

OSCILLATION: A LIFE-STORIES ANALYSIS OF WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCE BISEXUALITY

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“Be open and just don’t care too much about... don’t put so much doubt on yourself...the discourse about sexual orientation will put you in doubt sometimes because you always feel like you have to draw a conclusion about your identity, but just don’t care about it so much and just let go and be open to things!” (Diane)

“She broke up with me because she fell in love with a man,” Tori told me a few days ago; “and how do you feel,” I asked in an attempt to comfort her. “I feel betrayed,” she said, “and I just hope that one day she will realize that she is truly gay and will come back to me.” “But Tori, what if she’s bisexual?” I asked, but Tori set me straight: “No, that can’t be!” In other words, bisexuality can’t be, or, better yet, it mustn’t be. It causes betrayal, anxiety, and messes with a system that gives comfort and safety. In that system, no woman leaves another woman for a man, because a woman is either gay or straight. But is she really?

Bisexual subjectivity has been part of the lived experiences of many people, with as much legitimacy as any other for the ones who experience it. However, bisexuals move in a binary gender system which implies two strict sexual orientations (heterosexuality and homosexuality) based on which specific identities are created (straights, lesbians and gays). Thus, people who experience bisexual

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“Just let go and be open to things”

subjectivity cross the boundaries of this system and shake its very core – heteronormativity, homonormativity and monosexuality. The consequences of this positioning or, better said, un-positioning, are multiple and vary between seeing bisexuals as experimenters, transitioning, abusing heterosexual privilege or unable to commit. Another important consequence of the taboo of bisexuality is its rather reduced representation and analysis within the academic discourses on sexuality, which can be proved by the limited number of studies on bisexuality compared with the ones on homosexuality (if curious, one should just make a quick search in the catalogues of university libraries).

HOW CAN WE TALK ABOUT BISEXUALITY?

Contextualizing bisexuality in contemporary debates

Limited research doesn't mean there is no research on this issue. The contemporary debates on bisexuality stand as proof for the complexity of this reality. The existing academic approaches include varied angles of analysis like the history of bisexuality (Angelides 2001, Storr 1999), bisexual politics (Eadie 1993, Garber 1995), bisexual epistemologies (Pramaggiore 1996, Hemmings 1995) and bisexual subjectivity (Ault 1996, Clausen 1990, Garber 1995, Shokeid 2001).

Bisexuality is seen as an epistemological boundary between and/or beyond sexual categories (Storr, 1999). According to Pramaggiore (1996 in Storr 1999: 146), bisexual epistemologies are “ways of apprehending, organizing and intervening in the world that refuse one-to-one correspondences between sex acts and identity, between erotic objects and sexualities, between identification and desire.” In other words, bisexual epistemologies go beyond the either/or structure by acknowledging “fluid desires and their continual construction and deconstruction of the desiring object” (Pramaggiore 1996 in Storr 1999: 146).

This fluidity that goes beyond the restrictive binary is contested by a lesbian and gay identity politics, based on clear cut categories. It “unsettles certainties: straight, gay, lesbian” (Garber, 1995: 70) and creates anxiety because it is not easily classifiable (George 1993 in Storr 1999: 102). Theorists of (bi)sexual politics (Rubin 1991, Eadie 1993) look at how this uncertainty is translated in terms of heteronormative and homonormative sexual agendas based on creating a moral enemy – in this case the bisexual – that engenders the safety of spaces and legitimizes his/her/hir exclusion; “the anxieties centred on bisexuality can be read as expressing a very real fear of the collapse of a symbolic system: the heterosexual/homosexual dyad” (Eadie 1993 in Storr 1999: 130).

This hetero/homonormative construction of the bisexual influences the way bisexuality is experienced on a daily basis. Bisexuality is an ambiguous social construction, which translates into ambiguous, different and often conflicting lived experiences. According to Foucault (in Downing 2008: 106), “the subject with a knowable identity is the effect of the operations of regimes of truth”. Thus, the regulatory discourses on heterosexual, gay, lesbian and bisexual realities influence the way bisexuality is lived, accepted or negated.

