

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, HEGEMONIC HETERONORMATIVITY AND BISEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the proliferation of sexualities research to have emerged from debates within Social Constructionism and Queer Theory, there is still a limited canon of academic work which specifically explores bisexuality as a sexual identity and, in particular, explores the social stigmas that bisexual women face and how these stigmas are allowed to develop creating a poignant tension between societal attitudes and bisexuality. The author reflects on excerpts from a previous research paper which explored the narratives of bisexual women's experiences in order to sociologise these experiences through the theoretical lenses of Goffman's notion of Stigma, Mead's focus on the symbolic significance of language as well as Foucauldian and Queer theoretical analyses of the socially inscribed characteristics of sexualities. I assert that a renewed Sociological Imagination of bisexuality must be produced in order to cut through the restrictive nature of hegemonic heterosexual and homosexual discourses within which, bisexual women experience the social world.

KEYWORDS:

Bisexuality; social constructionism; sexual identity; social change

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout many contemporary societies, and even within the sociology of marginalised sexualities, bisexuality is somewhat anomalous; it is regarded as invisible or seen as something which it is not; a combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Rust, 2002). The emergence of Queer Theory (de Lauretis, 1991) has been used as a sociological lens to combat hegemonic Heteronormativity; consequently providing more cultural and political space for sexualities to be explored. Nevertheless, it can be argued that it has thus far failed to provide this for bisexuality as a sexual identity. Particularly given that there is limited research into bisexuality as a valid identity particularly in relation to the way that homosexuality and lesbianism has been given credence since the introduction of Queer Theory (Storr 1999). However, bisexuality has been afforded marginally more attention in recent research into sexual identity (Rust, 2002; Kleese, 2005; Angelides, 2007 and Storr 1999) which have engaged many of the issues that affect bisexuals such as bi-invisibility, bi-phobia, negative stereotypes and social attitudes.

Regardless of the attempts of these theorists' insights, social attitudes remain unchanged throughout society. It is for this reason that this paper is concerned with not only the controversy surrounding bisexuality but most importantly how these social attitudes are constructed and maintained throughout generations and how a renewed sociological imagination of bisexuality could contest this.

In order to provide some insight into the stigmas which affect people who claim bisexuality as an identity and to and to illustrate the arguments made, the author will reflect upon narratives from a previous research project, entitled “Bisexuality, Gender and Romantic Relationships” (Smith, 2012).

This paper aims to explore the ways in which these social attitudes are experienced, with reflection upon previously gathered data to demonstrate the real life consequences of stigmatisation and negative stereotypes experienced by women claiming a bisexual identity. In reflecting upon these experiences and using Goffman's notion of Stigma (1963) and Mead's theoretical stance of significant symbols in language (1962) can be used to gather a greater understanding as to how these social attitudes are being reproduced, therefore, realising the potential for change.

2. DECONSTRUCTING BISEXUALITY

The introduction of Queer Theory (de Lauretis, 1991) to academia and scholarship has resulted in a call for the abnegation of heteronormative ideologies. Queer Theory disassociates from the patriarchal, heteronormative views and beliefs in place throughout society; instead Queer Theory advocates for a fluidity of sex, gender and desire that does not reify heterosexuality but instead provides a cultural and political space for previously marginalised sexualities (Jagose, 1996). However, Queer Theory has thus far failed to significantly change social attitudes towards bisexuality; in its reluctance to adequately explore bisexuality as a valid sexual identity Queer Theory declines to sufficiently free its self from the hegemonic ideals that constrict society. Even within the sociology of marginalised sexualities, bisexuality is yet to be given the credence afforded to homosexuality and lesbianism; bisexuality is often rendered invisible or portrayed as something which it is not, a combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Rust, 2002).

