a meaningful and important aspect of their lived experiences (Brown, 1989; Clarke & Peel, 2007; Kitzinger, 1996). Further, since the 1980s, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the necessity of moving beyond purely tokenistic mentions of lesbians, and discussed the importance of meaningfully including lesbian experiences as an integral part of (feminist) psychology, rather than as tangential (Brown, 1989; Kitzinger, 1996; Peel, 2001). This argument has also been extended regarding bisexual women (Baker, 1992; Barker, 2007). However, bisexual women's experiences remain largely absent within sites of feminist psychology, where bisexuality has received only minimal attention (for recent exceptions see for example, Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Lynch & Maree, 2013). This indicates that bisexuality has been largely overlooked within contemporary feminist psychology which, it could be argued, contributes to the dismissal and marginalisation of bisexual people because 'the very invisibility of bisexual experience [...] is the basis for bisexual oppression' (Baker, 1992:265; Barker, 2007; Obradors-Campos, 2011). Bisexual women are likely to differ from either lesbians or heterosexual women, and

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research provides an opportunity to represent the unique ways in which they experience their lives and their oppressions.

Popular representations of bisexual women

Bisexual women's experiences of social marginalisation are likely to be considerably different from heterosexuals', lesbians', and gay and bisexual men's, particularly because of how bisexual women are depicted in mainstream mass media. Celebrities such as US singer, actor and model, Lindsay Lohan, who engage in a 'same-sex' relationship but have a history of 'opposite' sex relationships, are assumed to now be gay, rarely bisexual, regardless of how (or whether) they identify their own sexuality (McLean, 2008b). However, when female celebrities *have* identified themselves as bisexual (e.g., UK pop singer Jessie J, US pop singer Lady Gaga and US actor Angelina Jolie) they have often gained media attention in response to their public declarations (often framed as 'attention seeking'), hence when bisexual women are made visible their bisexuality is rapidly invalidated or dismissed (see for example, Mulvihill, 2012; Blackburn, 2012, in relation to Jessie J). Bisexual women are sometimes positioned as 'really lesbian' but more often are represented as 'really heterosexual' and as kissing other women in order to titillate and seek the attention of heterosexual men (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer, 2008; Diamond, 2005a; Fairington, 2008; Thompson, 2006). In these portrayals bisexuality is purely for fun and has been termed 'weekend lesbianism', 'bisexuality a la mode' (Wilkinson, 1996b), or 'heteroflexibility' (Diamond, 2005b). There are also a number of cultural terms (some specific to women, others gender generic) which refer to bisexuality as a temporary identity that is neither sustainable, nor to be taken seriously. These include 'bi now, gay later' (Ault, 1996:314; Morrison et al., 2010), 'gay, straight, or lying' and some terms which specifically

1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

3
4 situate bisexuality as a passing phase while at university, such as 'bisexual until graduation'
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6 (Fahs, 2009) or 'lesbian until graduation' (LUGs) (Diamond, 2003). Similarly, women who
7
8 identify as lesbian but then have a relationship with a man may be labelled 'hasbians', a
9
10 combination of 'has been' and 'lesbian' (Storr, 1999).
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13 **'Biphobia' and social marginalisation**

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17 This paper presents the results of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013) of
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19 interviews with British bisexual women about their experiences of social marginalisation,
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21 which could also be described as 'bi-negativity' (Eliason, 2001; Klesse, 2011) or 'biphobia'
22
23 (Eliason, 1997; 2001, Klesse, 2011; Obradors-Campos, 2011; Ochs, 1996). Biphobia is a term
24
25 which first came into use following 'homophobia' (Obradors-Campos, 2011). The concept of
26
27 homophobia, first coined in the 1960s/1970s and 'used to describe heterosexuals who
28
29 harbour fears, hatred and anger' of homosexual people (Aguinaldo, 2008:88; also see
30
31 Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993), has been heavily critiqued by lesbian feminists and others. These
32
33 critiques have focused on how homophobia (and attempts to measure it) rely on
34
35 individualisation, psychologisation, and medicalisation (Aguinaldo, 2008; Herek, 2004;
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37 Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Wickberg, 2000). Further, homophobia is implicitly located within
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39 a liberal humanistic framework that values similarities (rather than differences) between
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41 heterosexuals and lesbians and gay men (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Wickberg, 2000), and
42
43 denies the radical and revolutionary potential of non-heterosexual identities (Kitzinger &
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45 Perkins, 1993). In sum, homophobia locates gay oppression within the (sick and diseased)
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47 individual and obscures political ideological systems of economic, institutional, and
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49 structural power, where heterosexuality (and heterosexism) are the norm of patriarchal
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51 society, and where those who differ from this norm will find their sexual identity denied
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and/or disparaged (Aguinaldo, 2008; Herek, 2004; Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Wickberg, 2000). 'Biphobia' has sometimes been located at an individual level in terms of negative 'attitudes' and discrimination towards bisexual people (Eliason, 1997; Mulick & Wright, 2002). However, the term 'biphobia' has been critiqued in similar ways to 'homophobia' (Eliason, 2001; Weiss, 2004; Klesse, 2011; Obradors-Campos, 2011; Ochs, 1996) and has also been used to refer more broadly to cultural and structural oppression (Eliason, 2001; Klesse, 2011; Obradors-Campos, 2011). 'Biphobia' and 'homophobia' may overlap (Israel & Mohr, 2004), but so too may they differ (Obradors-Campos, 2011) because negativity around bisexuality may stem from mononormativity (where it is assumed that *only* attraction to *one* gender is possible) and dichotomous binary understandings of sexuality (which position homosexuality and heterosexuality as the only valid forms of identity) (Bowes-Catton, 2007; Obradors-Campos, 2011). Further, bisexual people may suffer 'double discrimination' (e.g., discrimination from both lesbian and gay, and heterosexual, communities) (Ochs, 1996).

