Revolving doors and new identities: A report into new bisexuality research in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate contemporary experiences of bisexual womanhood in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The research was conducted using focus group methodology. The analysis of the data reveals discourses used by the participants to negotiate identity, power, visibility and community. Attention is paid to the role modelling of bisexuality in popular culture, and the bisexual 'coming out' process. The importance of internet communities for new identity formation is also discussed. The findings of this study elucidate some of the political and physical projects that are important to contemporary bisexual women, as well as some of the persistent issues in bisexual life such as representation and legitimacy.

Keywords

bisexuality, non-monosexuality, queer theory, postmodern sexuality, women's sexuality, queer community, focus group methodology

Introduction

This report is based on a sociological study of sexual identification (or sexualities) I undertook for my dissertation in 2014. In my research, I sought to gain insights into how women who identify as bisexual or otherwise non-monosexual construct their identities, what terminology they use, and how they experience their identities. I have drawn on postmodern sexuality theory (Storr, 2003; Vassi, 1997) alongside the refiguring of queer theory to include non-monosexualities in a more extensive manner (Burrill, 2002).

Here I present data from focus groups, which represents a snapshot of some of the issues and projects that concern bisexual women in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Although the participants are not a universally representative sample, their contributions to discourses about gender and sexualities are indicative of the moral and philosophical interactions of feminism and sexual identity. The research undertaken asks how bisexual women interpret and describe their sexual identities, what power structures they have to contend with, and how they negotiate their contested sexualities within the spectrum of sexual identity.

Theoretical orientation

Research pivotal to the theorisation of sexuality within this study was informed by texts that elucidate both postmodern and queer theoretical approaches to sexuality. A postmodern approach to sexuality acknowledges the complexity of individual sexual identity and expression. For example, Patrick Califia's piece 'Gay men, lesbians, and sex: Doing it together' (2005) explores the dynamics of queer sex in the sadomasochism (S/M) scene. Merl Storr views bisexuality as a postmodern phenomenon, but argues that postmodern theory hinders

rather than helps the formation of bisexual theories and identities (Storr, 2003). These works are examples of the complexities of queer experiences recorded through auto-ethnographic, qualitative and theoretical research methods.

'Queer' opposes the rationality of the norm, disrupting the ideas and ideals of the natural (Burrill, 2002). Kathryn G. Burrill argues that the habitual exclusion of bisexuals is detrimental to queer theory as a field (Burrill, 2002). Marjorie Garber contextualizes bisexuality as radical non-normativity:

> Bisexuality undoes statistics, confounds dimorphism, creates a volatile set of subjects who will not stay put in neat and stable categories. No calipers will fit the shape of desire, which remains, thankfully, unquantifiable by even the most finely tested instruments. (Garber, 2005, p. 69)

Methodology

The method of data collection for this study was focus groups. Focus group methodology revolves around the social nature of decision making (Robinson, 1999). I chose to employ focus group methodology because it allows the researcher to see how participants articulate their experiences dialogically, and allows for explicit use of interaction between and within the group (Kitzinger, 1994). Each focus group was loosely conducted around a selection of research questions gleaned from common themes of the experience of bisexuality observed from the literature of queer theory and sexualities studies.

Discussion

The findings from the focus group data are organised according to four thematically linked groups. These themes were isolated in data analysis as synthesizing the dominant threads of the conversations.

Identity, politics, invisibility and expectation

The majority of participants expressed philosophical concerns about the word 'bisexual'. This group of women identified as feminists, and the sex-gender binary connotations of 'bisexual' made it a problematic term they were uncomfortable using. Other terms were also inadequate. 'Pansexual', championed for its gender inclusivity as an alternative to 'bisexual' (Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002), was only used by one participant. Some participants disclosed past relationships with trans people, which problematized their use of the term 'bisexual' as a self-identity marker:

> Angela: I'm not sure that the term bisexual applies to me but I don't really like the term pansexual either … particularly compounded by the fact that I've had relationships with people who are trans so I also feel not comfortable being like … of course I could define myself as bisexual but I also feel like it's a bit of a disservice to people who I've had relationships with.

Many of the participants reflected on complex sexual identity politics they encountered in their relationships with women:

> Jessica: The first girl that I ever fell for … she just had her own set of issues, but at a couple of points she said to me that she reckoned I was actually a lesbian, but she was totally bisexual. How the tables have turned, she's like "Dykey McDykerson" and I am married to a man.

