



Bisexuality and Relationships Project Report

September 2017

Background:

We know that more and more people are identifying as bisexual – estimates vary from around 22,000 to over 1 million people in the UK. We also know that bisexual people's lived experiences are often different from those of either lesbians, gay men, or heterosexual people. However, despite this, there is very little psychological research that has specifically explored bisexual people's lives, friendships, and relationships. Therefore, in this project we sought to find out more about bisexual people's experiences of bisexuality and relationships.

Who are the researchers and collaborators?

The researchers involved in the project are:

- Nikki Hayfield - a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol
- Chris Campbell - a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at St Mary's University, Twickenham, London
- Elizabeth Reed - Research Associate on the project and now a Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London.

This research was conducted in collaboration with:

- *BiVisible Bristol* - a bisexual community and network
- *OnePlusOne* - a relationship charity.

The project was supported and funded by the Department of Health and Social Sciences at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol.

Who was eligible to take part?

Anyone who self-identified as bisexual, was currently in a relationship, and was over eighteen at the time of the interview was eligible to participate in this research. We were interested in speaking to bisexual people who were in monogamous relationships (e.g., have only one partner) or multiple relationships (e.g., have more than one partner). We wanted to include a diverse range of participants and so bisexual people of all genders, classes, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and abilities were welcome to take part.

How were participants recruited and what did participation involve?

We worked in collaboration with *BiVisible Bristol* to invite bisexual people in and around the Bristol area to take part. We also advertised the study via the researchers' social and online networks, local LGBT+ groups, and through posters displayed in cafes and other public venues around Bristol between September 2016 and January 2017.

Participation involved being interviewed by one of the researchers for around an hour or so. Twenty people expressed an interest in our research and were happy to be interviewed.

We met most participants for a face-to-face interview, although a few were interviewed via *Skype* video software. In the interview, participants were encouraged to tell us what was important to them about their bisexual identity and their relationships. We asked participants lots of questions and we very much appreciated the time they took to answer these and tell us all about their experiences of being bisexual and in relationships.

Who took part?

Thirteen of these twenty bisexual participants were women, four were men, and three were genderqueer or nonbinary. We asked participants whether they used terms other than bisexuality to describe their sexuality and most commonly they reported that they identified with identities such as pansexual and queer. Participants were also invited to provide five words to describe themselves and the most frequently used words were feminist, atheist, liberal, and inclusive. The people we spoke to were aged between eighteen and forty, with the majority under thirty. Only two participants had children.

Participants were in a range of relationships. Some had been in their current relationship for around a month whereas others had been with their partners for around ten years. Fourteen participants were in monogamous relationships and the remaining six were in non-monogamous, open, or polyamorous relationships.

On the whole, participants were mainly white British or white European, with four describing their race and ethnic background in a different way. Thirteen participants described themselves as middle class and the remainder as working or working-middle class. Everyone we spoke to was either in full-time or part-time employment or education, or both.

What were the findings?

In our preliminary reading of the data we noticed some key commonalities across the interviews. However, these are broad patterns which do not necessarily capture all the detail or the unique experiences of all our participants. Therefore, we cannot capture everything from the interviews in this summary.

We summarise some of these participants' experiences below. We use examples of quotes from the interviews to show the types of things that participants said and we include participants' pseudonyms, gender, age, and the gender of their current partner(s).

In brief:

- Participants frequently reported their awareness of a range of stereotypes about bisexuality. These stereotypes were often based on negative (mis)assumptions about bisexual people and some related to how bisexual people might act in relationships
- These stereotypes were problematic for bisexual participants who reported that they therefore corrected other people's (mis)assumptions about bisexuality. This meant that these bisexual people educated others and explained to them how these stereotypes were not a good representation of bisexuality or bisexual relationships.
- Bisexual identity was often reported to be invisible, but particularly when bisexual people are in relationships. This was because other people assumed that bisexual people were either straight or gay based on the gender of a current partner
- There is no one type of 'bisexual relationship' and instead participants identified how their relationships might be arranged differently from those of other people
- These bisexual people wanted their sexuality to be validated and made visible – and there were lots of different ways people tried to achieve this.