When referring to others' research we use the term 'biphobia', but we also recognise its limitations and prefer the term 'social marginalisation' to capture bisexual women's experiences of oppression. There has been minimal research on biphobia particularly in comparison to a sizable literature on homophobia (e.g., Averett, Yoon & Jenkins, 2013; Hegarty, 2006; Herek, 1986; 2004; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). Existing biphobia research is mainly US based quantitative studies of *non*-bisexual people's attitudes towards bisexuality (Eliason, 1997; Herek, 2002; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999; Morrison, Harrington & McDermott, 2010; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Spalding & Peplau, 1997; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). This research sometimes indicates that heterosexual people hold mixed opinions of bisexual people, for example, when 'Fifty percent [of participants] rated

1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

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4 bisexual women as acceptable and 50% rated them as unacceptable' (Eliason, 1997:324).

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6 However, the main story of these studies is that bisexuality and bisexual people are often
7

8 viewed negatively. The genuineness or permanence of bisexual identity has been
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10 questioned (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999; Morrison et al., 2010; Spalding & Peplau, 1997) and
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12 bisexual people have been thought to be incapable of monogamy (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999;
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14 Spalding & Peplau, 1997) obsessed with sex, untrustworthy, and likely to spread sexually
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16 transmitted infections (Spalding & Peplau, 1997; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Herek (2002) found
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18 that the only group evaluated more negatively than bisexual people were drug users. Such
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20 findings have sometimes been explained with reference to common negative 'stereotypes'
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22 (Eliason, 1997; Spalding & Peplau, 1997) and individuals possessing a lack of accurate
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24 information about, or understanding of, bisexuality (Eliason, 1997; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999).
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26 These negative conceptualisations mean that heterosexual people may be unwilling to have
27

28 sexual relationships with bisexuals (Eliason, 1997:320). Qualitative research has also
29

30 identified widespread 'criticism of bisexuals within the lesbian and gay community (Welzer-
31

32 Lang, 2008:88):
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34
35 "They're hypocritical, unfaithful, two-faced, uptight, cold, pains in the neck,
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37 turncoats, self-important, trendy, heterosexual, capricious, and frigid." When asked
38

39 "What can they be blamed for?" he answered: "They always say no, and when they
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41 say yes, it's always short-lived; when they say yes for a long time, they're certainly
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43 cheating on you." [...] and he concluded: "They don't exist." (Participant quoted in
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46 Welzer-Lang, 2008:84).
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55 In summary a very small body of research, predominantly conducted outside the UK,
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57 indicates that heterosexual people, and lesbians and gay men, feel negatively about
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1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

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4 bisexuality and bisexual people. However, there is minimal research from the perspective of
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6 bisexual women and their experiences in relation to these negative conceptualisations of
7
8 bisexuality.
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10 *Bisexual women's experiences of social marginalisation*

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12 A small body of qualitative research has identified that within lesbian and gay, and
13
14 heterosexual spaces, bisexual participants have reported encountering the negative
15
16 stereotypes which call into question the legitimacy of their sexuality, and this makes them
17
18 feel that bisexuality is invisible, non-existent or illegitimate (Ault, 1996; Gurevich et al.,
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20 2007; Ross, Dobinson & Eady, 2010; Rust, 1995). These understandings include notions that
21
22 bisexual people are confused, undecided, in transition between heterosexual and lesbian,
23
24 'really lesbian' but holding onto their heterosexual privilege, cowardly, avoiding the stigma
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26 of being a lesbian, wanting the best of both worlds, promiscuous, unable to commit, and
27
28 seeking the attention of heterosexual men (Ault, 1996; McLean, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; Ross,
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30 et al., 2010; Rust, 1995). Research indicates that bisexual people's relationships with LGB
31
32 communities may be complex. Some report positive experiences, while others feel that their
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34 bisexuality is problematic within lesbian and gay space and that, due to anti-bisexual
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36 attitudes, they fear being ostracised (Gurevich, Bower, Mathieson, and Dhayanandhan,
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38 2007; McLean, 2007; 2008a; 2008b). Those who feel they belong have often 'blended in' by
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40 not coming out as bisexual and some bisexual people may simply avoid LGB communities
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42 entirely due to a fear of exclusion and discrimination (Gurevich et al., 2007; Hartman, 2005;
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44 McLean, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; Rust 1992; 1995). Lesbian spaces may be experienced by
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46 bisexual women as a 'chilly climate' (Hartman, 2005:63) and despite lesbian and bisexual
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48 women's commonality in being attracted to women, research has suggested that this does
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1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

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4 not results in kinship between them (Rust, 1995; Hartman, 2005; McLean, 2008a; 2008b).