In seeking an alternative to the binary-based word 'bisexual', the unpopular 'pansexual', and the cumbersome 'non-monosexual', one word was very popular and meaningful to some of

the participants: 'queer'. 'Queer' is not, however, an unproblematic term either. Jessica noted that older gay men and lesbians may not like the word queer, because 'when you've had it yelled at you, fair enough!' For younger non-heterosexual women, the term 'queer' has new meanings and uses that are salient to them in their quest for the language that best describes the complexity of a non-heterosexual, but also non-lesbian, sexual identity (Callis, 2014). Diana felt her sexual identity and politics often interacted:

> Diana: I feel like my sexuality does totally swing on a spectrum, so depending on how I'm feeling, and even how I'm feeling about my politics, I start feeling a lot more queer than straight because I get so frustrated at compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

Diana discussed the unique situation of having a lesbian mother and a gay father, and their responses to her sexuality. Her father dislikes her use of 'queer' to describe herself, because 'to him it's a bad thing'.

The invisibility of bisexuality was particularly problematic when it came to identifying as non-monosexual while in a relationship (Callis, 2014):

> Jessica: I'm in a straight-appearing relationship now which is monogamous and so that is probably going to be it, so these days it's much more a queer history for me than anything else.

Jessica uses her appearance as a method of maintaining 'queer' visibility (Hayfield, 2011; Hayfield, Clarke, Halliwell, & Malson, 2013):

> Jessica: Why do you think I've got my head shaved? I am so clearly 'not queer' in every other aspect of my life, that's why I have my head shaved.

Diana also employs a body project to express her queerness: hard femme. Hard femme is typically a fusion of feminine styles of dress and 'masculine' behaviour (e.g. lifting weights) that is used to disrupt femme lesbian invisibility and disorder the butch-femme dichotomy (Wang, 2009). Femme lesbian invisibility is based on assumptions of the butch 'lesbian aesthetic' (Hayfield et al., 2013, p. 5):

> Diana: Femme is different from "feminine" and when you dress hard femme it is basically a "queer indicator".

Participants provided anecdotal evidence of male sexual expectation regarding bisexual women's willingness to engage in sexual behaviour for the gratification of men:

> Jessica: I find with the more casual relationships, flings you know, there is much more of the bullshit "let's have a threesome", "would you make out with a girl for me", the performative aspect expected by men.

Diana reflected that disbelief in the existence of bisexuality could distort private expressions of romance and sex:

> Diana: The idea that there's no real bisexuals, and if you wind up with a man then you were just experimenting, or performing sexuality for the titillation of straight men, or if you wind up with a woman then you just didn't really know what you wanted, and you don't get to be a gold star lesbian because you've had sex with men. When I started dating pretty much exclusively men in my early twenties, it wasn't so much like by choice it's just that that's what ended up happening, but I felt like such a tenuous connection to bisexuality, that I felt a bit ashamed to claim it, like I didn't deserve to claim it.

Legitimacy and coming out

Sexual legitimacy concerned participants who felt there were societal constraints on being non-monosexual, particularly regarding sexual activity. Sex and romance did not have to co-exist in every type of attraction or interaction, although some noticed patterns within their own attraction that shifted and changed with time:

> Isobelle: I used to define myself as romantically attracted to women and sexually attracted to men. There was a period where I would fall in love with girls but have sex with boys. That has become less true the older I have gotten.

Identity legitimacy had a close relationship to expectations placed on bisexuals in the 'it's just a phase' discourse that surrounds non-monosexuality (Callis, 2014; Rust, 1993):

> Isobelle: The way that people's assumptions about sexuality work is, you're straight until you date someone the same gender as you, and then you're gay.

> Misty: And then if you go back to dating men, it's like you were a former lesbian, you're a "hasbian."

Legitimacy of identity was linked to the process of coming out. Some participants experienced having to come out twice or more; a kind of revolving door of sexual identity:

> Nancy: I had to come out twice. I came out to my mum at 15 with all the tears and the drama of being bullied at school and I said "mum I'm a lesbian", and she said "you don't need to put labels on yourself, it's all a spectrum, there's no need to make this grand announcement that you could change any time" and of course she was absolutely right. And looking back on it now from over ten years later I can see that that's an amazing response, at the time I was hearing "I don't believe you."

