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Bisexualities

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This entry introduces the topic of *bisexualities*, which can be broadly defined as emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to people of more than one sex/gender. To consider bisexualities is important in part because it allows for the exploration and interrogation of how all sexual identity categories are constructed. To give a sense of the commonality of bisexuality, according to recent reports, approximately 3.5% of U.S. adults identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and around half of those (1.8%) identify as bisexual. United Kingdom estimates are lower, suggesting that 0.5% identify as bisexual.

The current entry explores the theoretical underpinnings and complexities of bisexual identities since the late 1800s to the present day. It then briefly focuses on other people's (mis)understandings of bisexuality and bisexual marginalization, or *biphobia*.

A History of Theorizing (Bi)Sexual Identities

Same-sex relationships have been documented in historical writings and literature since at least the Victorian era. These relationships included intimate or romantic friendships between women often prior to, or alongside, their marriage to a man, although it is less clear whether these relationships would have been sexual. What has been established is that sexual *behavior* was not considered to indicate anything about sexual *identity* until the end of the 19th century. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the meanings of sexual behavior and relationships have evolved over time.

The turn from behavior to identity has been attributed to the work of early sexologists such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, Henry Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud, all of whom began theorizing and writing about sex in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Early sexologists initially conceptualized sexuality in relation to the gender of the person. Ulrichs (1825–1895) was a lawyer who developed a theory of the third sex or *uranism*, proposed as an "explanation" and category for lesbians, gay men, and transgender people. In this "inversion model," homosexual men were considered to be female minds or souls trapped in male bodies and homosexual women vice versa.

Psychiatrist and sexologist Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), sometimes labeled the "founding father" of sexology, also theorized homosexuality as inverted masculinity and femininity and conceptualized lesbians as "masculine" and gay men as "effeminate." It is clear how these notions persist today through images of "butch lesbians" and "camp gay men," which reflect the pervasive and persistent influence that "inversion" theories have had within Western culture. However, some contemporary scholars have pointed out that these sexologists created a binary model of sexuality.

Binary models of sexuality only account for the possibility of two sexualities—heterosexuality and homosexuality. The inversion theories developed by early sexologists positioned heterosexual men and women as directly opposite to each other, and homosexual men and women as opposite to each other *and* to heterosexual men and women, respectively. When masculinity and femininity and homosexuality and heterosexuality are understood as direct opposites, within what has been termed the heterosexual matrix, then gender and sexuality become conceptualized as dichotomous. It is difficult to locate bisexuality within this either/or model. Scholars have

argued that these binary models contribute to the dismissal of bisexuality and bisexual people.

Physician Hirschfeld (1868–1935) first considered bisexual people (termed psychic/physical hermaphrodites) to be those with male and female characteristics that would recede during the course of development. However, reflecting the shift from gender identity to sexual identity, the term *bisexual* also came to refer to those who were sexually attracted to both males and females. Sexologists had various biological and social theories regarding bisexuality, including that bisexuality was the starting point from which both heterosexuality and homosexuality evolved (with "same-sex" attraction receding in heterosexual development and "other-sex" attraction receding in homosexual development). It has also been argued that Freud (1856–1939) believed that all humans had a bisexual disposition.

Bisexuality, then, has been theorized alongside homosexuality since the work of these early sexologists. Their work saw a turn away from an early focus on gender toward the creation of sexual identities—with individuals' behaviors as the defining characteristic of sexual identity. Critically, these sexologists set up a binary understanding of sexuality that omitted bisexuality and introduced notions of bisexuality as a temporary stage of human sexual development. It is these theories that created the underpinnings of our present-day understandings of sexuality.

Contemporary Understandings of Bisexual Identities

Some contemporary definitions of bisexuality stay close to the conceptalizations of early sexologists, while other versions resist and move beyond their binary understandings. What all these ideas have in common is that they are affirmative of the notion of people being attracted to more than one gender.

Bisexuality as a Third Identity

While identity is often defined by sexual behavior (the acts in which we engage), bisexual people may prefer to define their sexuality based on attraction (the feelings we have toward others). Accordingly, bisexual identity has sometimes been defined as a capacity to be emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to *both* men and women. In this understanding, bisexual identity becomes a third sexual identity category in addition to heterosexuality and lesbian/gay identities. It is also fundamentally similar to them in being a fixed and permanent form of identification. However, it does nonetheless differ in that the person is *bi*sexual, not *mono*sexual (i.e., the assumption that attraction can only be in one direction—toward either men *or* women; attraction to more than one gender is not considered a possibility). Bisexual people are attracted to more than one sex/gender and therefore do not fit within a monosexual model of attraction.

During the 1950s, pioneering sexologist Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956) was the first to introduce the idea of sexuality as a continuum. Heterosexuality and homosexuality were positioned at opposite ends of Kinsey's 7-point scale, which ranged from *exclusive heterosexuality* (0) to *exclusive homosexuality* (6), with attraction to both sexes in the middle. This model was revolutionary in challenging the assumption that homosexuality and heterosexuality were mutually exclusive, and in creating space in between these two identities where bisexuality could potentially be positioned. However, binary

understandings of sexuality continued to be upheld because bisexuality could only be defined *in relation to* heterosexuality and homosexuality and therefore relied on these categories to exist.

When bisexuality is understood as a third identity "in between" heterosexuality and homosexuality, then bisexual people can claim a stable identity position and have the option to identify as a collective social group. This can be useful in attempts to achieve inclusion for bisexual people (in laws and equality agendas), which can help make bisexuality more visible and validated—a strategy that served gay men and lesbians well during the gay rights movement. However, it also relies on bisexuality being located within the same binary understandings that were developed by the early sexologists who traditionally dismissed and overlooked bisexuality.

