“This anthology of personal, accessible narratives … presents a compelling look at contemporary bisexual experience. … Bi people who read this book will find validation and community. Researchers and academicians will find the information they need to undertake more meaningful studies of bisexuality. The undeniably queer personal statements in this book should be of interest to people who wonder if it’s really necessary or appropriate to include the ‘B’ in GLBT.”

— Gay & Lesbian Review

“Every counselor and therapist working with bisexual clients and other clients who are questioning their sexuality will want two copies of Getting Bi on their bookshelf—one to read and one to lend to your clients!”

— Beth Firestein, Ph.D. Editor, Becoming Visible: Counseling Bisexuals Across the Lifespan.

“If you want to know what bi people are thinking, feeling, doing; you’ll find answers here. And if you teach LGBTI studies, health, history, psychology, sociology, women’s studies, international studies; your students need this book.”

— Loraine Hutchins and Lani Ka’ahumanu, co-editors, Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out

Getting Bi is published by the Bisexual Resource Center: www.biresource.net.
Getting Bi
Voices of Bisexuals Around the World

Second Edition

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Bisexual Resource Center
Boston, MA, USA
CHAPTER 1:

What Is Bisexuality?

bi·sex·u·al
1 a: possessing characters of both sexes: hermaphroditic
   b: of, relating to, or characterized by a tendency to direct sexual desire
      toward both sexes
2: of, relating to, or involving both sexes

One of the challenges of talking about bisexuality is that the word has many
different meanings, yet we rarely acknowledge their variety. The dictionary
definition above provides three very distinct uses of the word, each preeminent
in a different time, place and field of study. This book concerns bisexuality as a
sexual orientation, and even within this narrower scope, bisexuality has many
possible meanings.

What defines bisexuality? The answer varies, depending upon who is asking
the question. An epidemiologist, for example, might use behavior (regardless
of self-identity) as the main criterion, while a social scientist might focus on
self-identity (regardless of behavior). Where does bisexuality begin and end? If
we view sexuality as a spectrum, how much territory does the word bisexual
cover? How much bisexual attraction and/or behavior does it take to make a
person bisexual? Is the concept meaningful across cultures, and does it always
have the same meaning? Some cultures may not use the word bisexual, and even
in those that do, many people may be unfamiliar with or misunderstand it. Does
bisexuality encompass people whose attractions change over time? If you are
once bisexual are you always bisexual? Is there a statute of limitations? And for
each of these questions, who gets to decide?

At my speaking engagements, I sometimes jokingly ask those present to
imagine the following: Each person wishing to come out as bisexual would be
issued a wallet-sized bisexual identity card by a Bisexual Identity Certification
The card would state: “So-and-so is a certified card-carrying bisexual.” There would be two blank lines on the card: one for the signature and date of your most recent female lover, a second line for the signature and date of your most recent male lover. The Board would issue some sort of regulation stipulating that if either line were not updated within some specified period of time (ten years? five years? two years? six months?) your bisexuality would expire and your license to identify as bisexual would be revoked. The audience inevitably responds with laughter, nods and knowing looks. Everyone feels the pressure of other people’s definitions.

When talking about bisexuality, I find it useful to distinguish between behavior and identity. Someone who has had sexual experience with or even just attractions to people of more than one sex can be described as bisexual, but may not identify that way. Likewise, one can identify as bisexual regardless of sexual experience. Furthermore, identities can change over time.

So can definitions. My own understanding of bisexuality has changed dramatically over the years. I used to define bisexuality as “the potential to be attracted to people regardless of their gender.” Then one day I was chatting with my friend Alberto, who, like me, identifies as bisexual. I blithely stated my definition and he looked at me incredulously.

“Regardless of gender? No, no, no! There’s no ‘regardless’ about it for me. For me it’s all about difference. I’m attracted to cheerleaders and football players. It’s precisely the extremes of difference that attract me.” He looked me up and down, smirked, and said, “Robyn, you would be way too butch for me!”

I threw a pillow at him, he threw it back and we laughed. But I learned from that conversation. Some of us who identify as bisexual are in fact “gender-blind.” For others—in fact for me—it’s androgyny or the blending of genders that compels. Still others, like Alberto, are attracted to the poles.