Pascale's sexuality experience conflicted with her mother's heteronormativity:

> Pascale: I got some really awesome phrases from my mum like "you just haven't met the right guy yet" and, umm, "do you maybe just see your girlfriend as a mentor kind of figure" and I was like "no, no, pretty sure I want to be in her pants."

Pascale felt guilt when she disclosed a new relationship with a man to her mother:

> Pascale: Mum got to this place where she was super understanding, and she took these really big steps for her, and then I turned around and said "yeah I've met this guy" and I did kind of feel awful because I can always tell when my mum is trying to bring something up, and eventually she said "so you know … with James … I just, I thought … I thought you weren't … you know … interested" and I was like "in men?" and she was like "Yeah!" and I was like "I know, me neither" and I felt bad because I'd just gone and done a complete 180 on her after she'd done all this hard work.

Power, privilege and cultural visibility

For people who are neither gay nor straight, the visibility of their sexuality is tied to the power struggle of the perceived dichotomy between the privilege of heterosexuality and the oppression of homosexuality (Gill, 2014). Heidi and Misty discussed the suggestion that bisexuals could choose to benefit from straight-passing privilege (Gill, 2014):

> Heidi: If you're bisexual you could choose to live a straight life and appear to be completely straight, or a gay life … "You're not really gay, you're not really straight, you're straddling the border."

> Misty: You have the opportunity to not be visibly oppressed, so why would you? And if you do, then why are you co-opting gay oppression?

Many participants expressed anxiety about bisexual visibility in gay communities:

> Heidi: I struggle identifying as queer, because I feel like I am not queer enough. I don't deserve to use that label because I choose the easy way out by being straight at work and straight in my family life, and if I choose the easy way out, then I don't deserve to participate in this community, which is unified by oppression which I've opted out of.

There were general observations about the persistence of a patriarchal power structure within gay communities. Writer Dan Savage was mentioned as a celebrity gay male who contributes to negative attitudes toward bisexuals (Oommen, 2012). Beth quipped that as 'a fat bisexual woman I'm the worst thing in the world to Dan Savage!'

Queer representation in popular media has increased in the decades that the gay liberation movement has been active. Participants were asked if they had seen non-monosexuality role-modelled to them in popular culture. Most responded that queerness was role-modelled predominantly through gay male characters, and that bisexual characters were scarce. Jessica and Nancy reminisced about some of the queer stories they enjoyed as teenagers. Their 'formative queer experiences' were so meaningfully engrained in their friendship that on several occasions they spoke as one:

> Jessica: My formative gay movies were gay male movies. Nancy and I bonded – I've known Nancy since I was 12, and so we were each other's queer support for a good few years there. Like she was one of the first people I came out to properly voluntarily, cos there was a whole big mess with my mum and my high school friends, and them reading things that were none of their fucking business, you know? It was kind of a giant mess and so, Nancy and I would – what did we see? *Beautiful Thing* and …
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> Jessica and Nancy: … *Get Real*.
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> Jessica: Which were the two sort of accessible and main movies.
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> Nancy: Those were our queer formative experiences.
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> Jessica: And gay male! And like, *Beautiful Thing*, they're both great movies for it because we're kids our age dealing with being queer, but they were all about men, they were about boys falling in love, and there really was a lack, I think, for both of us. We eventually found *The Incredibly True* (sic) *Story of Two Girls In Love*, but that was dated at that point, like, it's an incredibly nineties movie, umm …
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> Jessica and Nancy: *But I'm a Cheerleader* …
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> Jessica: … was amazing.
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> Nancy: It will always be.

The participants lamented creators not taking an opportunity to acknowledge the possible, or even obvious, bisexuality of some of their characters. *But I'm a Cheerleader* is an example of a queer film with scant mention of bisexuality. For many research participants, realising their sexuality in the late 1990s and early 2000s happened concurrently with watching Joss Whedon's television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. One of the central characters, Willow, was initially portrayed as straight, but in later seasons was in a relationship with another woman, Tara:

> Angela: My formative pop culture gays are Tara and Willow from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, cos like, fuck, so good.

Samantha and Heidi critically assessed the erasure of Willow's bisexuality as aligning with their perspective on the perceived illegitimacy of non-monosexuality:

> Samantha: I think I have become a lot more aware of things like bi-erasure, and people having to be one or the other. Because I'm not hugely involved in queer communities I'm not familiar with people having their sexuality erased when someone says, "You're a lesbian now, or you're gay now." But I'm familiar with *Buffy*, and I saw it happening with Willow. If she was a real person, and said, "I am a lesbian now." Great, that's her thing, but she never says anything. When people talk about the character they always say "lesbian", but she had a pretty intense relationship with Oz [a male character on the show].