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6 Instead, lesbian women have been found to be sceptical of bisexuality, with some lesbians
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8 reporting anger, hate, or mistrust towards bisexual women and preferring not be politically
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10 or socially associated with them (Rust, 1995). Bisexual women have reported that tensions
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12 are more pronounced in lesbian spaces than in LGBT communities and that they can be
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14 covert and hidden rather than explicit, therefore difficult to identify or pin down (Hartman,
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16 2005). In conclusion, only a handful of studies outside the UK have focused specifically on
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18 bisexual women's experiences of their bisexuality. The broad aim of this study was to
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20 explore British-based bisexual women's understandings of bisexuality and their lived
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22 experiences of their bisexual identity in relation to social marginalisation.
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28 **Method**

29 *Interviews*

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32 The first author, who identifies as bisexual, conducted face-to-face qualitative interviews
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34 with 20 self-identified bisexual women, as part of a wider project exploring bisexual
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36 women's appearance and visual identities (Author, 2011; Author, 2013 Authors, in press).
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40 The interview schedule, developed on the basis of a review of relevant literature focused
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42 primarily on bisexuality, appearance and visual identity (see, Authors, in press). However, in
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44 early interviews participants consistently directed the interviews towards broader
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46 discussions of their bisexual identity and experiences of social marginalisation. Therefore,
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48 the interview schedule was revised to incorporate more general questions on these topics.
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52 Interviews took place mainly in participants' homes and lasted from 43 to 150 minutes.
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55 *Participants and recruitment*

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Bisexual women are a 'hidden population' (Hartman, 2011) and therefore a range of recruitment strategies commonly employed within LGBT research were utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Fish, 1999). Six participants were recruited through snowball sampling, 7 through an advertisement placed in a local (alternative) free quarterly newspaper, and 7 through flyers distributed at bisexual community events (Barker et al., 2008) and adverts placed in the bisexual bimonthly magazine *Bi Community News* (BCN). Demographic data was collected to situate the sample (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999). The participants were aged 19-53 (mean: 33), and identified mostly as white (only one identified as Black-British), middle-class (only 5 identified as working, upper or no-class), and well-educated (17 had postgraduate, graduate and/or professional qualifications). Eighteen participants were in a relationship (9 with a man, 6 with a woman) and 3 had more than one partner or identified as polyamorous/non-monogamous. Participants had identified as bisexual for between one to 36 years (mean: 13 years) and were 'very out' (N=10) or 'mostly out' (9), with one participant stating that this was context dependant. All but two participants reported past and/or current involvement with bisexual specific events and communities (BiCon/BiFest) (7), LGBT friendships or groups (10), and the wider lesbian and gay 'scene' (5).

Transcription and analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim (Braun & Clarke, 2013) by the first author and transcription was considered part of the analytic procedure (Bird, 2005). An inductive thematic analysis was chosen to identify patterned meaning across the women's interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). Our use of thematic analysis was informed by feminist approaches, and a key aim was to explore and represent these bisexual women's 'voices' in a way that legitimised their subjective experiences and how they make sense of bisexuality

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2 the lesbians"

3
4 (Kitzinger, 2004). However, we recognise that these meanings are always situated within a
5 wider social world and associated discourses (Willig, 1999). Our epistemological stance fits
6 within critical realism whereby our analysis recognises 'the existence of reality, both
7 physical and environmental, as a legitimate field of inquiry, but at the same time recognizes
8 that its representations are characterized and mediated by culture, language, and political
9 interests rooted in factors such as race, gender, or social class' (Ussher, 1999:45). Therefore,
10 our analysis focused on what could be said to be complex interactions between cultural
11 discourses of bisexuality *and* representations of these women's lived experiences of their
12 bisexual identities and biphobia, hence semantic themes were chosen because they stay at
13 the surface meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013).
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28 The first author became intimately familiar with the data during interviews, reflections, field
29 notes, and transcription. Transcriptions were read and re-read by the first and second
30 authors. Notes were made on margins and in notepads before data was coded and then
31 collated into multiple Microsoft Word documents. As broad patterns were identified (within
32 and across the data) themes were developed from these codes. A number of thematic maps
33 were used to assist and assess these distinct but interlinked themes, and analysis, conducted
34 by the first and second authors, was an ongoing iterative process that moved backwards
35 and forwards between data and analysis. In the final stages themes were defined, named,
36 and reviewed further (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). Unnecessary detail has been removed
37 from data extracts to aid readability and comprehension. Participants chose pseudonyms
38 which are used when reporting the results.
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55 Results

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Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the lesbians"

This paper reports three themes: *Bisexual belonging?: "There's nowhere to fit"* captures the ways that these women felt that they did not belong in lesbian and LGBT (or heterosexual) communities. *The dismissal of bisexuality: "Well I think you should just make your mind up"* and *The sexualisation of bisexuality: "Bisexuality's seen as this hypersexual identity"* report how these women perceived their bisexuality to be misunderstood, marginalised, dismissed and misrepresented by both lesbians (and gay men) and by the wider culture.