To start with, bisexuality is characterized by what Eadie (1993 in Storr 1999: 120) calls a “definitional incoherence”; in other words, there seems to be almost no consensus on what it means to be a bisexual or to experience bisexuality. George (1993 in Storr 1999: 102) points out some aspects of this complexity:

“[T]here are many different situations which may lead a woman to wonder if ‘bisexual’ is really the term to describe her feelings. If she has had many relationships with men for instance, and then falls for a woman, was she really always a lesbian? If she is much more interested in one sex than the other (although she still likes both) is she still a bisexual? If she has only had relationships with people of one sex, but has strong desires for, sexual fantasies about, or deep and exciting emotional attachments to people of the other, can she say she is bisexual?”

At this point, a new question arises: is this lack of definition giving space for expression and variation of lived experiences or creating frustration and lack of guidance? According to George (1993 in Storr 1999: 101), “the advantages of taking on an identity (as opposed to being labeled by others) are clear: an individual can work out for herself what it means to be bisexual... can regard it as positive rather than negative, can work to create a culture in which her sexuality is validated”; in other words, assuming a bisexual identity means working on a common definition, lifestyle and values. However, “creating categories fixes sexuality, which for many individuals is a fluid concept” (George 1993 in Storr 1999: 101), controlling and disciplining individuals, giving legitimacy to certain bisexual experiences and not to others. Moreover, any identity construction is “arbitrary, unstable and exclusionary... [and] consists in disciplinary and regulatory structures” (Seidman 1997: 92-93). Thus, the “definitional incoherence” of bisexuality leaves space for agency and exploration, and “the less culturally structured a particular sexual practice is, the greater the variety of scripts that will begin to emerge around it” (Gagnon et al 1998: 101).

On the other hand, a bisexual identity, as exclusionary or arbitrary as it may be, is part of many bisexual lived experiences. Through assuming and living an identity in general, and a bisexual identity in particular, people are not only being controlled or normalized, but they also enact their agency and reverse the regulatory discourses (in this case the heteronormative and homonormative ones), claiming their own space in the sexual strata, making themselves visible for others and claiming legitimacy for their experiences. Thus, the bisexual label, like any other, involves both conformity and liberation.

In the mid-1980s, Weinberg et al (1998: 169) interviewed 93 self-identified bisexuals from San Francisco and concluded that “becoming bisexual involves a special problem of meaning and adjustment, it requires the rejection of not one, but two recognized categories of sexual identity: heterosexual and homosexual”. According to the researchers, the last stage in assuming a bisexual identity is the “continued uncertainty”, when “even after having discovered and applied the label ‘bisexual’ to themselves, and having

come to the point of apparent self-acceptance, they still experienced continued intermittent periods of doubt and uncertainty regarding their sexual identity” (Weinberg et al 1998: 176).

Therefore, despite the comfort that people find in a bisexual identity and despite the certainties and order that labels are supposed to create, bisexuality does the exact opposite, which is strongly related to its definitional incoherence. According to Weinberg et al, while the gay/lesbian label involves assuming a certain lifestyle like subscribing to the gay subculture and its ideologies, for those ascribing to a bisexual identity “there are no informal rules about how much same-sex versus opposite sex interaction one should have, whether relationships should be simultaneous or sequential, or generally how to relate and interact with both men and women in a sexual/emotional way” (Weinberg et al 1998: 180).

In conclusion, definitional incoherence and continued uncertainty seem to be the main features of becoming and being bisexual. They characterize the context in which individuals negotiate, narrate, explain, assume, reject and/or subvert the trajectories of their sexuality in general, and bisexuality in particular. Moreover, both of these characteristics leave space for exploration, variety and finding a space.

Bisexual subjectivity is a narrative, a story unfolding in time and space

Bisexuality thus becomes “a process of growth, transformation and surprise, not a knowable and stable state of being” (Garber 1995: 66). In other words, bisexual subjectivity is a narrative, a story unfolding in time and space. This story unfolding, the “how” of living bisexuality, can be captured using a life-stories approach, addressing (bi)sexual subjectivity as “a discursively constructed self [...] understood as being constituted by a series of shifting, insecure and incommensurable subject positions” (Bryant & Schofield 2007: 322).