Then, to complicate things further, I learned a lot from my intersex, genderqueer and transgender friends. I came to realize that I had been confusing gender with biological sex and that the two are not synonymous. Though in reality the difference between sex and gender is far more complicated, I find useful the expression, “Sex is between your legs; gender is between your ears.” In actual people, sex and gender do not always correspond. I also learned that sex and gender each exist on a continuum; thus there are more than two sexes, and more than two genders. A male-bodied person can identify as a woman, or as a combination of male and female; so can a female-bodied person. And some people’s bodies do not fit their cultures’ standards of male or female.

What does all this mean for our understanding of bisexuality? Dictionary definitions of bisexuality that rely on an idea of “both sexes” are inadequate. As human beings, we live and love in a world that is far more complicated than these narrow ideas allow. Our attractions do not stay within tidy borders, and our understanding of bisexuality must rise to this level of complexity. People are attracted to both gender and sex, gender and sex do not necessarily coincide and neither is a simple binary. Someone might be attracted, for example, to masculinity in women or femininity in men, or femininity in anyone, and on and on. And on.

Then I started to question the meaning of attraction itself. I now see that attraction occupies a spectrum of its own. At what point, for example, does
WHAT IS BISEXUALITY?

affection become attraction and attraction become sexual and/or romantic? Each of these complex emotions has many varieties, each as distinct as the interactions between individual human beings. Every one of us must make sense of our own experiences and assign them meaning.

Every new idea I grappled with changed my definition of bisexuality. I have a new working definition: I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge in myself the potential to be attracted, romantically and/or sexually, to people of more than one sex, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree. I expect that this definition will change yet again, as I continue to learn.

Perhaps the most important way to learn is to listen to the voices of others as they grapple with their own understanding of sexual attraction, romance, relationships, love, desire. The following essays, from China, Colombia, France, Japan, Puerto Rico, Spain, and the United States, provide a small taste of this.

— Robyn

Shen Rui

Shen Rui's mother is a retired housewife with no formal education who lives in Beijing, where she was born in 1935. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) she was forced to take a job in the bureau of housing administration in Beijing.

SR: Ma, what do you think of bisexuality?

Mother: What? What are you talking about?

SR: Bisexuality, or bisexuals. That means, a man loves a woman and perhaps he also loves a man. Or more specifically, he not only loves the woman and man, but he also makes love with them. It is the same for a woman.

Mother: What? I have never heard about that kind of thing.

SR: Really? Never?

Mother: Yes, never.

SR: Well, now you have heard about it. What do you think?

Mother: I have no idea. Why do I have to think about it?
1. Unlearn binary thinking. To quote Alfred Kinsey, “The world is not divided into sheep and goats.” Further, if you consider it homophobic when straight folks erase homosexuality and assume everyone around them is or should be heterosexual, then acknowledge that it is biphobic when you erase bisexuality and assume everyone around you is or should be gay or straight.

2. Do not assume “gay and lesbian” is a sufficient descriptor for the LGBT community any more than you would assume using the word “gay” is sufficient to make lesbians feel included, or that white queer cultures are a sufficient representation of queer cultures worldwide.

3. Just as some women use both “gay” and “lesbian” to describe themselves, yet others use both “lesbian” and “bisexual” to describe themselves. If in doubt about who identifies as what, assume there are bisexuals present in every group of queers. We often are.

4. The sexual orientation of people cannot be inferred by the sex/gender of their partner. Just as a person may be gay/lesbian and single, a person may be bisexual and in a same-sex relationship, bisexual and single, or bisexual and in an other-sex relationship. Thus a “lesbian relationship” may include women of whom one or both are bi-sexually identified and/or oriented.

5. As an addendum to the above point, the term “same-sex relationship” is preferable to “gay/lesbian relationship” because the latter has come to imply that both partners are gay/lesbian while in reality that may not be the case. Ditto for other-sex relationships, in which one or both partners may be bisexual.

6. Bisexuals are not the latest pesky addition to a bestiary of sexuality minorities clamoring for greater inclusion. We have been around as long as homosexuals, and have been part of queer culture whether or not we have chosen to identify ourselves as bi.

7. Naming and honoring bi- and transsexualities is not merely a matter of political correctness or minding one’s Ps and Qs. It is about us queers showing the same regard for diversity and complexity that we demand—and rightfully so—from our communities of origin, and from the world at large.