Bisexual belonging?: "There's nowhere to fit"

These women often spoke of wanting to belong in lesbian, LGBT and heterosexual spaces, but commonly reported that they did not feel welcomed, and that it was therefore difficult for them to fit in:

We're kind of lumped together aren't we, this LGBT jobby. But the LGs aren't very happy with the Bs. So we're kind of stuffed in a community that doesn't actually understand us either, y'know, okay, the heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the lesbians and gay men (Roxy).

Like participants in previous research, Roxy felt an 'interloper' within LGBT community (Gurevich, et al., 2007:217; also see Hartman, 2005; McLean, 2008a) but she indicated her wanting to belong somewhere when she discussed her enjoyment of membership in another community group (unrelated to sexuality):

It's inclusive and it includes everybody. And I think sometimes the kind of, queer culture [...] but particularly the lesbian culture, is not inclusive.

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Some scholars have highlighted the necessity for caution when using the term LGBT because while the inclusion of the 'B' (and the 'T') in 'LGBT' implies that bisexual (and trans) people are welcome and included within this umbrella category, there is a lack of convincing evidence that confirms this (Clark & Peel, 2007; Weiss, 2004). This caution seems well advised when reading these bisexual women's challenges to the existence of a singular, coherent or inclusive LGBT community. Betty separated out the LGBT and in doing so identified multiple versions of community, none of which were places where she could comfortably and authentically fit:

I'm a bit wary of the term "community" [...] there's a lot of talk about LGBT community and I just don't think it exists. Well, I certainly don't feel a part of it. I s'pose I do a little bit, I'm involved with LGBT work, and various communities through my work. [But] with the lesbian groups, I'd feel quite reluctant to go to something like that because I don't really identify as being a lesbian, that's not who I am [...] there are different issues for lesbians and gay people and bisexual people, and for trans people (Betty).

Betty noted the existence of groups and cultures *specifically* for lesbians where she did not see her bisexuality as authentically belonging. However, other participants seemingly *expected* bisexual people to be included within groups and resources labelled as 'lesbian (and gay)' - perhaps because they considered such groups to fall under the wider and theoretically inclusive LGBT umbrella (Hartman, 2005; Weiss, 2004). Like Roxy (above), at particular points in their lives they had turned to these places hoping to find somewhere where they could belong and be understood, but when the 'support and solidarity' they

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sought was not forthcoming this was understandably upsetting (Fish, 2006:75). When Adele decided she was bisexual she telephoned a lesbian and gay switchboard:

It was sort of like "well I've heard of bisexuality and I think there might be some resources for you in Scotland, and so you'd have a good chance if you go up there". And that was it. It was just a person sounding really awkward on the phone. They didn't want to talk to me [...] So then I felt really bad [...] I just thought "oh well I must be wrong". And then for a bit of time I thought "maybe I am a lesbian".

Adele did not feel confused about her sexuality, a common construction or 'stereotype' of bisexual people (McLean, 2008b), until *after* she sought support. She concluded that the switchboard staff member was 'completely biphobic' which distressed her and left her questioning the legitimacy or validity of bisexual identity (Barker & Langdrige, 2008:

[Afterwards] I just felt, like, really awful about it. So I was happy for one moment when I realised "oh that's what I am" and then for the next, grief, about ten years, honestly, it was just absolute disaster'.

Although did not state how long ago, Adele referred to when sought support within a lesbian group:

I thought maybe that will be different and maybe they might be able to help me and understand. It was just... like a disaster movie [...] I just went to the first meeting and was told "if there are any bisexuals in the room, we want you to leave now". And I was too embarrassed to stand up and go out. So I had to wait till the end and then sort of escape and it was just really unpleasant.

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2 the lesbians"

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4 The women's experience of lesbian groups was often that they explicitly *excluded* bisexual
5 women which left them feeling hurt and rejected (Hartman, 2005). The commercialised
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9 'scene' (often described as 'gay' rather than 'LGBT' which demonstrates terminology
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12 excluding bisexual people) was another site where bisexual women struggled to fit in
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14 (Hartman, 2005; McLean, 2008b). Elizabeth had previously identified as a lesbian:

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17 I've always been out about being gay, but to be bisexual, it's like an excuse isn't it,
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19 it's like you're not really gay, you haven't got the guts to say you're gay, so you'll say
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21 you're bisexual. I'm sure the gay scene think you're saying you're bisexual just so you
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23 can fit in with them, but you're not really [saying you're bisexual to fit in, or fitting
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25 in]. So there's nowhere to fit. And I sometimes think I have to explain and say "well
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27 y'know, I was gay for years" and y'know (*laughter*) I do feel I have to do that ... to
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30 kind of be accepted.
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34 The women's talk indicated that the boundaries of 'the scene' are socially regulated. While
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36 'policing' of communities has traditionally kept them safe from the dominant (heterosexual)
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38 culture (Eves, 2004), these women reported that bisexual people are also policed and that
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40 their bisexuality is not understood as a valid identity position (Barker & Langdrige, 2008;
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42 McLean, 2008b) that can belong within these spaces. Accordingly, some of these bisexual
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44 women strategically censored themselves, avoiding discussing their male partners or even
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46 their bisexuality, to try to fit in on the scene:
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51 I think it's difficult for bisexual women to fit in for the most part. I think if you're
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53 going to go out on the scene (*pause*) I don't know, I found it quite a closed society ...
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56 [...] I don't think the best ploy is to go out and say "oh yeah I'm bisexual" [...] you
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4 always feel a bit like you're deceiving in a way. Not that I tried to pretend that I was
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6 a lesbian when I went out [but] I wouldn't go round broadcasting "oh yeah I've got a
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8 boyfriend at home by the way" in case they run you out of the pub (Emily).
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11 Blue had found a community who accepted her bisexuality, but their understanding of what
12
13 it meant to include bisexual people differed to hers, evidenced in this description of how her
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15 belonging within the group was disrupted by her openness about her relationship with a
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17 man and her desire to be able to include him:
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21 [T]hey say they are bi inclusive, but it's a women's group okay, so what that actually
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23 means is that all the women who have women partners, when they go on the hiking
24
25 on a Sunday morning, can take their women partners, but I can't take [my husband]
26
27 [...] I could take my kids with their father as a kind of shadow figure [...] And the way
28
29 that they get away with that is going "but it's a women's group". And it's like yeah,
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31 but if you're bi inclusive, y'know, bi people have bloody male partners, so what you
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33 have to do then is say "well you can't have your partner here either" [...] "so those
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35 are the issues you're dealing with, when you say you're bi inclusive".
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42 This regulation and policing of lesbian space and women only space (Eves, 2004; Clarke &
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44 Peel, 2007) meant that bisexual women felt that they could not comfortably acknowledge
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46 their attractions or involvements with men without feeling rejected by lesbians - perhaps
47
48 because men are perceived to be a threat to lesbian space (Bright, 1992; Rust, 1995). What
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50 is clear in these women's discussions is that they would like to be their authentic (bisexual)
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52 selves (Ault, 1996; Clarke & Spence, 2013) and be out and open about their bisexuality
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54 (McLean, 2007) but that by being honest they risk rejection. Therefore, these women
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1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

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4 managed their bisexual identities by neither hiding nor flaunting their bisexuality, in order to
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6 balance an authentic sense of (bisexual) self with the requirements and demands of the
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8 lesbian and gay communities to which they wished to belong (Ault, 1996; McLean, 2007).
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11 In contrast to the notion that bisexual people are gulping down heterosexual privilege
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13 (McLean, 2007; Rust, 1995), many of these bisexual women reported that they felt out of
14
15 place in both LGBT and heterosexual spaces (Ochs, 1996; Mulick & Wright, 2002): 'cos you
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17 don't fit anywhere' (Roxy). Claire observed:
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22 [Y]ou're never at home, so when you're in gay space you feel out of place, and when
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24 you're in straight space you feel out of place and, y'know, just in terms of keeping
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26 your psyche together and being able to preserve a coherent sense of self which I
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28 think is just really important to people [...] it's just constantly discombobulating and
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30 estranging and then makes you feel funny and odd.
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35 In sum these women reported that they fitted in neither lesbian and gay nor heterosexual
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37 spaces which left them with nowhere to comfortably belong, hence they reported feeling
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39 alienated and out of place (Ault, 1996; McLean, 2008a; Weiss, 2004).
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42 *The dismissal of bisexuality: "Well I think you should just make your mind up"*

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45 The women discussed how their sexuality was dismissed by LGBT and wider culture and how
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47 bisexuality was perceived by others as a temporary (and confused) phase between 'straight'
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49 and 'gay' identities. This reflects early stage models of identity development which
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51 positioned bisexuality as a stepping stone on the way to a fully fledged gay or lesbian
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53 identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; also see Eliason & Schope, 2007). In these representations bisexual
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55 people are considered to have not yet realised their 'true' identity or 'made up their minds'
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(Ault, 1996; McLean, 2008b) and until they do they are considered emotionally immature, psychologically disturbed, or confused (McLean, 2008b; Morrison et al., 2010). Matilda discussed her family's reaction when she split up with her first girlfriend, while Blue discussed others' perceptions of her bisexuality broadly:

They assumed that it had just been a phase and that it was just a one-off experimentation and whatever, and that was done (Matilda).

"You're just confused", "it's a phase you're going through", "it's not fair to the gay world", "being a traitor". Why should we [bisexual women] be negated? [...] And it suggests as well that there's something not quite right about us. That actually we don't exist in our own right. Y'know that we are passing through, we will eventually realise that actually we're straight, or actually we're gay. Y'know, whereas actually, no, we're not. We're not! (Blue).