Bergler (1956) argues that bisexuality should not be afforded the legitimacy to be seen as a valid identity, as individuals who claim bisexuality as a sexual identity are merely naïve homosexuals who refuse to accept their place in a marginalised group in society. Bisexuality is often seen as not being ‘Queer’ due to its evident connection to heteronormative norms and values, thus it is not granted the “cultural legitimacy accorded to heterosexual and lesbian/ gay identities” (Garnets and Kimmel, 2003, p.259) and this is a notion that has been carried through into contemporary society. Despite this, Katz (1995) argues that a shift in societal attitudes took place with regards to sexuality in the early 20th Century whereby both men and women came to be seen as eroticised individuals; contrary to prior attitudes towards sexuality, displays of sexual attraction were soon considered integral to legitimate relationships. This set the foundations for individuals to embrace their sexual identity and have the ability to actively display this throughout society, a renewed acceptance of eroticised individuals with gendered attractions created a socio-political space for recognition of sexual attractions *between* men and *between* women. Yet, bisexuality remains somewhat of an anomaly in the exploration of sexualities. It

could even be argued that the shift in societal attitudes towards the acceptance of homosexuality has had a detrimental effect on bisexuality, as a duality of sexuality has been created whereby the political movements of the mid to late 20th century have created an ideology of the homosexist minorities struggle against hegemonic heterosexuality.

Storr (1999) argues that bisexuality can be seen to reflect postmodernism in its fragmented, destabilising nature, thus leading to a hostile climate towards bisexuality and further emphasising the negative stereotypes that surround it, even from within the sociology of marginalised sexualities. This is most clearly exposed through societal attitudes towards bisexuality, commonly regarded as destabilised, not serious, non-monogamous and 'greedy' to name but a few; this was certainly observed in the preface research to this paper "Bisexuality, Gender and Romantic Relationships" (Smith, 2012) in which self-identifying bisexual women shared their lived experiences to ensure representation of the real issues that people claiming a bisexual identity face throughout society;

"Ramona: obviously people think it's a phase; you're greedy, you must cheat, like there are so many negative stereotypes and I can't think of any positive stereotypes of bisexual people" (2012, p48)

Negative experiences surrounding stereotyping and bisexuality was a prevalent issue throughout the paper with many participants sharing their experiences of how the stereotypes commonly held are particularly demeaning as a bisexual woman;

"Scarlet: Em, I think bisexual women in particular but this might just be because I am one, there's a kind of laddish like 'why we can have threesomes now' kind of thing, so bisexual women by some guys are considered quite appealing whereas other guys are like 'eugh, no!'"

These women refer to the negative stereotypes that are widely held amid many contemporary societies and reproduced through societal attitudes and hegemonic ideals. Angelides (2007) argues that bisexuality not only absorbs the sex/gender complex but by its very nature, repudiates binary logic all together. However, through academic discourse and the testimonies of the women outlined above, it is abundantly clear that binary logic is still firmly established in society, especially surrounding discussions concerning sexualities. The incessant negativity that is awarded to bisexuality throughout society is a constant conflict pertaining to this particular sexual identity; not only are bisexuals subject to the kind of global stigmatisation that has also affected homosexuality but bisexuals are individuals who are often told that they do not even exist in the world of, even marginalised, sexualities.

3. STIGMA AND THE RE-EMPHASIS OF HEGEMONIC HETERONORMATIVITY

Goffman (1963) relates stigma as pertaining to one of two groups of people. Firstly the discredited: a definition applying to beings whose stigma is inherently obvious upon first contact.

Secondly, the discreditable: a definition applied to beings whose stigma is not immediately apparent and not known before the first meeting. This is a notion which is arguably illustrative of stigmas surrounding bisexuality and therefore, from this point on, bisexuality will be linked with Goffman's notion of the discreditable (1963). Although not judged immediately upon meeting an individual, as is the case with the discredited, the bisexual person feels that he/she is continuously being stigmatised throughout society and therefore, must decide whether to share his/her sexual identity or keep it hidden to avoid stigmatisation. If one does decide to avoid stigma by not specifically revealing their sexual identity, that person will most commonly be referred to as being heterosexual and will be socially accepted as such. However, it could be argued that this may also be the case if one does reveal themselves as bisexual, dependent upon whom their current relationship may be with. This exemplifies the power of hegemonic Heteronormativity and the subsequent essentialist norms and values that it promotes.

Biphobia is commonly related only to individual experiences of hegemonic heteronormative oppression, thus providing an inadequate view of how Biphobia effects society as a whole. Biphobia is a structured oppression manifested in the social institutions that surround us, education, politics, health care systems, the media, and so on maintaining hegemonic heterosexuality and reinstating the powerlessness of bisexuality.