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Bisexual Etiquette:
10 Helpful Hints for Bisexuals Working with Lesbians & Gay Men

Robyn Ochs

I have been a bisexual activist since 1982. Much of my activism has taken place in the context of the Boston-area GLBT community. In most of the lesbian and gay groups with which I have been involved, I have been one of two or three out bisexuals. During my decades of activism I have learned a great deal, both from my own mistakes, and other people's. I have said and done things which I have instantly and thoroughly regretted, and experienced moments of proud accomplishment. At times I have felt like a supplicant, a second-class citizen, a token, a nuisance, and at other times an equal, a leader, a decorated veteran, a sister.

What follows are a few suggestions I would like to pass along to other bisexual people who are involved in GLBT communities.

1. RESPECT OTHER PEOPLE’S IDENTITIES. Don’t say, “Everyone’s really bisexual.” Don’t say that bisexual people are somehow more evolved. Think of your frustration when someone tells you that there is no such thing as a bisexual, or that bisexuals are really lesbians or gay men in transition, or that we are really heterosexual tourists out for sexual adventure at the expense of lesbians and gay men. Avoid false absolutes: reality is delightfully, disturbingly complex.

2. DON’T RAISE YOUR OWN SELF-IMAGE AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHER PEOPLE. Examples of bad ideas taken from real life: a t-shirt that says “Monosexuals bore me.” A button that says “Gay is good but bi is best.” Please. As the expression goes, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

3. RESPECT OTHER PEOPLE’S IDENTITIES AND CHOICES. It is our right to choose our own labels. Respect those who choose a label different from your own. Our goal should be not to create a space in which we are all alike, but rather to create a space in which our differences are recognized and valued.

4. Along the same lines, REMEMBER ALL THE LETTERS. Just as it is important for bisexuals that the word “bisexual” be included, so is it important
to use “transgender,” “lesbian,” and, when appropriate, “queer,” “intersex,” and “ally.” And so on.

5. AVOID THE TRAP OF WEIGHING AND MEASURING OPPRESSION. Avoid thinking of oppression and liberation as a zero-sum game, with a finite quantity of either to be parceled out. There is, unfortunately, plenty of oppression to go around. Fortunately, there is also enough liberation to go around. Don’t say that bisexuals are more oppressed than lesbians or gay men. We are ALL oppressed. Oppression sucks. Each of us experiences oppression differently. A bisexual person who has an other-sex partner experiences homophobia differently from a bisexual in a same-sex relationship. Out people experience oppression differently than closeted people. Butch women and femme men have a different experience walking down the street than femme women and butch men. Gay men experience oppression differently than do lesbians. People who belong in more than one oppressed group, such as a disabled Latina lesbian, have their own specific experiences. And bisexual men have an experience that is different from bisexual women. It’s OK that we are not all the same. Even people within the same identity group can have very different experiences. But oppression, homophobia, and sexism, no matter how they manifest, still suck, and we have a common interest in working together to end them.

6. RESPECT SEPARATE SPACE. There is a time for coalition building, and a time to get together in our own identity groups to do our own empowerment work. All members of oppressed groups have the right to take space when they feel it necessary, and we need to respect that. The difficulty, of course, lies in determining when separate space is appropriate, and when it is not.

It is my belief that any event in which lesbians and gay men get together is already by definition a coalition event. And I believe that I, for example, as a woman-centered bisexual feminist woman, have a lot more in common with most lesbians than do many gay men. However, when an event is explicitly a gay male- or lesbian-only event, we need to respect other people’s space. (I want to make a distinction here between a lesbian event—an event produced by, or primarily for lesbians—and a lesbian-only event. I am speaking of the latter.) This is a bit more complicated than it may seem, but I have developed a personal guideline, and I’ll give a couple of examples of its application.

Boston used to have a group called Dyke Dialogue, which was organized by Val Seabrook, a (wonderful) African-American lesbian activist. A few lesbians regularly attending the group believed that it should include lesbians only, and exclude bisexual and transgender women. In this instance, to determine whether it was in fact appropriate for me to attend, I asked Val, the group’s founder and organizer. She told me that the group was for all women, and she intended to welcome bisexual and transgender women. In this situation I believe it totally appropriate for bisexual women to participate. Any lesbians unhappy with the group’s composition were free to remove themselves and start their own exclusive group.
My second example came to me second-hand. A female-partnered bisexual-identified woman active in her local GLBT community was interested in joining a local mothers’ group to get support as a queer parent. The only group listed in the local newspaper was a lesbian mothers’ group. She called the contact person for the group and asked whether bisexual women were welcome, and was told that they were not. Disappointed, but respecting the organizers’ wishes, she resolved to try to start a second group for lesbian and bisexual moms.

