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Why I Study... Bisexuality and Beyond

Meg Barker

This article addresses bisexuality, non-monogamy and SM and the ways these are represented in psychological literature. It offers some challenges to conventional perceptions and ways forward for studying these areas, based in my experiences of researching sexual communities over the last few years.

‘British homosexual psychologist favours multiple sex partners’. This was the headline that an online American newspaper gave their report on a paper I presented at a recent BPS conference (Barker and Ritchie, 2004). The report went on to explain that my work illustrated ‘the repercussions incurred when God’s truth is suppressed for a lie’ (Traditional Values Coalition, 2004).

The headline displays the confusion that still surrounds minority sexual communities. Sadly, these misunderstandings are not confined to the extreme fringes of Christian fundamentalism. A flick through mainstream psychological textbooks suggests that bisexuality, non-monogamy and SM (sodomasochism) remain largely invisible within British psychology and, if they are ever considered, it is as abnormalities or pathologies rather than as legitimate sexual identities and practices (see Barker, in press, for an extensive review of psychology textbooks). One of my main reasons for beginning to study this area was the gulf between such representations and the experiences of people within the communities themselves.

The newspaper report states that I am ‘homosexual’, presumably because my conference paper mentioned my female partner and it is assumed that sexuality is dichotomous: that people are either heterosexual or homosexual. Such an assumption was also implicit in the recent debate in the letters page of *The Psychologist* over the causes of sexual orientation, and it is perpetuated in most mainstream undergraduate psychology textbooks. If they consider non-heterosexual sexuality at all, they compare lesbians and gay men to heterosexual people in the context of sexual orientation, relationships, child development and so on. For example, Shaffer (1996, p.538) states that a minority of adolescents are ‘attracted to members of their own sex...accepting they have a homosexual orientation’.

Petford (2004) argues that such assumptions may well contribute to discrimination experienced by many in the bisexual community and the myth that bisexuality is ‘just a phase’ on the way to a mature straight or gay identity. My initial discussions with attendees at the annual UK BiCon suggested that rather than seeing themselves as being attracted to ‘both’ men and women, many do not perceive gender as the defining feature in their attraction. Perhaps, rather than ignoring bisexual experiences, psychologists could learn something from them about the potential flaws in their dichotomous theories of both sexuality and gender. I certainly welcome Coyle’s (2003) call for more British psychological work on bisexuality and recent moves to incorporate ‘bisexual’ into the name of the Lesbian and Gay Section.

When I began my research I also became aware that psychological theories of attraction and love excluded the people in openly non-monogamous relationships who I was talking to. Erikson's theory is still the most frequently mentioned in undergraduate textbooks, presenting the formation of a monogamous long-term relationship with one person of the opposite sex as an integral part of healthy development (e.g. Malim and Birch, 1998). If anything other than monogamy is considered it is in the context of infidelities; honest non-monogamy is seldom mentioned. Like the headline I began with, people generally assume that any kind of 'non-monogamy' is about a desire for sex. However, my studies with openly non-monogamous people in the UK (Barker, 2004) suggest that they often present their relationship networks as 'families of choice' (Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks, 2004) down-playing the sexual aspect of them. Non-monogamy has also been demonised by links to the risk of HIV infection (Crossley, 2004), with some advocating 'faithfulness' and 'monogamy' to stop the AIDS pandemic (e.g. Shelton *et al.*, 2004). However, given that dishonest infidelity occurs frequently within committed relationships (Vangelisti and Gerstenberger, 2004), unsafe sex with one 'trusted' partner is likely to be more risky than safe sex with many.