Looking at Bisexuality through Life Stories

As a research method, life story (or life history) “is a powerful means of capturing the dynamic and conflicting experiences of the sexual subject... [it] capture[s] the way in which individuals move

through life, revealing how subjects are produced or made over time” (Bryant & Schofield, 2007: 322). Moreover, approaching sexuality as life story means “not only the emphasis on participants as active agents engaged in interpreting the meanings of discourses available to them, it also involves recognition of the role of agential practice in altering the social patterns of sexual practice that develop over time” (330). In other words, using life stories as a research method tracks the way bisexuality is experienced in any of its forms in the course of one’s sexual life.

Another important aspect of using life stories as a method is the function of memory and the authenticity of what is recollected through that memory, as “life story work involves recollecting, remembering, rediscovering, along with the active processes of memorializing and constructing history” (Plummer 2001: 401). However, according to Diamond (2006: 477-478) memories are dynamic and influenced by the individuals’ present goals, self-perception and self-identifications, thus what matters is not looking for consistency as a proof of authenticity and truth, but “what is it about this particular scenario or memory that has given it such prominence as a core feature of this individual’s narrative sense of self?” These strategies enable looking at how people make sense of their experiences and how they develop “a conscious, or even unconscious, strategy for self-presentation, a legitimation of moves and counter-moves and of projections for the future” (Knudsen 1990: 122).

In her criticism of Plummer’s typology of life stories, Storr (1999: 315) argues that bisexual life stories fit Plummer’s description of postmodernist stories as they are concentrated around fragmentation and not a sexual core, being “full of indeterminacies, multiple possibilities and multiple choices, and recount the blurring or changing of identities.” Nevertheless, they embody the collapse of grand narratives, in this case the ones of homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Thus, bisexuality is not a linear narrative (Michel 1996) and not all bisexuals have to get from point A to point B in order to reach a ‘complete’ sexual development. Hence, life stories as a method

provide the proper framework for looking at the struggles and fragmentations contributing to the sense of self and being in the world for people experiencing bisexuality.

HOW DO WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCE BISEXUALITY LIVE THE TRAJECTORIES OF THEIR SEXUALITIES?

These struggles and fragmentations as part of experiencing bisexuality had been addressed in the life stories of seven young women, aged between 22 and 27, living in Amsterdam. The ways they experience bisexuality stand as proof for the complexity of such a lived experience, varying from having been sexually and emotionally involved with people of similar genders to having been sexually and emotionally involved with only men, but having strong desires also for women.

Bisexuality as lived experience

Bisexuality becomes part of one's trajectory in different ways and at different moments in one's sexual and emotional development.

For some it is a recent discovery, triggered by a new sexual and/or emotional attraction; "there was this girl in that class... and she was just hot in general... and I thought about her more and I started fantasizing a bit... I [was] constantly flirting and making small advances... I was completely the way I acted around men and I was doing that with her" (Isis).

The same happened to Monica: "around June last year... [a friend] told me she was a lesbian and I was like, yeah, I think I might be bisexual as well...and that's when I started to think about it, and also I had a little bit of a crush on her and that kind of developed the whole thing."

For others, experiencing bisexuality has always been part of their lives "I always knew that I liked girls and didn't think it was weird or something and later on I was like oh, I like boys as well,

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so it was just a given in my life” (Layla); “it was always like this... so already when I was younger, I don’t know what age it started, but I knew” (Laura). Kendra also admits experiencing bisexuality from a younger age: “I think I always had crushes on girls,” but it was something she put aside until “coming here [to Amsterdam] and having like a space to explore and having an opportunity for people to ask me or be curious about my sexuality” (Kendra).

Furthermore, bisexuality can be part of one’s trajectory for a limited period of time. Jane perceived herself as bisexual until she discovered more inclusive ways of describing her sexuality, such as pansexual. For Diane, her sexuality moved back and forth from lesbian to bisexual, up to a point where she feels attracted to both labels as part of her sexual trajectory, but she is also critical about them “I feel a little bit attached to both labels... but I feel a little bit of a distance between the categories and myself, and in the end it is practice that matters, and not how you name it” (Diane).