Of course, there are many gray areas: what about the bisexual woman in a monogamous same-sex relationship of ten years who considers herself a bisexual lesbian or a lesbian bisexual considering whether to attend an event advertised as being “for lesbians only”? Should her lover attend but not her? Should she go and keep her mouth shut about being bisexual? Should she go and be an out bisexual? Here the answer is less clear.

But one thing is certain: lesbians and gay men need to feel that there are places and times when their space will remain inviolate. There do need to be limits to inclusion, and inclusionary politics and separate space can exist simultaneously.

7. **BE A GOOD CITIZEN.** Don’t insist on being included in a given group unless you are willing to put your energy into that group. While bisexual women and men have been active in the lesbian and gay community from the start, remember that few of us have been publicly identifiable as bisexual. Most of us have simply done the work, attended the events, and not corrected people’s misassumptions about our identities. I can think of more than one political event or pride march I attended along with other bisexual activists, only to read that “thousands of lesbians and gay men rallied...” in the gay press. This oversight has allowed many lesbians and gay men to assume that there are few, if any, bisexual people in the movement. Just as all of us have been written out of the mainstream imagination, so have bisexuals and transgender people been largely omitted from lesbian and gay awareness. Therefore, when we join a group as out bisexuals and begin asking for explicit recognition as bisexuals, many people believe that bisexuals have suddenly appeared out of nowhere and are now trying to muscle and whine our way into their movement, riding on the coattails of their hard-fought battles. Remember this when you enter a new group. Be a good citizen. If you want to be recognized as part of the community, don’t just show up and tell them what to do. Join the group. Show your commitment as an out bisexual. Then express your concerns.

8. **CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES.** This has been a hard one for me personally. Is it always important to have every sentence end with “and bisexual”? Is it important to point this omission out every time? Sometimes it may be more constructive to just be your wonderful, out bisexual self. Choose your battles thoughtfully, and prepare in advance constructive ways to respond when you feel that the language used does not include everyone.
9. **LISTEN.** Rather than being always on the defensive, I have been trying hard to listen to the fears, concerns, and perspectives of my lesbian and gay male friends. I’ve been surprised at how much I learn when I stop defending myself long enough to listen well.

10. **REMEMBER,** underneath it all, we all want the same things. We want respect. We want understanding. We want to be listened to, and acknowledged. We want to feel safe. Accord others the same respect that you are demanding for yourself.
Biphobia

Robyn Ochs

Bisexuals make people uncomfortable. Many people wish that we would just go away, or at least keep quiet about it, because they perceive our very existence as a threat to the social order. A declaration of bisexual identity often results in discrimination, hostility, and invalidation. Gay- and lesbian-identified individuals frequently view us as either confused or interlopers possessing a degree of privilege not available to them, and many heterosexuals see us as amoral, hedonistic spreaders of disease and disrupters of families. Why all the fuss?

To understand the dynamics of biphobia, it helps to understand the dynamics of oppression in general, in order to separate out what is actually about bisexuality itself, and how much of it is just about silly humans, and how we tend to behave as social creatures.

Sociology 101

First off, Western society likes to construct things in binaries: Male/Female, Good/Evil, and, of course, Straight/Gay. In each of these binaries, one is given high status, the other lower.

Prejudiced behavior, or discrimination, is widespread. People in many categories and in many cultures have long been denied access to opportunities in employment, housing, and civil liberties. We are also denied the luxury of being able to see people who look and live like ourselves represented fairly on television, in the movies, in newspapers and in magazines.

Another example of discrimination is stereotyping: having a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person. For example, bisexuals have been stereotyped as indecisive and promiscuous. Sexual orientation is what Gordon Allport (1954) called “a label of primary potency,” one that is seen as so significant that “it magnifies one attribute out of all proportion to its true significance, and masks other important attributes of the individual” (p. 179). Attention is focused on this one aspect of ourselves, and all of our other qualities and characteristics get thrown into shadow. Bisexuality, once known, thus becomes foregrounded.