As well as bisexual and non-monogamous groups, I now conduct research within SM communities. Unlike the previously mentioned sexualities, SM is explicitly pathologised in the American Psychological Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR), with sexual sadism and masochism being listed as 'paraphilias' (302.83, 302.84). This categorisation is unquestioningly reproduced in most abnormal psychology textbooks (e.g. Durand and Barlow, 2003). It is important to remember that homosexuality was classed as a disorder under the DSM until 1973 and when it was removed it was initially replaced with a category of ego-dystonic homosexuality (DSM-III): homosexuality which distresses the individual. Similarly, the definitions of sexual sadism and masochism have changed over the years to explicitly state that the person must be caused significant distress or impairment. However, ego-dystonic homosexuality was eventually eliminated because it 'suggested to some that homosexuality itself was considered a disorder' and 'all people who are homosexual first go through a phase in which their homosexuality is ego-dystonic' (DSM-III-R, cited in Kutchins and Kirk, 1999). Kutchins and Kirk also point out that heterosexuality which was 'unwanted and a persistent source of distress' was never included in the DSM. Similarly with SM the remaining classification under DSM-IV suggests that SM in general is a disorder and/or abnormal behaviour. As with homosexuality, there are still strong taboos around SM in our culture; many SM practitioners are likely to go through a stage of being distressed about their desires, which may pass leaving them happily and non-problematically involved in SM activities. SM may cause 'significant distress or impairment in...functioning' precisely because of the stigma, social unacceptability, discrimination and prejudice surrounding it.

There is little psychological research on SM taking anything other than a clinical perspective, and most such research assumes that people engaging in SM are psychologically unwell, despite evidence demonstrating their relative psychological health (e.g. Moser and Levitt, 1995). Much of the literature on SM searches for one encompassing explanation for why all people engage in such activities. My own research

so far suggests that SM practitioners themselves perceive multiple distinct and overlapping reasons for their (and other's) engagement with SM practices. For example, being the submissive party in an SM scene may allow someone to let go of the responsibility they usually have, to gain control in one specified area as they negotiate the scene, to increase their sense of intimacy with the others involved, to break taboos, to prove their ability to endure what is happening to them, to enjoy a pleasurable physical sensation, and/or to induce a meditative state.

To return to the question posed by the title of this article, I began research in these areas of human sexuality because I felt that they were under-researched and largely misunderstood in the existing psychological literature. As I have continued my studies I have come to the conclusion that these identities and practices may also have important implications for general psychological theories of sexuality, gender, attraction and relationships. If people can be attracted to others regardless of gender, or with the focus being on something else entirely (e.g. certain sensations, submission and dominance), and if people can form more than one romantic relationship at a time, or even relationships which involve three or four people, this suggests that we should re-evaluate psychological theories to ensure that they encompass such possibilities.

Another avenue I have recently begun to explore is the potential that bisexuality, non-monogamy and SM have for challenging theories of self-identity. The traditional way of viewing the self is as one, coherent whole but, as constructivist and constructionist theorists have pointed out, this can be an unhelpful view leading to conflict over what the 'real' self is (Butt *et al.*, 1997). It seems that bisexuality, non-monogamy and SM have the capacity to help people become aware of different facets of themselves and perhaps come to a different understanding of identity. Bisexual people can form deep relationships with more than one gender, which may draw out different aspects of their identity. Non-monogamous people might see themselves reflected differently in the eyes of those they are closely involved with. SM enables the exploration of different kinds of dominant and submissive states of mind.

A final reason to continue to research and write about these communities relates to understanding amongst applied psychologists. Preliminary research (Barker and Evans, in prep) suggests that many counsellors and psychologists still have little awareness of the issues faced by same-sex couples, and even less those in multiple relationships (for further discussion of some of the issues involved see Accoroni, this volume). Bridoux (2000) argues that there is also a lack of understanding about SM amongst most psychologists and therapists, and a tendency to assume that if a client is involved in SM that is part of their problem. Psychological understandings of sexualities beyond heterosexuality and homosexuality are also relevant to other applied areas since they should inform organisational equal opportunities policies, sex education in schools, and legal debates around recognition of relationships and the treatment of those who engage in consensual SM practices. As well as publishing my research in psychological journals and presenting it at conferences, I am beginning to run training sessions for practitioners based on the accounts of those I research, and to write more popular, journalistic pieces

based on my findings to try to counter some of the common myths that still abound about the communities I study, as evidenced in the headline I began with.

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