Realizing and accepting bisexual desires as part of the sexual trajectory often involves a mixture of excitement, confusion and panic. The process of acceptance makes an interesting case: for Monica and Isis, realizing their attraction to women was a recent discovery, past the age of 20, when they already had a support system composed mainly of friends; “so I called a friend and I said okay, I have to tell you something, I have no idea and I am panicking and freaking out and you have to comfort me... so I told her... and she said well, that happens to a lot of people, why are you freaking out?” (Isis). This helped them accept their new desires as part of their sexuality easier and faster; “we would start going out to lesbian parties together here in Amsterdam” (Monica).

On the other hand, for Layla and Laura these dual desires have always been there and they grew up having to make sense of them; this hardened the acceptance process because of the social restrictions imposed by the heteronormative environments they grew up in and the lack of support systems. Layla accepted her attraction to women, but experienced it with fear and secrecy. “I couldn’t do

that [flirting] in public with women because nobody could know,” she admits. For Laura, self-acceptance came much later on, when she developed a support system made of close friends. “Acceptation, I think it was two years ago when I met different people like my boyfriend because he is really open about stuff as well... and he said hey, it’s okay, it’s just the way you are... so he really helped me accept it....and now I just try to think about and accept everything” (Laura).

This mixture of feelings and the process of self-acceptance led to the need to make sense of a new developing self. “I had to rediscover who I was and what my interests were in general in life” (Isis). For most of the respondents, having a support system where they could share their new self-discoveries helped them give meaning to the various aspects of their sexual trajectories.

Once they incorporated these dual desires as part of their trajectories, they started coming out to the people around. For Layla, Isis, Monica, Laura and Kendra, coming out had a liberating effect. “For me it was enough to just talk about it at that moment” (Laura); “and then, yeah, afterwards I told everybody” (Layla). For Jane coming out was a natural step in her development: “it didn’t seem that strange to me that I liked women because my sister is gay, so I grew up with her and her girlfriends and it never really seemed unnatural to me.” Diane saw it as helpful at the beginning and restrictive later on: “I don’t like to bring it up because in a way you are reproducing the idea that you have to identify with something.” Talking about their desires to others helped in reaching a certain level of internal coherence and overcome the fears and anxieties. However, this level of comfort that was reached in the development of these seven young women was often shaken by the fact that coming out was a never-ending process through which they faced various reactions that led to experiencing contradictory feelings.

The reactions discussed came from family members, friends, work colleagues and gay, lesbian, and queer group members. For Monica, Layla and Kendra, the reactions of family members consisted of an understanding of bisexuality as a period of experimentation. “[They think] I only do this because I am in my student

years and I am experimenting and this will all be over,” Monica notes. For Jane and Laura, family reactions consisted of support and understanding: “my mum actually embraced it and met my girlfriend at that time” (Jane). The friends of Layla, Jane and Laura had positive reactions, while Monica distinguished between her acquaintances who were easy to talk to and her close friends who had a harder time in understanding her changed desires because “they have a very rigid idea of who you are and what’s supposed to fit with that” (Monica).

There are two very important common reactions of family members and friends. Firstly, it is believed that bisexuality is a stage in which young people experiment and that eventually ends by them making a monosexual decision, which will automatically invalidate their bisexuality. Secondly, bisexuality comes with behavioural expectations: one is granted validity as bisexual if there has been involvement with both men and women, preferably an equal number of both. Otherwise, the validity of a self-claimed bisexual identity is seriously questioned by family and/or friends, as exemplified in a statement made by Layla’s mum: “how do you know you’re a bisexual if you never fell in love with a woman?”

In their working environments Isis, Layla and Monica are faced with curiosity from their peers – “[I am perceived] as a novelty, haha” (Monica) – and with humour – “there’s always certain jokes and kind of male fantasies that are spoken of considering two women going together, but not really bad judgments” (Isis). In gay, lesbian or queer groups Kendra and Monica received different reactions: from bisexuality understood as a transitioning phase towards a homosexual identity – “Sometimes they’re like oh, yeah, I went through that phase too... and it’s gonna be fine, I know where you’re at, or they’re just like ‘oooooh,’ and walk away” (Kendra) – to understanding and acceptance – “I have a lot of gay friends who are cool with it and identify with it in a lot of ways” (Kendra); “I think most people in the queer scene go with it” (Monica).