It is important to remember that despite this, each person has numerous simultaneous identities. I, for example, identify as bisexual, able-bodied, athletic, a dancer, left-handed, an activist, an academic, a student, a public speaker, a daughter, aunt, and sister, and as someone in a same-sex marriage. Many of us are members of more than one identity group within a given category: I, for example, identify as mixed-class, and my religious/ethnic heritage is mixed. I am Jewish but not religious, and one of my three parents was Christian. I have lived in Boston for 20 years but identify strongly as a New Yorker. Some of our
identifications may be as members of the majority or in-group; others may be as members of the minority, or out-group. Few of us are in all respects privileged or in all respects oppressed.

Another factor directly affecting bisexuals’ experiences of oppression is the invisibility of our particular minority population. We have to deal with the constant visibility of those of our identity categories that are visually identifiable (by the fact of sitting in a wheelchair, or because of the hue of our skin). These characteristics do not give us the option of “passing” as a member of the dominant group in order to avoid discrimination. We experience identities that are not readily apparent, such as sexual orientation or religion, differently. While not constantly identifiable, which may in certain contexts protect us from discrimination, we suffer the disadvantage of not being able to identify others like ourselves, resulting in feelings of isolation and an underestimation of our large numbers by both members of our own group and members of the dominant group. In addition, the “privilege” of passing also carries as its counterweight the onus of needing to repeatedly announce ourselves in order to avoid being misidentified, as well as feelings of guilt or discomfort when we are silent. We carry the weight of constantly having to make the decision of how and when to come out and at what cost.

Homophobia

Biphobia cannot be understood in isolation. It shares many characteristics with other forms of oppression, especially homophobia. Audre Lorde (1984) defines homophobia as the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving, and thereby the right to dominance and the fear of feelings of love for a member of one’s own sex, and the hatred of those feelings in others. The Campaign to End Homophobia, an organization dedicated to raising awareness among heterosexuals, divides homophobia into four distinct but interrelated types: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. Personal homophobia is an individual’s own fears or feelings of discomfort toward homosexual people or homosexuality. Interpersonal homophobia is that same fear manifest in hurtful behaviors, such as name-calling, negative jokes, or the physical violence directed at bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians, known as “gay bashing.” Institutional homophobia consists of a broad range of discriminatory practices toward lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, such as prohibiting same-sex couples from obtaining social benefits under their partners’ policies or denial of legal protection against discrimination in employment, housing, or public accommodations. They define cultural homophobia as cultural standards and norms that pervade society, such as the assumption that all people are heterosexual or silence around issues of homosexuality (Thompson & Zoloth, 1990).

There is no doubt that homophobia and heterosexism exist. One need only look at the prevalence of bomb threats, murder, physical assaults, arson, vandalism, telephone harassment, and police abuse against GLBT people. How does homophobia affect bisexuals, gays, and lesbians? Gordon Allport
laid out multiple ways in which individuals respond negatively to stigmatization, including two of importance to the discussion of biphobia: aggression and blame directed at one’s own group, and prejudice and discrimination directed against other minorities. Theoretically, this may assist us in understanding two phenomena frequently observed in sexual minority populations: (a) internalized homophobia and (b) the hostility directed at bisexuals and transgender persons by some gay men and lesbians. Some act out feelings of victimization through anger at and rejection of those who are perceived as even less acceptable than themselves. They fear that these “marginal people” will give all gays and lesbians an even worse image than that which they already hold in the eyes the dominant culture, further impeding gays’ and lesbians’ struggle for acceptance.

Where Does Biphobia Overlap With Homophobia?

There is a considerable overlap between homophobia and biphobia, as well as specific ways in which each is unique. Furthermore, homophobia and biphobia affect men and women differently.

Visible bisexuals, like visible lesbians and gay men, may be targeted for discrimination. If theories of the “lesser oppression” of bisexuals were to hold true, the bisexual teacher whose sexual orientation has been disclosed would merely be reduced to half-time employment, and the bisexual individual being targeted by homophobic teens would get only half-gay bashed (punched and kicked half as many times, or perhaps half as hard?). Homophobia and biphobia inevitably intersect through the common experience of discrimination. To the bigot, we are all alike.

Another area of congruence between the experience of biphobia and the experience of homophobia may be with respect to “coming out” issues. A bisexual coming to terms with a same-sex attraction is likely to experience shame, ambivalence, and discomfort similar to that experienced by lesbians and gay men. Most world cultures deny both homosexuality and bisexuality, present distorted images of both homosexuals and bisexuals, and prevent the dissemination of accurate information about both groups to people in the general population.

In summary, we are all oppressed, and we can all be targeted. Whether the cause of this oppression is called homophobia or biphobia, it hurts everyone.

