

Special Section

Reflecting on bisexual identities and relationships: Nikki Hayfield in conversation with Annukka Lahti

*Annukka Lahti is a Doctoral Student (Gender Studies) in the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland¹. Before starting her doctoral studies, she taught psychology at The Open University of the University of Jyväskylä. In her Doctoral studies, she explores how bisexuality – which is persistently culturally associated with temporariness, multiple partners and promiscuity - fits, fights and expands the normative cultural understandings of relationships. Her research specifically examines how a sample of Finnish bisexual women and their (ex-)partners of various genders negotiate bisexuality in their relationships, as psychosocial subjects. She considers how intersecting cultural constructions of relationships, genders and (bi)sexualities shape those negotiations and analyses her interview data through a psychosocial lens. Her analysis shows that negotiations around bisexuality and relationships are made not only through discursive regulation, but are also shaped in interaction with affective, non-rational psychic dimensions of being in a relationship. She has recently published on bisexual women's and their partners' relationships in *Feminism & Psychology* and has a number of papers under review. She is currently finishing her dissertation and plans to start her post-doctoral research project focusing on the separation experiences of LGBTIQ persons. Nikki Hayfield had an email discussion with Annukka over the summer to find out more about her research and interest in bisexuality.*

Nikki: *Perhaps we can start with me asking you to tell me a little bit about your background of researching bisexuality?*

Annukka: In 2003, I wrote my proseminar paper [equivalent to an undergraduate bachelor's dissertation] on bisexual identity. Then, in my Master's dissertation I focused on bisexual women's relationships and interviewed bisexual women and their partners. When I was writing the proseminar paper I was also participating in my first queer studies courses, which included *Introduction to Queer Theory*, *Queer Families?* and *Theory of Gender Performativity*. So, during this time I became very interested in queer theoretical approaches to sexuality, identity and intimate lives, which also resonated with my personal experience.

The basic queer theoretical idea that desire and desiring subjects cannot easily be placed into clearly defined and fixed identity categories has been very influential in my thinking (Butler, 1991; Giffney, 2009), as have queer theorists' critiques of mainstream culture's normative relationship ideals in LGBTQ politics (Butler, 2004; Warner, 2000).

Nikki: So how did you find bisexuality fitted alongside those ideas from queer studies?

Annukka: Of course, starting research with an identity category, bisexuality can seem contradictory to queer approaches. Yet, it seems to me that bisexual identity in particular is prone to invite this kind of questioning around "why do we need labels?", and lesbian and gay identities and heterosexuality are not often questioned in quite the same manner. But then queer theory does not address bisexuality that much (Callis, 2009; Hemmings, 2002; Klesse, 2014). In my study, I regard bisexuality as a contradictory identity, which seems to foreground some 'old' and still very topical issues about the recognition of sexual identities and (marginalized) queer intimate lives (Butler, 2004; Warner, 2000). Looking back on researching bisexuality over a number of years, it's not always been the 'hottest' topic in LGBT circles or in queer studies, where I was eager to find my way in. Nevertheless, I started and continued to work on the topic.

Nikki: And can you tell us a little bit about what led you to focus specifically on bisexual women's relationships with their partners?

Annukka: When I started to research bisexuality, I noticed that existing research provided important insights into self-identified bisexual peoples' definitions and experiences of bisexuality, bisexual identity and bisexual people's understanding of social marginalization (e.g. Barker et al., 2011; Bowes-Catton & Hayfield, 2015; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2001; Kangasvuo, 2011; Kangasvuo, 2014; Rust, 2000). But while research on bisexuality often touched on the topic of bisexual people's relationships (e.g. Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2011; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2005; Rust, 1996), only a small number of studies had actually focused on the topic (e.g. Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2007; Lynch & Maree, 2013; McLean, 2004). I wanted to explore how bisexuality emerges (relationally) in a relationship context for bisexual women and their partners. I had this idea that bisexuality in a relationship context is a much more complex matter than just accepting or rejecting the cultural stereotypes of bisexuality. I think bisexuality is a very interesting identity precisely because it is persistently culturally associated with wavering desire, promiscuity and multiple partners and so it doesn't seem to fit neatly into normative relationship ideals. So, I wanted to

look at how bisexuality is experienced, lived and negotiated within relationships in more detail than had been done before.

Nikki: You have written about tensions in bisexual women's relationships. Can you tell us more about these, based on your research, and maybe what you would say is distinctive about bisexual relationships?