Due to perceptions of temporariness bisexuality ceases to exist as a valid identity position (Barker & Langdrige, 2008; McLean, 2008b). The expectation that bisexual women will eventually identify as 'one or the other' demonstrates the *invalidation* of bisexuality through the *validation* of heterosexuality and homosexuality as the only meaningful or real identities (Bowes-Catton, 2007). In these binary understandings bisexuality is perceived to be neither genuine (Gurevich et al., 2007) nor legitimate (McLean, 2008b; Ross et al., 2010). Until these women 'made up their minds' (Ault, 1996; McLean, 2008b) they are viewed by others to be 'fencesitting' (Berenson, 2002; Bower, Gurevich & Mathieson, 2002, Gurevich et al., 2007), in a precarious position between 'straight' and 'lesbian'. In the past Alex and Rose had been

1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

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4 involved in lesbian feminist groups (see Hartman, 2005; Rust, 1995) and had felt pressure to
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7 'get off the fence':

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10 I felt very pressured for years and years and years to identify as lesbian [...] I met
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12 women through a sort of lesbian feminist world. And I felt under huge pressure to
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14 suppress my bisexuality [...] to the extent where I feel quite hurt actually and quite
15
16 bitter [...] [Now] I'm aware of sort of asserting my bisexuality sometimes almost
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18 quite forcefully because I think there was a almost mind control a bit [...] If you're
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20 going to identify as lesbian then that's for the cause and Greenham Common and
21
22 everything, and if you still fancy men, or you're sleeping with men or you've got
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24 friends who are men, y'know, then you're not with us, y'know "choose now!!"
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28 (Alex).

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32 It was really difficult, because there was a lot of pressure to be either one thing or
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34 the other [...] lesbian women wanted bisexual women to come off the fence and
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36 identify with their camp. Even just as a political act, there was a lot of talk about
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38 that, and I just couldn't do that (*laughs*). It seemed wrong (Rose).

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41 For Rose being made to choose would not fit with her authentic sense of self (Clarke &
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43 Spence, 2013) hence it 'seemed wrong'. It has been argued that lesbian separatism was the
44
45 root of tensions between lesbians and bisexual women, when bisexual women were seen as
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47 apolitical despite many bisexual women having previously identified as lesbian feminists
48
49 (Hemmings, 2002; Weiss, 2004). The pressure to choose and identify as (inauthentically)
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51 either lesbian or heterosexual was not something that only existed in the past, rather other
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53 women also spoke contemporarily of similar pressures:
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Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the lesbians"

I belong to the LGBT group and I've had some snide remarks, about that, about sitting on the fence, y'know, "which way are you going"? (Amy).

Lucy had been confronted at a bisexual event when a stranger learnt that she was bisexual:

[S]he just totally laid into me, said "you should just make your mind up and so on and so on and so on" and I just said "well thanks for your understanding love".

These dismissals of bisexuality can be attributed to dichotomous (where the only valid options are heterosexual or homosexual) (Bowes-Catton, 2007) and mononormative (where attraction is only to one gender) understandings (Fish, 2006; Hemmings, 2002) because these frameworks reiterate bisexuality as temporary and/or inauthentic (Ault, 1996; Diamond, 2003; 2008; McLean, 2008b):

It's like it's not really believed in [...] people want women either to be straight or gay and they don't want a kind of middle ground (Marie).

I've just been spending the last five years coming out to our lesbian friends as bi. And we went to the pub last Thursday with a lesbian friend of ours and I was saying about meeting you, and doing this research, and she just put her pint down and said "you're not bi Alex, you're a lesbian!" And Alyssa and I were saying afterwards, y'know, even to intelligent well-informed lesbian friends, it's like, can't compute, "you're with Alyssa, you've been with her for many years, you're not bi" (Alex).

These quotes show bisexuality to be either unacknowledged or not taken seriously.

Consequently bisexual women may struggle to maintain their identity, whatever the gender

1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

3
4 of their partner. Alex discussed a bisexual friend who was in a long term relationship with a
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6 man:
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10 We've had the same struggles holding onto our bisexual identity [...] she has the
11
12 complete mirror image opposite of me [...] over and over again, people make
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14 assumptions that she's completely heterosexual because she's married to this guy,
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16 and I have the opposite experience of everybody just assumes that I'm gay.
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20 Alex positioned bisexuality as a precarious and vulnerable identity which in a
21
22 mononormative world could easily disappear (Ault, 1996; Fish, 2006). Further, while
23
24 bisexual women defied the expectation to identify as lesbian or heterosexual (rather than
25
26 bisexual) then they were perceived to be greedy bisexuals who wanted to have their cake
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28 (the pleasure of same-sex encounters and membership within LGBT communities) and eat it
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30 (through maintaining their heterosexual privilege and avoiding the stigma of being out)
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32 (Hemmings, 2002; Rust, 1995; Spalding & Peplau, 1997). Emily reported how her ex-
33
34 girlfriend spoke of bisexuality:
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39 [She used to say] quite harsh things to me almost like trying to provoke me, y'know,
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41 "you bisexuals, you sit on the fence and you choose from the whole bloody world".
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46 In sum, the women's narratives indicated that bisexual people's identity continues to be
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48 dismissed and/or discredited, and not understood as a legitimate identity (Eliason, 1997;
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50 Mohr & Rothen, 1999).
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53 *The sexualisation of bisexuality: "bisexuality's seen as this hypersexual identity"*
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1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