Stereotypes about bisexuality

Most participants reported negative stereotypes about bisexuality and bisexual people. The most commonly reported stereotypes were that bisexuality is not a valid identity, and that bisexual people are confused, attention seeking, promiscuous, and incapable of being faithful. Many of these stereotypes have been around for a long time, but our participants awareness of them indicated that they continue to exist - both within lesbian and gay communities and the wider culture:

Some of the lesbian community are, I guess understandably, a little bit wary [of bisexuality] because, you know, some of them perhaps don't recognise it as a valid sexuality in itself. They sort of see it as more of a transition, so they think 'ok, so you've tried being gay and that didn't work out?' Like 'no, I've always been as I am' [...] Conversely if you're sort of going into male heterosexual circles, a lot of them have associated it with titillation, that sort of meme in porn, which is really not a flattering one, and there's all kinds of associations that you must be promiscuous (*Lucy, woman, 40, relationship with a man*)

We were particularly struck by how easily participants were able to recite these ideas:

They'll say they'll never date a bisexual girl, or "oh that just means your gay and you're too scared of saying it", "oh that means you're straight and you just want to experiment", "oh do you mean you're just confused?", "you haven't decided", "but don't all bisexual girls cheat on people", "oh but aren't all bisexual girls sluts?" or "oh do you want to have a threesome" (*Kate Slater, woman, 22, relationship with a woman*)

These negative ideas were a lot more prominent than *positive* ideas of bisexuality. Lots of our

participants said they found it hard to give an example of a widespread positive understanding of bisexuality, although some reported that they felt more accepted within LGBT+ spaces than they had in the past.

Educating others and explaining bisexuality

Lots of our participants reported that stereotypes seemed to inform others' understandings of bisexuality. In particular, participants had encountered prospective (and current) partners whose understandings of bisexuality were based on notions of bisexual people as hypersexual and promiscuous. This commonly linked to the idea that bisexual women would want to have threesomes. Participants described how they had corrected the assumption that this was what bisexuality was all about:

It's like the, inverted commas, "slutty bisexual" [laughs] and that idea that you can't be monogamous if you're bisexual [...] "Are you up for a threesome then?" and I'm like "no I'm not". Every time I've come out in long-term relationships, I've been like "no that's not something I want to do [...] I think that's something that's frustrating and annoying (*Piper, nonbinary, 19, relationship with a man*)

Others told us how they had spent time reassuring partners that they really were bisexual, that they were capable of being faithful, and that they could be satisfied in their relationships:

[Some men] think that you can only be one way or another [straight or gay] and that you're going to run off and leave them for a woman or something like that, because that's who you really are. Or, I don't know, if you're seeing a guy and then [if] you are no longer in that relationship, and then you're in a relationship with a woman, they might sort of go "I was such a terrible person that I turned him off men forever and now he's with a woman" (*Daniel, man, 32, relationships with a man and a woman*)

Our participants defended against negative stereotypes of bisexuality because these did not fit with their understandings and lived experiences of bisexuality. This meant that they corrected others' misconceptions about bisexuality and were engaged in repeatedly educating others and explaining what bisexuality meant to them.

The erasure and invisibility of bisexuality in relationships

These bisexual participants also reported that others (mis)interpreted their sexuality based on the gender of a current partner. If participants were known to be in a relationship with someone of the same gender as themselves, then others sometimes assumed they were gay or lesbian. If participants were known to be in a relationship with a partner of a *different* gender to themselves, others assumed they were straight:

We [Stephanie and her partner] were known as just 'the lesbian couple' (*Stephanie, woman, 19, relationship with a bisexual woman*)

Whenever I tell people I'm really interested in LGBT stuff the first thing they'll

ask is “but you’re not L, G, B or T?” Because they know I have a boyfriend so they assume I’m straight. So, I’m just like, why can’t I be one of the four [LGBT] ...they’ve never been like “are you bisexual?” or whatever, because I have a boyfriend [...] they just assume I’m straight (*Aidan, woman, 21, relationship with a man*)

Some participants who were in relationships with someone of a different gender stressed that whilst they understood that ‘passing’ as heterosexual could be perceived to be a privilege, it was also challenging in terms of their bisexuality becoming invisible:

I’m non-binary, so no relationship that I’m ever in is really an opposite sex relationship in the traditional sense. So, what I guess I gain in not dealing with homophobic abuse, I lose in... people not respecting or acknowledging my identity exists and the revolving door of coming out forever and ever and ever, telling people that I’m bi, because I’m in relationship where I’m perceived to be straight (*AJ, nonbinary, 27, relationship with a man*)

Other participants also reported that they had to repeatedly ‘come out’ to correct (mis)assumptions about their identities based on others (mis)reading their sexuality through their relationships. In effect, our participants ‘relationship status’ often meant that their bisexual identities were at risk of being erased.