Annukka: My article (Lahti, 2015) was based on couple interviews with bisexual women and their partners. In the paper, I report on how they invested in the normative relationship discourse where they sought to form a durable relationship with one person, possibly for the rest of their lives. So, if you looked at their relationships, in some ways there is seemingly nothing distinctive about their relationships compared to other normative relationships. However, although the couples seem to slide into these normative relationships very effortlessly at first sight, negotiations and affective tensions arose during couple interviews when the couples 'failed' to fully fit into these normative discourses. These women's bisexuality disappeared easily in the normative relationship talk. In defence of the stigma of non-heterosexual and trans identities, the interviewees turned to the discourse of sameness between heterosexual and homosexual couples. In this talk, they positioned themselves within the homo/hetero binary, or as a trans couple, on the basis of their partner's gender. However, in order to construct a discourse of an equal relationship they distanced their own relationship from 'traditional' heterosexual relationships, which they associated with hierarchical gender arrangements. On the other hand, they continued to constantly negotiated how their relationships fitted with more normative discourses: Is our relationship traditional or is it equal? Are we similar or are we different? What kind of role does bisexuality play in our relationship? When the woman's bisexuality was discussed, the exclusivity and future-orientation of the relationship became subject to negotiation. So, on closer reading, the negotiations and tensions brought to light the hidden hierarchies related to gender and (bi)sexuality that constitute the ideal discourse of enduring relationship (Lahti, 2015). In a forthcoming article (Lahti, 2017a, under review) I further explore how the binary categories of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), together with the strength of the monogamous norm, produce conditions where there are possibilities for bisexualities to emerge in (normative) relationships.

Nikki: So, in terms of bisexual identity more broadly, could I ask you about the history and cultural contexts of bisexual identities in Finland?

Annukka: Jenny Kangasvuo (2001, 2011, 2014) has studied the cultural terms and usage of the concept of bisexuality in Finland during an extensive period of time, from 1970s to early 2010s. She has shown that in the Finnish sexual culture, bisexuality started to become a viable identity label during the 1990s. Before that, bisexuality was largely used only as a concept to explain the basic nature of human beings. According to Kangasvuo's media text analyses during the 2000s, bisexuality has become more visible as a sexuality in its own right in the Finnish media landscape, and in sexual minority politics, and also more accessible as a sexual identity - especially for young women. But bisexuality is also at times considered to be this shifting and trendy identity and it is often brought up to entice and excite different audiences so becomes a target of culturally acceptable pornification (Kangasvuo, 2014).

Nikki: *There's often reference in academic literature, and within wider western culture, to the idea that bisexuality is invisible. Do you think that bisexuality has become any more visible in recent years?*

Annukka: I think this depends on the context really. It might be true in a UK and US context, but in Finland I don't see huge changes in the visibility of bisexuality. For example, through *Twitter* I have found all these bisexual activist groups (based mainly in UK and US), which post regularly on bisexuality. I don't see any of this happening in Finland though. Recently, there was column in the main newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, which claimed that young people nowadays might date people of different genders without labelling themselves in any particular way and without making 'such a big deal' about it anymore. This might be true in a sense, but of course, the situation is not so rosy. I think young people still face the pressure to grow up as heterosexual, although this might vary between more liberal contexts and more conservative ones. So, while I don't see bisexuality as a sexual identity becoming much more visible in Finland in recent years, maybe it is more common that people can have relationships with different genders without having to downplay the importance of these relationships. The Finnish singer-songwriter Saara Aalto, who competed in *X-Factor* in the UK in 2016, has spoken openly about her girlfriend, but also about her ex-boyfriend, with whom she collaborates on many work projects. To my knowledge, she has not used the label bisexual, but I consider her still part of the 'new generation', for whom it might be easier, or at least possible, to present their relationships in this way.

Nikki: *And what do you see as being the main inequalities that bisexual people might continue to face?*

Annukka: I think I am somewhat ambivalent about this. When I see my *Twitter* feed, a lot of the bi activists' tweets seem to be about the validation and recognition of bisexual identity, which of course is very important. At the same time, I am worried about what will happen to bisexualities in the process of 'normalisation', keeping in mind the progression of same sex-marriage with such a strong promotion of one particular 'lifestyle' as the appropriate way to live out our lives and sexualities. I think that it is still very important to validate bisexuality as a sexuality, and yet, I hope that this does not mean that we have to polish all the complexity out of it as an identity. For example, the bisexual women in my doctoral research highly valued their committed long-term relationships, yet desires to explore their sexuality beyond normative couple relationships were also present in their interviews (Lahti, 2017b, under review).