Through his paper "The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure" (2000), Kenji Yoshino explores the notion that invisibility is not an inherent trait of bisexuality but instead a direct result of social construction of sexualities perceived and maintained not only by heterosexuals but now also within homosexual discourses. Yoshino suggests that the two monosexist groups have a mutual interest in the erasure of bisexuality in order to maintain the gay/straight binary and therefore, the notion of monogamy and the image of stability in relationships. This leads to what Yoshino terms "the epistemic contract of bisexual erasure" which ensures the production of cultural knowledge that extinguishes the notion of bisexuality; creating an umbrella of bi-invisibility throughout contemporary society which undeniably rejects the notion of bisexuality as a valid sexual identity. This is a major concern not only in the academic study of bisexuality but more importantly in the real life experiences of bisexual people. Clear examples of how difficult it can be to fully embrace a bisexual identity with the constant expectation of monosexism in such high volume throughout society were shared in "Bisexuality, Gender and Romantic Relationships", with one participant suggesting that the prevalence of bi-invisibility and monosexism seriously affected how seriously she was taken in her sexual identity.

"Ramona: "It's kind of... kind of weird because if I tell people I have a girlfriend everyone assumes that I am a lesbian and it's, being bisexual is kind of hard because you have to, if you change your relationship you have to come out each time, because otherwise people assume that you're straight, you're gay.""

"Scarlet: "And some of the prejudices that heterosexuals have around, em... not really being bisexual y'know just actually being heterosexual and y'know just having a bit of fun. Em or the fact that it's easier for many of us to "pass" so not having to do the

coming out thing. Em, so much 'cause y'know we don't, if I'm in a hetero relationship I don't need to come out as bi so to the rest of the world I look normal, in quotes.'"

A common misconception of this view is that it is only promoted by heterosexuals; however, many groups from within the LGBT community can be seen to share the same negligence towards bisexuality. A statement from a bisexual women working within an organisation that advocates for LGBT people across Scotland exemplifies the disregard for bisexuality that can be seen within the LGBT community as well as the heterosexual community and can be seen to support the claim that monosexism has produced a social and cultural knowledge that erases bisexuality (Eisner, 2013);

Jane: "I'm a youth worker with [organisation's name] and there was y'know we were talking about our coming out stories and there was another young woman and I said something about like the first person that I fell in love with was a woman and, and they couldn't...like one of the girls was like "so you're gay?" and I said "no, I'm not gay, I'm bisexual", "but you fell in love with a woman?", "yeah", "but that must mean that you're gay". And so there were...just, y'know it's just a lack of understanding it's just a... y'know you must fit into one of those categories."

The statements presented above illustrate the lived experiences of bisexual women and the stigmas they face through everyday life. These stereotypes are commonly imposed on all bisexuals generally, contributing to the ever growing list of negative stigmatisation and stereotypes that society places on bisexuality. Outlined above are only a small proportion of the negative statements that most bisexual people have to live with every day. It is to no surprise then that the recent "Bisexuality Report" (2012) states that of all common sexual identity groups, bisexual people are the most likely to suffer from mental health problems including depression, anxiety and suicide. A survey focussing on bisexual people attending a bisexual conference found that 36% of attendees suffered from mental health issues which interfered with their day to day life (2008). This is directly related to the encompassing stigmatisation that bisexual people face throughout society and is also one of the many reasons a change in societal attitudes must take place. In order to successfully change societal attitudes, I argue that a change in the language, and therefore 'knowledge', in relation to bisexuality must happen in order to free bisexuality from the shackles of the negative stereotypes and stigmatisation in which it emerged.

4. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LANGUAGE AND ITS NEGATIVE IMPACT ON NON-HETERONORMATIVE SEXUALITIES

Social Constructionist theorists such as Mead (1962) and Berger and Luckmann (1966) have long since argued that society and our individual perceptions of such society are socially constructed. Mead (1962) states that human beings use a combination of gestures and symbols in order to derive meaning in any social setting; this becomes a social act in which we all partake in order to be able to interpret meanings derived by other individuals and therefore

construct knowledge of our societal surroundings. Berger and Luckmann (1966) support this concept in arguing that we catalogue our subjective view of the world through signification in gestures, body language but most importantly through spoken language. Considering this and the fact that Social Constructionism profoundly refers to language being at the centre of understanding knowledge (Bruffee, 1986), it is *vital* to analyse language and the production of language in a heteronormative society.