Community, belonging and the Internet

The research participants felt their bisexual identity left them outside of the predominant narratives of queer communities, that they were perceived as not queer enough for inclusion:

> Samantha: Being a bisexual within the queer community, for some people, is a bit of a taboo. I don't know, people don't like bisexuals.

For Jessica, her queerness and her politics have been linked since early in her discovery of her sexual identity:

> Jessica: I realised I was queer when I was 14, and my identification with the queer community brought me to feminism, which is a big part of my general ideology.

Diana referred to non-monosexuality as a 'liminal space'. Liminality refers to that which is 'betwixt and between'. Interestingly, Diana's comment also highlights the underlying assumption about liminal space as a 'rite de passage'; a period of removal from the community followed by reintegration into society and the adoption of a new identity (Ridge, Plummer, & Peasley, 2006). An individual in 'the liminal space' is between worlds, no longer what they were but not yet what they will become. If we apply the metaphor of the liminal space to non-monosexuality, it is suggestive of the mononormative conundrum troublesome to many participants: that a bisexual woman is lesbian who hasn't come out yet, or a straight woman performing lesbianism for the enjoyment of straight men. Diana did not intend to portray non-monosexuals in this fashion; rather she was describing the treachery of the terrain in the non-monosexual sphere. Any decision made regarding one's personal life has meaning attributed to it by people outside of one's frame of identity.

More than anywhere else, the internet is where the non-monosexuals in this study found a sense of community. In particular, the social media website Tumblr received praise for its content and capacities:

> Isobelle: I follow a lot of people on Tumblr who are quite a bit younger than me, and there are people who are trans, and people who are queer, and there are people coming out. And they're all coming up with these new labels for what they are and who they are like, "demi-sexual", "demi-romantic", "demi-boy", "demi-girl". There's a lot of "demi". But it's like, they're finding new ways to define themselves because the old labels don't fit them, and they don't respond to them, which I think is really interesting.

According to Isobelle, the only drawback of having such a vast world of gender and sexuality variety, self-determined identity structures, and positive progressive communities, was that it softened you to the realities of the non-cyber world:

> Isobelle: I found, from going through all of my conversations about sexuality and gender and stuff happening on Tumblr, to going out into the real world, it was such this harsh, sudden, 'Oh, fuck!' kind of thing because everybody on Tumblr is very respectful of each other's feelings.

Community is a complex abstract concept, and so can be imagined and made tangible in a variety of socially bound scenarios (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011, p. 1294). To return to Diana's supposition of the liminality of non-monosexuality, we could extend her supposition to include Victor Turner's (1975) notion of 'communitas', the building of relationality between individuals based on common ground, especially in situations of social anti-structure (1975). The resistant nature of non-monosexuality interacts with anti-structure, allowing the emergence of new forms of community.

Conclusion

Visibility and acceptance are two major barriers to bisexual women feeling a sense of belonging within the 'gay' communities. Lesbian women's suspicion of bisexual women was a notable problem, as was the ability to maintain a queer identity while in a 'straight-passing' relationship. Bisexuality as 'a phase' or transitional period before coming out as gay, or the perception of bisexual women as giving a performance of lesbianism designed to titillate straight men (and

implicitly ridicule actual lesbian women) were aspects that made non-monosexual identities socially difficult. The lack of positive role-modelling of bisexual and other non-monosexual characters in popular culture is something the participants found frustrating and disappointing.

The participants in this study demonstrated an approach to queer gender and sexual life based on radical inclusivity and openness to a variety of gender and sexual expressions and identities. An example of the gender-progressive outlook of this sample of bisexual women can be found in their philosophical quandary regarding the gender binary implications of the term bisexual.

These women are taking charge of intersecting feminism and queer theory, and making it work for them. The desire to discuss, unpack, and reclaim queer as a term of inclusivity was vital for these women. One way to achieve visibility was through body projects, such as Jessica's shaved head, and Diana's hard femme fashion expression. These queer visibility modes of practice are a unique part of queer women's expression. For the women in this study who adopted queer visibility practices, these methods intersect queerness and feminism. These changing concerns regarding gender and sexuality are relevant to the rethinking of queer theory, the application of resistant discourses and the sociological approach to investigating sexuality and gender intersections.

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