Nikki: *So, picking up on that idea about the normalisation of relationships, in what ways do you think that legal changes to same-sex marriage have had an impact for bisexual people?*

Annukka: I explored this in my first article where I demonstrated that utilising the discourse of sameness - which builds on homo/hetero distinction - often leads to bisexuality completely disappearing from view (Lahti, 2015). I think same-sex marriage gives a very limited picture of queer desire and queer lives and it does not represent bisexuality very well. Often individuals in dyadic relationships are regarded as either heterosexual or homosexual. Also, as an example in Finland, the campaign for gender-neutral marriage was often referred to in the media as promoting 'gay marriage' with the emphasis on the right of 'same-sex couples' to marry. In these discourses, there is very little room to address issues other than those of assumed-to-be cisgender gay and lesbian couples. So, there's a risk there that diverse gender identities and bisexualities become overlooked and continue to be invisible. I think this also has very much to do with the normative relationship ideals. As I mentioned earlier, as a desire for more than one gender, the notion of bisexuality is culturally always in some tension with the relationship ideal of one partner who can meet all our psychological and sexual needs. By saying this I do not mean to strengthen the very problematic assumptions that bisexuals are necessarily promiscuous, or that they would be unable to commit to a long-term relationship or relationships. I just think bisexuality as a sexuality often makes the tensions in the couple ideology visible, and this is often the reason why bisexuality is erased from the campaigns for gender neutral marriage law or other citizenship rights campaigns. It is seen as a bit too messy as a sexuality. If the couple ideal was to represent bisexuals, the ideal of having

feelings or desires for only one person needs to be revised or changed. I also think that it would be refreshing that the current idea that one's sexuality is mainly represented by one's (respectable) couple relationships, would be diversified. Relationship and family life can be a very important part of life, but sexuality is also so much more than that - fantasies, fleeting moments of connection, different kinds of relationships during one's life course, single life experiences, and so on.

Nikki: I'm interested to know more about your methods too. You've used interviews in your research and taken a psychosocial approach. Has your research always been qualitative and psychosocial?

Annukka: Yes, but in the Master's thesis I operated mostly at a discursive level of doing relationships (Lahti, 2007). I approached the interview data from Foucauldian and Butlerian perspectives, with the aim of studying how the relationships are made and shaped as performative processes of repeating (and failing to repeat) some already existing relationship discourses and practices in a customary manner (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1981). That meant that although an observation of the performative elements was present in the research, it turned out as a quite typical Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). In my doctoral study, I became interested in a psychosocial approach, which is a theoretical framework and a method in which attention is given both to the psychic and social dimensions of intimate relationships (Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2006). The psychic reality and the irrationality of the unconsciousness are taken seriously, but not as disconnected from the socially constructed reality (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Woodward, 2015). Personal relationships are seen both as socially constructed and something that individuals experience as 'inner and their own' (Roseneil, 2007).

Nikki: And are there any particular academics and activists who have influenced your thinking and your research and teaching?

Annukka: Those are my teachers, whose feminist and queer studies courses I attended during the early years of my studies: Finnish feminist and queer scholars Sari Irni, Marja Kaskisaari, Paula Kuosmanen, Tuija Pulkkinen, Antu Sorainen, Tuula Juvonen and Tuija Saresma. Some of them also became my supervisors; Paula Kuosmanen for my Master's thesis and Tuija Saresma and Tuula Juvonen for my dissertation. It was through these teachers' and researchers' courses that it was possible to engage with the intriguing, but challenging, feminist and queer texts and to discuss them with other students. There was a lot

of enthusiasm in the air during those early years of my studies and I think these readings and discussions laid the foundations of my academic engagement and thinking, which has then developed and changed throughout the years. I can only wish to be as vigorous and engaged in my research and teaching as my former teachers are.

Nikki: *It sounds as though working with those people and with a community of researchers is really important to you?*

Annukka: Well, for the past two years, I have been part of the *Affective Inequalities* research project, which has been extremely important for the development of my thinking. Working with Marjo Kolehmainen, Tuula Juvonen and Raisa Jurva, reading and discussing theories of affect and research on affect with them has influenced my thinking enormously and given me a new perspective for my future research. Furthermore, living and discussing feminism, queer issues, bisexuality, singlehood, gender non-conformity, relationships norms and intimate lives with my colleagues in the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy in the University of Jyväskylä, and with my friends, has tremendously influenced my thinking.

Nikki: *Can you tell us a bit more about the Affective Inequalities research project that your PhD is part of?*

Annukka: In the Academy of Finland funded research project *Just the Two of Us? Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships* we focus on the affective dynamics of intimate relationships. We seek to theorize the arrangements of gender and sexuality in new ways as well as to develop new methodological approaches for studying affect. In turning our attention to affects we hope to shed new light on the ways in which inequalities are both produced and maintained affectively in various kinds of intimate relationships. Deploying affect theories to the empirical studies of intimate relationships calls into question conventional understandings of a couple relationship as consisting of two autonomous individuals (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Seyfert, 2012). Paying research attention to affective flows, energies, intensities and relations between bodies, complicates the analysis of how gendered power operates in relationships and highlights the ongoing process of relationships.