All these reactions made my respondents experience various feelings such as lack of acceptance, uncertainty, discomfort, and periodically comfort. The latter is the least prevalent in the discourses

of my respondents, while the other feelings help my respondents express agency in claiming space and validity for their sexualities against the discourses that normalize them. “It makes me very angry, it makes me feel that I am not accepted in their lives and categories and their perception of the world and it makes me feel that they are the ones who are ignorant of people and life in general” (Isis).

These various ways of experiencing bisexuality demonstrate the complexity of such a lived experience and its lack of linearity. The definitional incoherence (Eadie 1999) and invisibility of bisexuality leads to a contradictory and fragmented lived experience, in which women have space to explore and create their own coherent images of self while at the same time experiencing and making sense of stereotypical reactions to and behavioural expectations from their bisexuality. In this complex process, bisexuality becomes an identity for some, while being rejected as such by others.

Bisexuality as category

When it comes to bisexuality as a category, its definitional incoherence has various implications on individuals’ sexual and emotional trajectories. The context in which bisexuality is lived is characterized by multiple and at times conflicting definitions. “Everybody in the entire world has a different definition of bisexuality... I know quite some bisexual people and they all have very different definitions of it... so I’m like, okay, you can call yourself whatever you want because everybody has his or her own definition” (Layla).

“Everybody in the entire world has a different definition of bisexuality”

In this context women create their own definitions aimed at encompassing the complexity of their desires and lived experiences. The core of these definitions consists of their *desires and the potentiality of acting upon* them rather than the actual behaviour that they had so far. In other words, in the case of my respondents, bisexuality is related to desire and not behaviour; “being attracted to men and women and you could also be in a relationship with both of them and fall in love with them and have sex with them” (Diane). At the moment of the interview

Kendra hadn't had any sexual experiences with women, which did not alter the way she made sense of her bisexuality. "I don't think I have to have had sex with a woman to know that I am interested in doing so, but I am not interested in just fucking any woman just so I can say that I did to validate what other people wanna know" (Kendra). Laura was in the same situation as Kendra and she also rejected the popular behavioural expectation of having to have had sex with both men and women; "for me it means that basically, I like men and women both, but it doesn't mean for me that I need to have sex with women" (Laura).

Moreover, by exerting agency, these women are able to experience their sexual and emotional trajectories in a positive way. "I think for me it means that you are more alive in a sense, because life is always about meeting new people and having new experiences that you didn't think of having beforehand" (Monica). Furthermore, for Diane "it means that you let go of that fear and that you don't mind what other people think about it and that you are open to just overcome those fears...and preconceptions about how things should be or will be" (Diane).

However, having their own inclusive definitions does not mean that all women interviewed actively choose to use bisexuality as an identity. In fact, most of them prove to be ambivalent, having to deal with a conflict generated by their own understanding of bisexuality – feelings and potentiality, versus the understanding of others – the behavioural expectation of having to be involved with both men and women, or the common belief that bisexuality reinforces the gender binary. For example, Isis prefers not to use bisexuality as an identity because of the lack of consensus around its meaning correlated to the fact that her lack of experience with women invalidates any bisexual identification she might have in front of others. Therefore, she prefers describing her sexuality in terms of an attraction to both men and women instead of claiming a bisexual identity; "because I haven't been with that many women, a lot of people don't accept it as a term of who I am... so I usually relate more to the fact that I am attracted to both men and women and see where I end up, leave it more open" (Isis).