Breaking Down the Binaries

Bisexuality has also been defined as a fluid sexuality that has the capacity to challenge and break down binary understandings of gender and sexuality. Common critiques of Kinsey's scale arise from the idea that bisexuality is "in the middle" of a single scale of heterosexuality and homosexuality. This has led to interpretations of bisexuality as equal attraction to men and women and as unidimensional. While some bisexual people feel equally attracted to men and women, others do not, and they reject the idea of sexuality as being pinned to a fixed midpoint. Instead they see their attractions as fluid and open to flux and change over their lifetimes. Further, some consider bisexuality to be multidimensional. During the late 1970s, psychiatrist Fritz Klein (1932–2006) tried to capture these notions in his 21-point scale, which measured past, present, and ideal behaviors on scales of attraction, behavior, fantasy, lifestyle, emotional and social preference, and self-identification.

Bisexual people may also challenge binaries by rejecting the idea of only two sexes/genders, instead recognizing multiple sexes/genders including trans identities. In these more fluid understandings of bisexuality, notions of stable and fixed identity categories such as "men" and "women" and "homosexual" and "heterosexual" begin to be called into question. Some acknowledge this by using alternative identity labels such as *pansexual*.

When bisexuality is considered as fluidity there can be an attempt to specifically affirm the existence of bisexuality in its own right, instead of in contrast to other sexualities. However, if fluidity is defined as a spectrum or space between homosexuality and heterosexuality, then these categories remain and the binary is maintained. On the other hand, if these categories are rejected entirely, then a wider challenge to identity is posed in which the logical conclusion is the rejection of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and therefore, eventually, of bisexuality itself.

Bye-Bye Bisexuality?

Perhaps the most radical way in which bisexuality has been defined is when traditional identity labels *are* explicitly rejected and instead the term *queer* is embraced. During the early 1990s, philosopher Judith Butler and others critiqued binary divisions of sex, gender, and sexuality, demonstrating that these are socially constructed and that they (and the assumed inherent links between them) can therefore be destabilized and deconstructed. In queer accounts, identities such as bisexuality and transgender trouble conventional stable and binary understandings of sexuality and gender. Some

individuals embrace this perspective, and prefer to identify their sexuality as queer rather than as bisexual.

However, the deconstruction of these categories leaves no identity labels with which to articulate a shared sense of identity. This makes it that much more challenging to create communities and shared solidarities. In turn, this limits the opportunities for political strategies that aim to emancipate a group, leading to a risk of continual stigmatization. This means a risk of perpetual invisibility for bisexual people, who without a distinct identity label to unite around, disappear entirely. Further, even to talk about sexuality generally requires drawing on the only available language, which is rooted in the very binary models it critiques and rejects.

(Mis)Understandings of Bisexuality

How bisexual people make sense of and define their own identities may also be influenced by their own beliefs and by whether they are involved in lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual communities. Research and theory has focused not only on how bisexual people understand their identities but also on how others (mis)understand bisexuality. There are a number of misconceptions about bisexuality, often arising from binary models of sexuality that simplify, overlook, and/or dismiss the existence of bisexuality. Bisexuality has been considered a stigmatized and marginalized identity and conceptualized as invalidated or invisible. Bisexual people may experience biphobia from both heterosexual and lesbian/gay populations, a phenomenon that has sometimes been termed *double discrimination*.

One key misconception about bisexuality is that it does not really exist and that women who claim to be bisexual are purely performing same-sex behaviors (such as kissing) in order to titillate and attract heterosexual men. Others consider bisexuality to be a temporary state and position bisexual people as really heterosexual or lesbian/gay people who have yet to “make up their minds” or “pick a side.” This may be exacerbated by developmental models of sexuality that position bisexuality as a part of identity development. While this can hold true for some lesbians and gay men, who may temporarily identify as bisexual before later claiming a lesbian or gay identity, for others bisexual identities are valid and enduring.

Another assumption is that bisexual people are equally attracted to men and women. (While some bisexual people may be, not all are.) Further, some believe that because bisexual people are attracted to more than one gender, they must therefore have to have multiple (and simultaneous) sexual relationships to “be bisexual.” However, behavior is not a prerequisite of identity, and heterosexual people are rarely required to “prove” their sexuality. Many bisexual people have positioned their identity based on attraction (rather than behavior) and may never have engaged in a sexual relationship either at all, or with more than one gender.

Similarly, the idea that bisexual people are attracted to “anyone and everyone” has meant that bisexual people’s ability to be committed and monogamous has been questioned. However, current relationship status does necessarily indicate identity, and many bisexual people do continue to identify as bisexual within stable monogamous relationships. Notions of non-monogamy have caused further stigmatization for bisexual people, especially during the early era of HIV/AIDS, when their (assumed) sexual behaviors were linked with sexually transmitted diseases. Other bisexual people may

have multiple relationships that are non-monogamous or polyamorous. However, research has shown that openness and honesty (rather than cheating and lying) are highly valued.

These (mis)understandings can have negative consequences for bisexual people's sense of self and mental and physical well-being. In summary, there are a range of understandings and misunderstandings of bisexuality that are likely to impact whether, or how, people define themselves as bisexual and their experiences of bisexual identification.

See alsoBiphobia; Bisexuality, Female; Bisexuality, Male; Pansexuality; Polyamory; Queer; Sexual-Identity Labels

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