Nikki: *Your PhD research has been funded from various sources. How challenging is it, or has it been, to find funding for (bi)sexuality research in Finland?*

Annukka: My research has been funded by the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy and the National Graduate School for Family Studies as well as additional

funding from the Finnish Concordia Foundation and Finnish Cultural Foundation. I thought that it would be more difficult, but these institutions which are highly competitive have funded my research, so it is possible. Being able to show that my research continues and further develops research on (queer) intimate lives has been an important part of the positive funding decisions.

Nikki: *And what's been your proudest academic achievement so far Annukka?*

Annukka: I think I am happy and proud that every day that I'm able to do research on topics that I find extremely important and interesting: bisexuality, relationships, queer sexualities and women's sexualities. It shouldn't be underestimated how important it is to study these types of topics, particularly in the current neo-liberal academia, where there is a danger that such topics are marginalized even further by the current politics (particularly when cuts are deployed on humanities and social sciences). I'm also very proud to be part of such a vibrant and skilled research project as *Just the Two of Us? Affective inequalities in intimate relationships*.

Nikki: *Apart from those that you have just mentioned, are there any other challenges that you see (bi)sexuality researchers facing, in Finland and perhaps elsewhere?*

Annukka: I think sexuality is a topic that many people find interesting, but not always as a research topic to be taken seriously. This is of course very problematic, because sexuality is a very social and political topic and if it is not addressed as such, many 'common sense' or taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality and related norms and hierarchies go unquestioned. In terms of bisexuality, I think people often think that it is a very marginal topic that touches very few people, although the statistics and research often show bisexual identification to be more common than, or as common as, lesbian and gay identity among 'sexual minorities' (Rodríguez, 2016).

Nikki: *So, what sorts of questions do students have for you when you teach about (bi)sexuality and queer studies?*

Annukka: In Finland teaching responsibilities is one part of your PhD studies. I have given introductory lectures and seminars on queer studies and also feminist and queer approaches to intimate relationship. As my research has progressed, I have also started to talk about bisexuality in my lectures, because at one point I caught myself engaging in perhaps some kind of self-censorship. I think this also tells us something about the canon of queer studies.

Bisexuality is not very present, so I had to write it in. Students are very aware of gender norms, they know the problems of cissexism and in their lives gender manifests in various ways and in multiple identities, for example in non-binary gender identities. Sometimes they question the term bisexuality and suggest pansexuality instead as it is thought to be more inclusive and convey attraction to many, or more than two, genders. Bisexuality, because it has bi in it, literally two, is sometimes understood to only refer to a two-gender structure (Eisner, 2013, p.49). However, I try to explain that the usage of the term bisexuality has developed in concordance with the development of queer theory of gender (Wilchins, 2004). In the current academic discussion, bisexuality is predominantly defined as a desire for more than one gender, and is not transphobic, and I think that these identities are not opposed to one another in any way, but instead that we need multiple identities.

Nikki: *And what's your favourite gender / queer studies / bisexual text?*

Annukka: I'm not sure if these articles fall easily into these categories, but during last year, Ruth Stein's (2008) article on *The otherness of sexuality: Excess*, and Valerie Walkerdine's (2015) article *Transmitting class across generations*, as well as Patricia Clough's (2013) article *Intimacy, lateral relationships and biopolitical governance* have been very important for me, especially when striving to develop my thinking on psychosocial subjectivities. Clare Hemming's (2002) book *Bisexual spaces* has been very important for my theoretical understanding of bisexuality as well as Meg John Barker's texts, often co-authored with Darren Langdrige (e.g. Barker & Langdrige, 2008).

Nikki: *So perhaps we'll end by looking forwards. What do you see as being the most important areas for future bisexuality research to focus on and what are your plans over the coming months and years Annukka?*

Annukka: I think to see and go beyond the binary understandings of gender and sexuality; we possibly need new research methodologies. I think it is important to show the limits of our cultural understandings, yet research should also develop new ways of going beyond these limits. Now I am writing up my doctoral research, and I plan to defend my thesis next year. I am also writing a book chapter where I analyse my dissertation data, but from a new theoretical-methodological perspective, inspired by feminist scholars who rely on Deleuze's and Guattari's thought (e.g. MacLure, 2013; Renold & Mellor, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2014). In order to capture the dynamic processes of power in a relationship, I take affective intensities in bisexual women's and their (ex-)partners relationships as a starting point of

inquiry. After that, I will continue my research when I begin my post-doctoral research project on the separation experiences of LGBTIQ persons.

Nikki: *Thanks so much Annukka, it's been really interesting talking to you about bisexuality and your research. Good luck with your future projects.*

Annukka: Thank you! I really enjoyed this opportunity to discuss these interesting and important topics with you!

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