There’s not a just one type of ‘bisexual relationship’

We asked people about how they arranged their relationships. Participants told us that they drew ideas about different types of relationships from a range of sources including friends, family, and discussions on the Internet. Some participants celebrated the range of options open to bisexual people and the conscious choices they had made in building relationships in ways which suited them:

It’s not that my code about being bisexual allows me to have different relationships, no, I just feel freer because I don’t have to follow your not-real rules (laughs). Even if I do! (*Sophia, woman, 23, relationship with a man*)

Some participants were in consensually non-monogamous or polyamorous relationship. For those in multiple relationships this often involved making decisions about (and keeping a track of) ‘coming out’ both as bisexual *and* as non-monogamous or polyamorous:

Being poly gives me a lot more opportunities to come out, and it gives me reasons to. I literally have to keep a log of who knows about [my boyfriend] because... I could come across as completely [heterosexual] because they would just assume instantly, if I said I was just with [my girlfriend], they would just assume I was a lesbian. Before, I was in two different gender relationships, I didn’t have to come out and I very, very rarely did. And it’s hard for me to talk about bisexuality without bringing poly into it now (*Michelle, woman, 22, in relationships with 2 men and a woman*)

Some participants were in relationships with people who were trans and non-binary, or sought to have relationships that were less rigidly organised around traditional heterosexual gender roles. They reported that their bisexual relationships enabled them and their partners to explore and express different gender roles and identities, outside heterosexual norms.

Me being queer makes it feel a lot safer for him to ... have told me how he identifies and for him to feel ... to feel safe and like, he's going to be loved whatever *(Rose, woman, 28, relationship with [closeted] trans woman)*

Overall, there were lots of ways to be bisexual and be in a relationship and it seemed that bisexuality opened up potential opportunities for different ways of doing relationships.

Making bisexuality visible and valid within and beyond relationships

Lots of participants talked about how they wanted to keep their bisexual identity present and visible in their relationships and their wider lives and some participants reported strategies that they engaged in to try to do so. One way in which participants made their bisexuality a part of their relationships was to talk about their ongoing attractions to people of more than one gender with their current partners:

It's just nice to be able to talk honestly and not have a secret. I guess it sounds really trivial and I feel really silly, but just to be able to say 'oh, I quite fancy Kristen Stewart' or something daft...I should be able to do that I think, in the same way I can say I really like Robert Downey Jr or whatever. *(Toni, woman, 28, relationship with a man)*

For all our participants, it was really important to them that their partners acknowledged and celebrated their identity as bisexual people. This happened in different ways and to different degrees. Participants gave us examples of some of these instances which were most important to them. These ranged from occasions where talking about bisexuality and the importance of their identity was welcomed and celebrated within their relationships, to times when partners corrected other people who made (mis)assumptions about their sexuality, to advocating for bisexual people and their inclusion in professional and social contexts:

[My girlfriend] loves to have those conversations [about bisexual identity]. And she loves to talk to me about it, and it's fun. *(Kate Slater, woman, 22, relationship with a woman)*

He'll correct people for me. Because most people we'll talk to know [I'm bisexual and nonbinary] and he's like, 'no, you'll use the right words' or whatever *(Piper, nonbinary, 19, relationship with a man)*

The bisexual people we spoke with all highlighted these kinds of validation and support as hallmarks of a relationship they felt positive about. Almost all of the people we spoke to also reported making a conscious effort to watch LGBTQ films, read LGBTQ books, and go to LGBTQ events in order to keep their bisexuality present in their wider lives:

I think that the [LGBT] book group is important to me because it connects me to queer history and other queer people who changed things so that they could, so that I could be who I am now (*AJ, nonbinary, 27, relationship with a man*)

Talking about bisexuality and participating in LGBTQ and bisexual community and culture played a big role in helping bi people respond to invisibility which they understood as providing them with more of a sense of a positive and visible bisexual identity.

What next?

Now that all the interviews have been conducted we will be analysing the data and reporting the findings in more depth in an academic paper. We will also be making recommendations, which will include the need for:

- More research focusing on bisexuality and relationships, including diverse groups of bisexual people in a range of different relationship types, to build on our existing knowledge
- More research exploring how bisexual stereotypes impact on bisexual people's lives to increase knowledge about how bisexual people are impacted by, and respond to, negative conceptualisations of bisexuality.
- Bisexual people's wellbeing as a key priority for healthcare and relationship initiatives
- Increased focus on strategies to legitimise bisexuality and efforts to ensure that bisexuality and bisexual people are socially and culturally visible
- Counselling provision tailored to be able to support bisexual people, particularly in relation to experiences of marginalisation, discrimination, exclusion, and feeling invisible.

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