To sum up, bisexuality as category leads to a contradictory and fragmented lived experience. Its “definitional incoherence” (Eadie 1999) puts women in the conflicting position of exploring and creating their own senses of self while at the same time dealing with the stereotypical reactions of others and the behavioural expectations from their sexualities. In other words, the “definitional incoherence” (ibid.) encompasses both agency in claiming validity for their sexuality by rejecting the discourses that normalize them, and frustrations and insecurities for not having a common discourse to relate to. This suggests the complexity and lack of linearity that characterize the trajectories of the women interviewed who, even after reaching a certain level of internal coherence, still experience “continued uncertainty” (Weinberg et al 1994).

“The object of desire shifts for women who experience bisexuality”

Sexual desire

According to Gustavson (2009: 408), the modern notions of homosexuality and heterosexuality assume that the gender of the individuals desired impose the sexual orientation, which is a “simplification that hides the fact that sexual pleasure is also situated in other practices, fantasies, artifacts and so on.” Thus, if pleasure is limited to the gender identity of the person desired, “other feelings, experiences or practices won’t be recognized or theorized” (Gustavson 2009: 408), such as the experiences related by the women interviewed to sexual desire. The object of desire shifts for women who experience bisexuality, thus “gender as an object choice is [...] not central to sexual identity” (ibid.).

When talking about their sexual desires, the respondents started describing them in a non-gendered way. Most of them talked about being attracted to the person in general, like Layla: “with men and women it’s just really, I don’t have a specific type, a specific character or appearance that I like, I just fall in love with a person.”

However, despite this non-gendered framework, they do have gendered preferences. According to the interviews, the desire for women is a very strong one, irrespective of the actual sexual

involvement with women. It is interesting how for Monica, for example, although bisexuality entered her sexual trajectory recently, her attraction to women feels more natural than the one for men. “Well, I know... when I am attracted to girls it feels more natural” (Monica). Moreover, Jane mentions that, although she does not limit her attraction to gendered objects, she prefers being involved with women: “I love so many aspects of women and can appreciate so much about women” (Jane).

The features that are preferred in women are diverse and vary from normative descriptions of femininity – “girly girls” (Layla), “what I find really aesthetic is women who have curly hair and maybe even with lipstick, very sophisticated, so not very girly, but womanly” (Diane) – to queer and norm-subverting preferences – “I like women who don’t perform what society tells them to” (Jane). When talking about their desires for men, they mostly used normative descriptions of masculinity; Isis prefers “really dominant, with leadership, but really, it’s a man, like how we would define a real man,” while Diane and Kendra mentioned being attracted to more feminine men: “I think when I fall in love with guys they’re all quite feminine” (Diane).

Thus, the respondents subvert the gender binary by not having gender as a core element separating their objects of desire, while at the same time reinforcing the gender system by using normative descriptions of masculinity and femininity.

The way they act upon their desires proves to be another conflicting aspect of their sexual trajectories. The respondents not only mention experiencing sex differently with men and women, but their involvement in the sexual act also differs according to the gender of the partner. This difference is mainly due to their sexual experience – while Diane, Jane, Monica and Layla have had sex with both men and women, Isis, Kendra and Laura have only had sex with men.

When involved in heterosexual sex, Kendra and Monica aim at subverting it through exploring other ways of mostly non-penetrative sex. “There are lots of times Tim and I don’t have like

penetrative sex and we do a lot of other different things, not necessarily what you would think two heterosexuals would do while having sex... massaging each other or kissing each other or going down on each other” (Kendra). Isis, Laura and Layla enjoy sex with men as it is and don’t feel the need to subvert any prescribed norms, while Diane and Jane sometimes mention missing certain elements involved in traditional heterosexual sex—penetration (Diane) and being submissive (Jane), while having sex with their female partners.

Sex with women comes as a contradictory experience, encompassing feelings of both enthusiasm and insecurity. Kendra, Laura, Isis, Layla and Monica perceive (potential) sexual experiences with women as more intimate through the familiarity with bodies: “with women I’m way more aroused, way hornier because this is my ultimate fantasy since I was born and it was never a possibility” (Layla); “it feels more natural...you have this kind of unspoken level of understanding... with girls it’s easier to relate on a deeper level than with guys... like almost spiritually, that you feel connected spiritually, whereas I don’t have that with guys, not at all actually” (Monica). The insecurity that some respondents experience is due to their reduced sexual experiences with women: “I think the problem that I have is that with women I don’t know what I’m doing, and even though I know what I like people to do with me it doesn’t mean that it works the same way with another person” (Isis).