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4 These women reported that others' (usually mainstream society's) conceptualisations of
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These women reported that others' (usually mainstream society's) conceptualisations of
bisexuality often relied on images of bisexual women as flirtatious and highly sexual in ways
that did not reflect their lived experiences of bisexuality. The women objected to, and
disassociated from, understandings of bisexuality as an attention seeking strategy to attract
(and please) heterosexual men (Barker, et al., 2008; Diamond, 2005a; 2005b; Thompson,
2006; Wilkinson, 1996b). Berni distinguished between bisexuality and heterosexual 'messing
about':

Society gives bisexual people a bad name in terms of straight people messing about.
And I think that's where the root of the problem is with the whole "oh my God
you're bisexual", it's like "oh right so you're one of those people who messes about,
and hurts people, and tramps on people" and has no regard for anybody's feelings,
and it's not that bisexual people are like that, it's maybe straight people who are out
for a laugh and don't think about the consequences (Berni).

Roxy discussed a male friend who she believed flirted with her out of curiosity. She
indicated that bisexuality is sometimes understood as a commodity for the consumption of
heterosexual men: 'He's a bit curious bless him. It's like "no we don't do it to order and we
don't sell tickets ... bog off!"' The term 'bicurious' was often understood to encapsulate the
notion of bisexuality as an attention seeking strategy, which the women also disassociated
from their own 'genuine' sexuality:

I think there's a certain type of bisexuality that is visible and I don't think that's real
bisexuality [...] There's so much of a focus on, a sort of faux bisexuality as being
something to attract men. The actual true sexuality is lost in that [...] I think the

Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the lesbians"

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4 media just don't really want to accept it or understand it [...] all the sort of
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6 stereotypes, the pornographic stereotypes and the bicurious stereotype is very
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8 dismissive, it's like it's not a real sexuality, it's not a real thing [...] because biness is
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10 so invisible in society, unless you're bicurious (Marie).

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14 There was like about a million people that were bicurious [on the social networking
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16 website 'Facebook']. And actually bicurious just means I wanna shag with a woman
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18 and a man really, it doesn't mean (*laughter*) that you're thinking that you might be
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20 bisexual and you wish to explore these feelings, because you wouldn't be doing that
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22 on a site, wearing nothing but your underwear (Roxy).

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27 Many of the women rejected the notion that bisexuality is primarily about sex and
28
29 promiscuity (Ault, 1996; Klesse, 2011; McLean, 2008b). This alleged link also feeds into the
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31 idea of bisexual people having 'erotic relationships with "anything that moves"' (Esterberg,
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33 2002:215):
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37 There's an assumption within the heterosexual population and within the
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39 homosexual population [...] [that] bisexual people are promiscuous, thus they are a
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41 threat to my relationship (Roxy).
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45 I think people have a real problem with bisexuality, they don't really understand it,
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47 or they think it's a lie, or that you're just wanna sleep with everybody (*laughs*) [...] If
48
49 you're straight, you fancy men, and if you're going out with a man no one kind of
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51 [says] "oh but you're just gonna go and sleep with loads of other men", in the same
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53 way if you're gay, people aren't like "oh well you must actually just be using them
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55 and soon you're gonna drop them and sleep with someone else". Cos that's not how
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Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the lesbians"

heterosexual or homosexual relationships are seen. Whereas the stereotype is that you can't commit, or you don't want to commit, you just wanna go off with anyone which I think's a real shame. Because it's not true (*laughs*) (Marie).

On the other hand, 7 of the women had been, or were, currently polyamorous and a further 3 discussed being open to the idea of polyamory:

[T]hat was what was so liberating when I went to Bicon. Polyamory is open, honest, y'know [...] rather than lying and cheating and sneaking around (Alex).

Polyamory is often understood as a revolutionary way in which restrictive monosexual and mononormative relationship boundaries can be challenged (Barker & Ritchie, 2007; Klesse, 2006; Noël, 2006; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). However, monogamous heterosexual relationships with two people are privileged, partly through their visibility in romantic fiction and mainstream mass media portrayals (Barker & Ritchie, 2007; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). To have multiple partners, especially if they are of more than one gender, disrupts traditional heterosexist and hegemonic constructions of what constitutes an adult partner relationship (Barker & Ritchie, 2007; Klesse, 2006; Noël, 2006; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Sheff, 2006). Rose considered polyamory as the ideal and had contemplated multiple relationships, but felt that they were too much practical and emotional effort partly due to their not being socially normative:

If it was acceptable ... for people to ... (*sighs*) relate intimately with more than one person, and if we all had the kind of level of personal integrity and self-confidence not to be threatened by somebody we're intimate with being intimate with somebody else, then maybe it could work, but, we're not there yet are we?