Biphobia

Most bi people I have met come laden with painful stories of rejection by both heterosexuals and lesbians and gay men.

A primary manifestation of biphobia is the denial of the very existence of bisexual people, attributable to the fact that many cultures think in binary categories, with each category having its mutually exclusive opposite. This is powerfully evident in the areas of sex and gender. Male and female, and
heterosexuality and homosexuality are seen as “opposite categories.” Those whose sexual orientation defies simple labeling or those whose sex or gender is ambiguous may make us profoundly uncomfortable.

Thus, bisexuals create discomfort and anxiety in others simply by the fact of our existence. We are pressured to remain silent, as our silence allows the dominant culture to exaggerate the differences between heterosexual and homosexual and to ignore the fact that human sexuality exists on a continuum. It is much less threatening to the dominant heterosexual culture to perpetuate the illusion that homosexuals are “that category, way over there,” very different from heterosexuals. If “they” are extremely different, heterosexuals do not have to confront the possibility of acknowledging same-sex attractions within themselves and possibly becoming “like them.” There is considerable anxiety in being forced to acknowledge that the “other” is not as different from you as you would like to pretend.

Because of our cultural erasure, bisexuality tends to be invisible except as a point of conflict. Given that studies reveal that only a small percentage of bisexuals are simultaneously involved with persons of both genders (Rust, 1991) and that we tend to assume that a person’s sexual orientation corresponds to the sex of his or her current partner, it is difficult to make our bisexuality visible in daily life. As a result, most people usually “see” bisexuality only in the context of uncomfortable situations: a closeted married man contracts HIV from sex with another man and his wife contracts the virus; a woman leaves her lesbian relationship for a male lover. Often, when bisexuality is given attention, it is portrayed as a transitional category, an interim stage in an original or subsequent coming-out process, usually from heterosexual to homosexual. This has the effect of associating bisexuality in many people’s minds with conflict and impermanence.

The word bisexual itself may be seen as a product of binary thinking and, therefore, problematic. Many people struggling to understand bisexuality can only imagine the concept as a 50-50 identity. In their minds, if a third category exists, then it must fall midway between the other two categories and have clearly defined, unchanging parameters. Using this measurement, they will find very few “true” bisexuals. Many people also assume that a bisexual must need a lover of each sex to be satisfied, raising the specter of non-monogamy, another hot button for many.

This association of bisexuality with non-monogamy is a source of biphobia within heterosexual communities, especially since the arrival of HIV and AIDS. In the minds of many, bisexuality has come to be strongly identified with images of married, closeted men bringing HIV to their wives and children through unsafe sex with other men, and these stereotypes are amply reinforced in the media. This has been a common theme since the second half of the 1980s and has most recently manifested itself in a frenzy of media attention about the “down low”—African American men who have sex with men and with women but who identify neither as bisexual nor as gay.

Biphobia directed at bisexuals by gay men and lesbians is complex. Its roots lie in the dynamics of oppression and the particular historical contexts affecting the growth and development of individual gay, lesbian, and bisexual
communities. Coming out and living as gay can be very difficult. Many gay men and lesbians have experienced a great deal of hurt and rejection, and shared pain is one of the foundations on which many “lesbian and gay” communities have historically been based. External oppression may create a sense of not being safe and a strong need to maintain a clear boundary between “us” and “them.” Bisexuals are by definition problematic in this regard, blurring the boundaries between insider and outsider. And further, bisexual visibility within the lesbian and gay community calls into question the inaccurate assumption that there is a monolithic lesbian and gay community with a single set of standards and values, composed of individuals who all behave similarly and predictably.

Lesbians and gay men may also fear that they are unable to compete with the benefits our culture accords to those in different-sex relationships, believing that those who have a choice will ultimately choose heterosexuality. Many lesbians and gay men believe that bisexuals have less commitment to “the community,” and that whatever a lesbian or gay man might have to offer to their bisexual partner will not be enough to outweigh the external benefits offered to those who are in heterosexual relationships. There is some realistic basis for this fear: heterosexual relationships are privileged, and many bisexuals, like many lesbians and gay men, adopt at least a public front of heterosexuality to avoid family censure, develop careers, and raise children with societal approval. However, I also believe that this line of reasoning shows some internalized homophobia. Many bisexuals, even with this perceived choice, still choose same-sex relationships. What gets lost in the fear is the fact that same-sex relationships also offer benefits not available in heterosexual relationships: the absence of scripted gender roles, freedom from unwanted pregnancy, the ease of being with someone with more similar social conditioning, and so on. Most important, the psychic cost of denying one’s love for a particular person can be astronomical.