Thus, sex with men is perceived either in a critical manner because of the heterosexual roles that it involves, or with lack of enthusiasm because of the banality that some respondents see in it “with men it’s just like yeah, we’re gonna have sex, let’s see if it’s good” (Layla). On the other hand, sex with women is talked about or imagined with much more enthusiasm, which is related in most cases to the limited sexual experience with women. However, it is interesting to notice how, despite these differences, their experience with women remains limited due to the barriers that they face in approaching and flirting with women.

Experiencing relationships

Romantic relationships are perceived as safe spaces for sharing desires, needs and feelings: “it’s nice to talk about it and work through it; it’s always nice to... talk about what you feel and want” (Kendra). The respondents have different ways of practicing emotional relationships. Layla, Isis, Diane and Monica prefer monogamous arrangements with their partners, while for Jane, Kendra and Laura these are limiting for their desires.

Except for Jane and Diane, relationships with men are prevalent among my respondents who are aware of the social construction of heterosexuality. Monica and Kendra want to subvert the heteronormative gender roles through the way they practice their relationships. “I am pretty conscious of role patterns and things that are expected of me as a girlfriend that we sometimes fight about” (Monica). Jane feels more equality in relationships with women, claiming “it just doesn’t seem so rigid with women, it

seems more flexible in what we can say to each other or do to each other and sexually it’s more versatile I think, which I like... the power differentials are more equal” (Jane). Laura relates critically to heterosexual arrangements using normative understandings – men hurt women, men cannot express emotions. Monica’s case was especially interesting here: although she talks about her attraction to men as a consequence of culture and the environment she grew up in and she is actively trying to subvert heteronormative gender roles in her relationship, she

is involved with a man who has slightly sexist understandings of her sexuality (getting aroused at the thought of her with another woman); the latter is not perceived as a problem by Monica, rather as something that keeps her bisexuality ‘alive’ while being in a relationship with him. Thus, in her case, although identifying as bisexual, being in a monogamous relationship with a man limits the practice of bisexuality.

Just like in the case of experiencing sex, most of the respondents have an idealized image of the potential romantic relationships

Romantic relationships are perceived as safe spaces for sharing desires, needs and feelings

with women. The power differentials and traditional gender roles that they experienced with men are perceived as resolved in (potential) relationships with women. However, it is interesting how even though romantic involvements with women are perceived as more fulfilling, most of the women interviewed have very limited experience with women due to the barriers they face in pursuing female partners. In other words, perceiving both sex and relationships with women as different as the ones with men accentuates a conflicting and confusing lived experience and keeps it unresolved in terms of practice.

To sum up, the experiences of the women interviewed prove that bisexual subjectivity, with all that it implies, is to be found at the intersection of “definitional incoherence” (Eadie 1999) and “continued uncertainty” (Weinberg et al 1994). Experiencing bisexuality is a contradictory, paradoxical and conflicting lived experience. In other words, the sexual and emotional trajectory of the respondents is not experienced as a linear one, but rather as oscillatory, with agency, comfort and enthusiasm in some contexts and normativity, discomfort and uncertainty in others, in various degrees. This leads to a fragmented lived experience, in which the women interviewed have to give meaning to conflicting aspects and incorporate them into a coherent sense of self. The ways each of them goes through this process vary and prove the complexity of the sexual and emotional trajectories for women who experience bisexuality.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In our contemporary society, bisexuality means dealing with conflicting discourses and living fragmented lives. Heteronormativity, homonormativity and the imperative of monosexuality are constantly making bisexuality invisible by putting the ones who experience it in either straight or gay boxes.

These categories are so embedded in the way we think about sexuality in general, that when one sees two women holding hands on the street, the first thought that comes in mind is that they

are lesbians. Nobody is able to think that one of them, or maybe both, are bisexuals. Being in a lesbian bar means one is interested in women, while being in a straight bar means one is interested in men. Where should bisexual women go and where their sexuality will be perceived as being valid?