1 Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do
2 the lesbians"

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4 Rose drew attention to how polyamory can challenge traditional ideas about relationships,
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6 such as finding one partner and staying with only them forever (Barker & Ritchie, 2007;
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8 Ritchie & Barker, 2005; 2006). Claire was polyamorous, and acknowledged but
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problematized the linking of bisexuality and polyamory:

It's also about sex negativity and greed because I think bisexuality's seen as this
hypersexual identity and so if people are bisexual [...] then it must mean that they're
not monogamous, and therefore it must mean that they're promiscuous, and that's
all terrible because we mustn't ever have sex apart from the one person blah blah
blah, or at least if we do it we mustn't admit to it and we must feel very terrible
about it, and so there is that kind of conflation, and it is a complete conflation, of like
bisexuality and non-monogamy ... so yeah that's a load of bollocks, but people
always throw that book at you, telling you that you're greedy and all the rest of it.

This is far removed from simplistic and dismissive understandings of bisexuality and
promiscuity which hinge on bisexual people wanting lots of sex with 'anyone and everyone'
or 'anything that moves' (Esterberg, 2002:215). Such constructions support the notion that
bisexual people are likely to be dishonest (Barker & Ritchie, 2007; Ritchie & Barker, 2006),
cheat on their partners (McLean, 2008b; Morrison et al., 2010), and be highly risky and
potentially diseased sexual companions (Esterberg, 2002; Fish, 2006; Spalding & Peplau,
1997), an understanding which arguably stems from the early days of AIDs when bisexual
people (mainly men) were alleged to spread HIV/AIDs from the 'deviant' gay community to
the 'pure and innocent' heterosexual world (Gamson, 1989; Weiss, 2004). However, echoes
of this were apparent in some of these *women's* talk, as Claire said: 'I think with the straight
community it's all about bloody HIV. Cos there is that kind of like "bisexuals are the vector

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of transmission" and Sandy said 'I remember my mother when I was a kid saying that bisexuals were dirty (laughs) [...] she's like "yeah, they're responsible for the spread of AIDs"'. These bisexual women felt that bisexuality was stigmatised within British society through inaccurate understandings about their (assumed but also real) relationships and sexual practices.

Conclusions

These bisexual women believed that their bisexuality and associated relationship practices were strongly misrepresented within contemporary society and culture. The results indicate that many of the negative constructions of bisexuality identified in the past remain pertinent in contemporary society. These include notions that bisexuality is an invalid identity and a temporary stage (Ault, 1996; Barker et al., 2008; Diamond, 2003; Fahs, 2009; Morrison et al., 2010), and that bisexual women are indecisive, confused, cowardly, greedy, sex-obsessed, untrustworthy and attention seeking (e.g., Barker et al., 2008; Israel & Mohr, 2004; McLean, 2008b; Morrison et al., 2010; Spalding & Peplau, 1997; Rust, 1995). The findings provide insight into how bisexual women negotiate their identity in relation to widespread negative conceptualisations of bisexuality by constantly negotiating whether to reveal their identity (or partner's gender) to others (McLean, 2007). Therefore this paper makes an important empirical contribution to the existing (largely) theoretical and conceptual discussions about negative conceptualisations of bisexuality, and on the literature on biphobia. Further, in striving to hear these bisexual women's voices and represent their experiences, this paper acknowledges the validity of bisexual women's lived realities and aims to increase the visibility of bisexuality within the feminist psychological literature and elsewhere (see *Author*, 2011).

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Bisexual women's understandings of social marginalisation: "The heterosexuals don't understand us but nor do the lesbians"

Further research which focused on bisexuality and other aspects of identities (such as trans/gender, class, ability, ethnicity and so on) is necessary to provide a clearer picture of these intersections (e.g., Fish, 2008). Further, a focus on bisexual men and their experiences of their bisexual identities and social marginalisation is clearly lacking in the existing literature. A few psychologists have specifically discussed the impact and implications of biphobia on bisexual people. These range from difficult social environments, impacts on bisexual people's social and psychological wellbeing, effects on the dynamics of bisexual women's friendships, and violence towards bisexual people (Dworkin, 2001; Galupo, 2006; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Ross et al., 2010). It would be extremely useful to conduct further research which more directly focused on the ways in which negative conceptualisations of bisexuality impact upon bisexual people in their day-to-day experiences of friends, family, life, and work, especially in relation to stigmatisation, discrimination, violence and hate crimes (e.g., Dworkin, 2001). This is particularly important in order to understand and improve bisexual men and women's wellbeing and it is critical that psychologists and health professionals ensure that bisexual health is a part of their research (e.g., Ross et al., 2010). It would also be useful to move beyond identifying bisexual marginalisation and to consider how to address tensions between bisexual and lesbian, gay and heterosexual people. This study has identified and unpacked the mismatch between popular conceptualisations of bisexuality versus bisexual women's own lived realities of their bisexuality.

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