In contemporary Western society, language is most often accredited as the use of vocal gestures to depict meaning in objects and gestures; allowing the individual to use the appropriate expressions and responses during social interaction. As well as this ability to use self-reflection, it is our innate desire to socially interact and to habitualise through interaction, allowing the creation of institutions and thus the creation of a hierarchy of roles (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Thus avowing the unconscious construction of a dominant ideology, as individuals learn to give “greater weight to those responses than to the other responses” (1962, p.66) whilst following a social hierarchy. A dominant societal attitude, or a ‘whole truth’, is thus, created subconsciously but develops to be deeply-rooted throughout Western society and ingrained in the fundamental building blocks of language as we know it. This is continually maintained via social construction, the socialisation of individuals from birth and the institutions which surround our development; supporting the social constructionist view that language is community generated and maintained in the interests of the dominant system of ‘knowledge’, further imprinting the dominant ideology on society and strengthening its roots.

The rudimentary basis of spoken language, as we use it in contemporary society, lies in the meanings which we attribute to words, “one must understand what he is saying has to affect him as he affects others” (1962, p.75). Meaning relies on the relationship between the original gesture of an individual being capable of both objectification, as in the case of the face-to-face conversation, and subjectification, as in the case of interaction beyond the immediate reality of the face-to-face conversation. It is this that grants the individual the ability to construct meaning and understanding of the social world. The second individual involved in a specific interaction does not necessarily need to have experience of the object in question; the response given is directly correlated to the behaviour promoted by the individual initiating the social process. Hence, an individual displays the reaction which is deemed socially acceptable in the current circumstances; allowing one to establish ideas surrounding objects that one has no personal experience of. This is clearly advantageous in the initial development of language in the early stages of life as a child cannot innately know the meaning of a chair; however, since this ‘symbolisation’ does not only happen during the early stages of life, it can be argued that it is also this which allows the domination of hegemonic Heteronormativity to be reproduced throughout society. “Social process relates the response of one individual to the gestures of another, as the meanings of the latter, and is thus responsible for the rise and existence of new objects in the social situation, objects dependent upon on constituted by these meanings” (1963, p.78) This illustrates the ways in which individuals learn to project meaning on to objects with no prior experience by relating the foreign object with an object they do have a meaning

for. Thus, exemplifying how the current meanings, as well as the previously discussed stigmas, attributed to bisexuality have come into existence and continue to be replicated throughout society.

The early history of sexuality as a discourse only allowed for sexuality to be briefly discussed in Confession in church, during which, discussions were ruled by hegemonic Heteronormativity where-by non-heteronormative relations would be blatantly stigmatised and rendered invisible. This ignorance and disdain towards non-heteronormative relationships has over Centuries been embedded into society and has in turn had a significant impact on the language used in relation to non-heteronormative relationships, leading to anything other than heterosexuality being seen as 'not normal'. This has thus, been the backdrop for distinguishing meaning and the origins of formulating language around sexualities; it continues to be passed from individual to individual through interaction and institutionalisation in such a way that further strengthens the hold of hegemonic Heteronormativity and further demonising non-heteronormative sexualities, predominantly bisexuality.

Language can only be appropriately formed where there is recognition of the meaning behind a word or object, however Mead (1962) states that the meanings behind certain words/objects imply with it universal characteristics. For example when we think of an individual we are not confined by our experience of one particular individual but instead we can imagine an individual using universal characteristics. However, what distinguishes human beings from animals is the ability to understand the complexities of objects and therefore, the proficiency to internally reflect on the universal characteristics of a person and determine particular stimuli pertaining to that particular person. It is this that Mead terms "rational conduct", permitting an individual to isolate particular stimuli in an object in order to differentiate it from another using personal experience, which in turn leads to the continuous production of individual responses. This reflexivity allows the individual to exercise "conscious thought over his behaviour" (1962, p.117) hence, allowing for the production of alternative ideologies and the potential for the eradication of a hegemonic Heteronormativity in favour of a fluid meaning of sexualities and therefore a change in social attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexualities, particularly bisexuality.

5. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A RENEWED SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION OF BISEXUALITY

This research has endeavoured to illustrate the impact of social ideologies and concepts in the construction of sexualities as we know it; in that socially constructed ideologies and concepts surrounding sexualities are grounded in a heteronormative lens and it is predominantly through this lens that we understand the language and concepts used throughout this discourse. In doing so, it has become evident, that social attitudes towards sexualities are malleable and indeed have changed dramatically throughout the centuries leading up to what we now experience throughout contemporary society. This shift in social attitudes has had a

significant impact in recent years particularly on homosexuality; so much so that a sexual identity which has previously suffered intense stigmatisation has now in fact become somewhat normalised; to the extent that within the last 40 years homosexuality has all but freed itself from the shackles of the stigmatisation forced upon it through hegemonic heteronormative norms and values.

However, despite this change in social attitudes towards homosexuality, this paper has made clear the extensive level of stigmatisation that individuals claiming a bisexual identity are still subject to. Stigmatisation, bi-invisibility and hegemonic Heteronormativity has a significant impact on the lives of bisexuals including dramatic effects on the mental health of individuals who are consistently denied a voice in society. Not only do bisexuals find it a constant struggle to be accepted into society that is dominated by heteronormative norms and values, they continue to find themselves as a group that is commonly ignored from within the community in which they are said to belong to. As we have seen, the stigmas attached to bisexuality are common both in the heterosexual community as well as in the LGBT community; the notion that bisexuality does not exist, the misconceptions that bisexuality and non-monogamy are inherently interlinked, bi-invisibility and hostility still held from within the LGBT community and society in general.

It is for this reason that I argue towards a complete renewal of the Sociological Imagination of bisexuality, in order to cut through the restrictive nature of hegemonic heterosexist and homosexist discourses within which bisexual women experience the social world generally, and romantic relationships specifically. C. Wright Mills (1959) defines the Sociological Imagination as the ability to “understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (1959, p.5). It is the Sociological Imagination then that allows the individual to understand society and the societal issues which affect us all throughout daily life. Wright Mills (1959) states that the Sociological Imagination allows us to distinguish between a personal “trouble” and a societal “issue” therefore, allowing for one to understand the prominence of societal issues and the effects these issues have throughout society.

I argue that discourse surrounding sexualities are both “troubles” and “issues” in that these are discourses which undoubtedly affect the individual, but importantly are “issues” within society and take place within the public sphere. Hegemonic Heteronormativity has, for centuries, been ingrained into the depths of society through institutionalisation and legitimisation. Therefore, rectifying this issue is a matter that concerns everyone, we cannot simply look only at individual “troubles” and assume the change that is desperately needed, will change from within the private lives of individuals. In order to create change there must be a change in both the stigmas attached to bisexuality and the language used to discuss sexualities in general; initiating a change in social knowledge and the regeneration of such knowledge.

A renewed Sociological Imagination of bisexuality would promote a more fluid view on sexualities as a whole, away from the monosexist ideology that is currently apparent throughout

Western society and in existing research on sexualities. In order to achieve this goal the necessity to rely on heteronormative ideologies must be eradicated primarily through the language that maintains it. In a contemporary society which is heavily affected by the postmodern by-product of fragmentation it is the task of the sociologist to “make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference” (1959, p.12); this paper has endeavoured to make clear the issues that surround bisexuality as a sexual identity and the implications that the notions surrounding bisexuality has on both the individual and society as a whole, in terms of reaffirmation of hegemonic heteronormative ideologies. A push in academia with a renewed Sociological Imagination of bisexuality, activism and overall prominent identity of bisexuality as a **valid** sexual identity will undoubtedly make a democratic change in the way that we, as a society think about sexuality and particularly bisexuality. This is not an unproblematic task in the least; however, it is a task that can be achieved as we have seen through the change in attitudes towards homosexuality. By re-evaluating the way we as social scientists overcome the issues surrounding bisexuality **we** can change the way society perceives bisexuality as a sexual identity and eradicating the stigmas surrounding it.

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