**Internalized Biphobia**

Biphobia does not come only from the outside. Internalized biphobia can be powerful, sometimes overpowering, and the experience of isolation, illegitimacy, shame, and confusion felt by many bisexuals can be disempowering, even disabling.

Even today, with modest improvements in this area, bisexuals have few role models. Due to bisexual invisibility and the paucity of bisexual role models or bisexual community, most bisexuals develop and maintain our bisexual identities in isolation.

Most bisexuals spend a majority of our time in the community that corresponds with the sex and sexual orientation of our romantic partner. As a result, we may experience a sense of discontinuity if we change partners and our partner is of a different sex, or if we shift back and forth between two differing communities over time. Other bisexuals have a strong social affiliation with either a heterosexual, lesbian, or gay community. This can result in another set of conflicts: if our partner is not of the “correct” sex, then we may feel guilt or shame.
for having “betrayed” our friends and community. Because of these potential
difficulties, many people privately identify as bisexual but, to avoid conflict
and preserve their ties to a treasured community, choose to identify publicly as
lesbian, gay, or straight or to stay silent, allowing others to presume that they do,
further contributing to bisexual invisibility.

Therefore, it is not surprising that some bisexuals find their bisexual desire
more a burden than a gift. They may feel a pressure or a wish to choose between
heterosexuality and homosexuality to make their lives easier and avoid internal
and external conflict. Many desire the ease they imagine would come with
having one clear, fixed, socially acceptable identity. The behavior of individual bi
people, as members of a stigmatized group, is frequently seen as representative
of all bisexuals. Thus, a bi-identified person may feel a sense of shame when any
bisexual person behaves in such a way as to reinforce negative stereotypes of
bisexual people. And we can feel an even more profound sense of shame when
our own behavior happens to mirror one of the existing stereotypes of bisexuals
(such as practicing polyamory, or leaving one relationship for another). Although
some bisexual people do behave in ways that conform to negative stereotypes
about bisexuals, it is actually the dynamics of prejudice that cause others to use
such actions to generalize their stereotyping and prejudiced behavior to an entire
group.

Ironically, bisexual individuals in monogamous relationships may also
experience difficulties, feeling that their maintenance of a bisexual identity
constitutes a double betrayal of both their community of primary identification
(straight or gay) and of their partner. Alternatively, the bi person’s partner may
feel that a bi person’s decision to continue to identify as bisexual, despite being
in a monogamous relationship, somehow withholds full commitment to the
relationship and holds out the possibility of other relationships. This overlooks
the fact that one’s identity is, in actuality, separate from particular choices made
about relationship involvement or monogamy.

So, how do we make things better? Given so many obstacles, both internal
and external, discussed above, how can a bisexual person come to a positive
bisexual identity?

Understand the social dynamics of oppression and stereotyping. Get support
and validation from others. Join a support group, subscribe to an email list, attend
a conference, read books about bisexuality. Get a good bi-positive therapist, and
find a friend (or two or twenty) to talk to.

Silence kills. I encourage bisexual people to come out as bisexual to the
maximum extent that you can do so safely. Life in the closet takes an enormous
toll on our emotional well-being. Bisexuals must remember that neither bisexuals
nor gays and lesbians created heterosexism and that as bisexuals, we are its
victims as well as potential beneficiaries. Although we must be aware that we, as
bisexuals, sometimes have privileges that have been denied to gays, lesbians, and
transgender people of any orientation, this simply calls for us to make thoughtful
decisions about how to live our lives. We did not create the inequities, and we
must not feel guilty for who we are; we need only be responsible for what we do.

Bisexuals, along with lesbians, gay men, and supportive heterosexuals must
open our hearts and minds to celebrate the true diversity among us. Our success
lies in creating a space where the full spectrum of our relationships is respected and valued, including those that are unlike our own. We must remember that each person is unique and also that we have much in common. Labels can unite us, but they can also stifle us and constrict our thinking when we forget that they are merely tools. Human beings are complex, and labels will never be adequate to the task of representing us. It is impossible to reduce a lifetime of experience to a single word.

If biphobia and homophobia are not allowed to control us, we can move beyond our fears and learn to value our differences as well as our similarities.

Bibliography


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