Monogamy is another imperative of our society. Some bisexuals find comfort in it, some don't. If, according to my respondents, bisexuality is related to potentiality and feelings, why does a monogamous involvement invalidate their bisexuality in the eyes of the others? Why does bisexuality have to be practiced sexually so that people will know it's there? A single heterosexual woman who actively chooses not to date any men is not practicing her sexual identity, and still nobody denies her heterosexuality. Why would we deny it for bisexual women who choose not to put in practice their desires for both men and women? Why are bisexuals asked to prove themselves by confession on demand, while gays and straights are not? Why is it acceptable to invade their privacy, while respecting it for others?

Taking this discussion a bit further, non-monogamous arrangements are strongly condemned; this is something that not only bisexuals face, but when it comes to them a certain level of promiscuity is always related to their sexuality. How can we condemn people who actively choose to disclose, negotiate and respect their desires in open relationships with their partners, while we tolerate or take pleasure in talking about people's affairs and cheating techniques, are those not promiscuous? How can people demand bisexuals have sex with both genders to prove themselves but at the same time denounce such "promiscuity"?

Bisexuals come
and disrupt the
normative and reg-
ulatory discourses

Society makes it hard. Bisexuals come and disrupt the normative and regulatory discourses; they pose the danger of showing that there is much more out there, more sexual potential to explore, more emotional possibilities. In a society where sexuality has to be normalized through identities and categories, nobody wants disruptions. If one dates a lesbian woman one has to be sure she stays that way. Why

does that matter so much? Relationships, emotional or sexual, involve communication, compromise and negotiation, that's what makes them worthwhile. Why are we accepting partners that fit in normative categories, but not partners that might disrupt them through their desires?

These social contradictions translate into contradictory lived experience for bisexuals, who face barriers on a daily basis while moving between heteronormative and homonormative social fields. I believe that both formal and informal groups that address the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community should pay a closer look to the letter B, which seems to be neglected on their agendas, and should work together with already existing groups addressing bisexuals. In a context where bisexuality seems to be actively ignored, the diversity of sexual desires and behaviours should be made visible and advocated for.

The women interviewed showed agency in claiming a space for their sexualities, but none of them talked about reaching out to a bisexual community, because there was no visible one. Instead, some of them moved between straight and gay communities, while others preferred the queer one. For the former, this lack of community to reach out to accentuated the internal conflicts and made it harder to accept bisexual desires as part of the sexual and emotional trajectory. They were on their own, having to deal with conflicting discourses coming from various groups. Bisexual/LGBT communities should reach out to them, look closely at their lived experiences, create role models and empower young people experiencing bisexuality through inclusive community-based activities that would embrace their sexual and emotional desires and behaviours, providing them with a sense of belonging and pride.

This would be a strategic choice in contexts that demand identities, for people that need them in order to live their trajectories with comfort and enthusiasm. However, any identity construction poses the danger of becoming exclusive. As some of the respondents mentioned, they found comfort in a queer community, where gender and sexuality categories did not matter and where the comfort of living their trajectories came from not having to

use labels and identities. Their experiences prove that sexuality can be enjoyed without having to put a name on it, where desire and behaviour do not determine who one is. This would be a utopian choice towards an ideal world where the focus is not on identity construction, but rather on living and enjoying one's desires in all their diversity, without the limitation of a label.

These two opposite choices, strategic and utopian, very often intersect in the trajectories of people experiencing bisexuality, contributing to their contradictory lived experiences. However, it is these contradictions and learning how to live with them that make people experiencing bisexuality great allies in leading the debate on and away from identity and community, creating a society that opposes the regulation of sexuality and leaves space for exploration and freedom of expression.

The open-end

Kendra, Jane, Isis, Layla, Diane, Monica and Laura have shown strength in facing their conflicting experiences and making sense of them. They have shown courage in speaking up and claiming space and validity for their sexualities among discourses that are actively ignoring them. They have shown force in entering a path of making sense of all aspects of their sexual trajectories, despite the barriers and obstacles they meet on the way. Their ride is not smooth. But smooth rides make for boring stories, and nobody reads those...

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